



Michael Reno Harrell "**Drive**" Dancing Bear Records

I first stumbled across Harrell's name a couple of months ago, a possible folk/country 'singer/songwriter' download on my eMusic account. Then, a few days later, a New Jersey friend mentioned his name in one of our regular e-mails. When a review copy of "**Drive**" turned up at Folkwax HQ a few weeks later, it seemed like something subliminal was going on. Time to become familiar with his music, rather than just his name.

Harrell is based out of Charlotte, North Carolina, and has been for over a decade. Are we surprised that the music scene in Nashville, his previous domicile, just wasn't holding his attention as a songwriter? In the Charlotte music scene he's established something of a reputation as an Americana performer [whatever that means!] and "**Drive**" is his seventh solo CD release. After a number of trips through the disc, I'm still unsure about where Harrell lies in the greater scheme of folk/country music. Mostly his lyrics paint portraits of ordinary everyday events, in the process employing a small cast of very similar characters. At times Michael skirts being 'hokey' by a mere hair's breadth. Furthermore, when rhyming the current line with the one that follows, Harrell has a penchant for signalling his punch by indulging in the obvious.

In the opening cut, "The Wind," Harrell sets the rural scene with the insight that, for his narrator, it's a rainy day and too wet to plough with that old tractor. Underpinned by an urgently paced melody, by the third verse with 'time on his hands' the narrator intones, "*I still remember when you left me and how I begged you not to go.*" In my best Forrest Gump accent, "*It's a love song!*" As it turned out, it was the first of a series on "**Drive**," other examples being "Missing You" and "Sally Street." I guess it's no great stretch to learn that "Redemption" is a gospel-tinged number. While the guitar playing is as urgent as on the opening cut, "Redemption" finds Harrell vocally accompanied by Rank Outsiders founder, Gigi Dover, now a solo artist. It doesn't take long for the narrator in "Me & You" to establish that many things in his life – the leaky roof on the family home, his old car – are falling apart, but then attests that a still robust bond binds him to his wife. On that basis, he attests that they can overcome whatever life throws at them. By the way, at the outset we're told "*It rained every day for a week.*" Seems like we've been there before?

"Fishing In The Morning" and "This Old Truck" need no explanation, while "I Miss Daddy" is an instance where 'hokey' almost becomes an issue. Viewed through the eyes of an adolescent whose father is now absent, he intones "*I miss Daddy, But Mama don't.*" We're also told that she's bringing money home, her feet ache, and that, last night, "*She brought home some guy I don't know.*" I don't believe we're meant to conclude that all those insights are related. The album title cut is a road song [for travelling musicians], while, hinging on the repeated "*Strangers in the night*" – a poetic reference to the current state of his marriage, and also to Sinatra's worldwide hit song – "*in the cold projector light*" of a midnight "Slide Show," a man views pictures of happier times, featuring his now estranged wife and their wedding day.

Set in October "Be Still" is a seasonal natural world exposition, while pursuing the road song genre from a different angle a restless drifter narrates "Rambling Kind." In the penultimate "The Ballad Of Til Huffman," Til, a thirty something 'fictional' Alabama born African American – "*With holes in his pockets, And not a thing to loose*" - takes part in the pivotal March 1965 Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery. A familiar guy, the one who is currently down-on-his-luck, sleeps in an abandoned car in the album closer, "Graham Street."

I guess "**Drive**" can be summed up with the words, pleasant though hardly earth shattering – the lack of variation in the themes employed, and the [repetitious] use of similar characters being the principle flaw.

Folkwax Score 6 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 09/06.