



Tim O'Brien "**Cornbread Nation**" Sugar Hill Records

"**Cornbread Nation**" is one of a pair of O'Brien solo recordings simultaneously released by the Sugar Hill label, the other being "**Fiddler's Green.**" Both recordings *bottom out* as a mix of material from traditional sources alongside original songs, old and new, some penned by O'Brien. "**Cornbread Nation**" opens with the "*time to meet my maker is nigh*" themed gospel number "Hold On," and the lyric also references farming by way of the oft repeated – "*put you hand on that plough.*" Tim shares the lead vocal on the opening cut with his sister Mollie, and follows with another gospel number "Moses," an invocation to the spiritual leader of the Jews to make good his escape from bondage in Egypt. The soulful vocal contribution to "Moses" by Odessa Settles, Todd Suttles and Darrell Scott deserves mention and the trio also feature vocally on the closing track "When The World Comes To An End." The album title cut, lyrically it practically amounts to a cornbread recipe, is one of a pair of tunes on this album that O'Brien penned. Melodically, it's a happy-go-lucky celebration of that tasty accompaniment to meals in America's southern states.

I'm accustomed to hearing the traditional "The Foggy Foggy Dew" performed in a more boisterous manner, but here Tim slows it to a waltz pace. I've also known versions where the words were rather bawdy, but O'Brien's "**Cornbread Nation**" reading is thoroughly sanitised. "Let's Go Huntin'" is underpinned by a bouncy Cajun rhythm – "*dog in the woods he done treed something.*" I have a close friend Stateside who lovingly likens O'Brien's style of delivery on this cut to "*pig callin' music.*" For me what O'Brien indulges in, vocally, is the North American equivalent of the strangulated delivery that certain traditional, British bred folk performers indulge in when performing old folk songs from these islands. I don't just mean flat sounding vowels, but the, sometimes, incomprehensible mispronunciation of words.

"Walkin' Boss" is an old railroad work song, while the well known "House Of The Risin' Sun" is delivered at a slow waltz pace, and features yet another typical "rise and fall" bluegrass vocal. Furthermore, listen closely and you'll discern a repetitive [and irritating], but suppressed banjo play "*puck, puck*" sounds reminiscent of a chicken pecking in the yard. Composing "Runnin' Out Of Memory" took the combined efforts of Tim, his son Jackson, plus his wife Kit Swaggert and Dermot Diamond, and unfolds as a fun-filled computer age lyric that includes the words *e-Mail, reboot, compression* and more.

Penned by the late, great Harlan Howard's "Busted" gave Ray Charles a # 4 U.S. Pop hit in 1963. The previous year Johnny Cash included the tune on his album "**Blood, Sweat And Tears,**" and the single release gave him a # 13 Country Chart single. Almost two decades later, on the same chart, John Conlee took the song to # 6. O'Brien's take on Howard's tale of one family's run of bad luck is to set it at a waltz pace with some fine pedal steel pickin' c/o "Dangerous" Dan Dugmore. The second cover song is Jimmy Rodgers' "California Blues" aka "Blue Yodel No. 4." The penultimate track is the upbeat "Boat Up The River" and the album closes with the aforementioned "When The World Comes To An End."

In addition to those already mentioned, O'Brien's vocals, guitar, bouzouki and mandolin are augmented on "**Cornbread Nation**" by Kenny Malone [drums/percussion], Kenny Vaughan [electric guitar], Jerry Douglas [lap steel], Stuart Duncan [fiddle], plus there's vocal support from Del McCoury.

Folkwax Score 6 out of 10

**Arthur Wood.**

Kerrville Kronikles 08/05 & 09/05.