



Slaid Cleaves **“Wishbone”** Rounder/Philo Records

Some things change, but mostly they stay the same. Austin songwriter and Cleaves song collaborator, Steve Brooks, supplied the liner notes for Y2K’s **“Broke Down.”** This time around, his buddy of a dozen years, Mike Jasper, also an Austin based writer/songwriter, performs the honours. In the closing lines of his submission, Jasper *paraphrases* Jon Landau’s infamous 1974 Springsteenism [#], *“I have seen the future of the folk’n rockin’ blues and its name is Slaid Cleaves.”* In those days, Jon was a journalist. Now he’s Brooce’s manager. Has been for decades. Seems like Mike possesses the credentials..... *some things change, but mostly they stay the same.*

Mike makes a point of stating, in the sleeve notes, that he wasn’t a Slaid fan from the get go. It took a little time. Same here. Now that, on record, Slaid’s indulging in the delivery of *“folk’n rockin’ blues,”* Mike’s a helpless addict. Later in the narrative there’s mention of Cleaves winning the 1992 Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Songwriting Contest, but Mike’s still not convinced. *“Folkie”* he spits. My ears and eyes were privy to the latter event, and to tell the truth it was a vintage year – Michael McNevin, Karen Taylor Good and Cosy Sheridan were among the other winners. As for my, now, *twelve year old* take on Cleaves contribution, *“A name that Nashville cats in suits would love, but hey, musically it’s acoustic Earle.”* These days, I practice conditional ambivalence, since there are times when the Mainer hits the ball clear out of the park, and then there’s times – well you know how it ends.... *some things change, but mostly they stay the same.*

Cleaves ain’t no prolific composer, **“Wishbones”** is only his *third statement* for the Philo imprint in a span of seven years. Last time around, in the co-writing stakes, he *tyed one on* with the *late and legendary* Woody Guthrie. This collection opens with the album title cut, a tune Cleaves co-wrote with a *living legend* of Texas music [and Philo label mate], Ray Wylie Hubbard. *Some things change, but mostly they stay the same.* Simply put, the lyric of “Wishbones” presents an old man’s reflection upon his life – *“I guess some dreams just don’t come true, Nothin’ left but skin & wishbones.”* On backing vocals, Eliza Gilkyson absolutely nails the song, while pitched, as it is, at the outset of the album Jasper is totally on the money with the contention that it’s a *“stone-cold hit song.”*

Slap in the middle of this collection there’s three co-writes and one cover song. First up is the self-explanatory “Drinkin’ Days” written with Austin writer/performer Karen Poston. The song name checks a number of local clubs and bars including the, already eulogized in song [with Poston], “Horseshoe Lounge.” There’s a dirtier bluesy edge to “Sinner’s Prayer,” co-written with his bred in Maine childhood buddy, Rod Picott. Picott’s captured part of his own family history in “Tiger Tom Dixon’s Blues,” which relates the story of a professional boxer who had all the credential to make the big time, but succumbed to the demon in a bottle, alcohol. The song provided the title for Picott’s 2001 debut solo album, and here the sharp snap of drummer Rick Richards’ backbeat [Georgia Satellites, Izzy Stradlin], finds Slaid rockin’ the folk out of Rod’s “Blues.” If the foregoing is a testament to anything, it’s that....*some things change, but mostly they stay the same,* and now here’s the rub. The quartet is completed by the appearance of a new co-writer, Nicole St Pierre. Their highly literate collaboration, “Below,” in the vein of Mark Erelli’s “The Farewell Ball,” concerns the submerging of a town in the name of progress. *“Until the modern world started creeping in, One day came the lawyers with cash in hand, They swore that our village would light up the land.”* Excuse the pun, but in *the light* of the foregoing.....*some things change, but mostly they stay the same.*

As for the pure bred new Cleaves tunes on "**Wishbones**" they kicks in with the second cut, "Road Too Long," a realism filled tribute to the [hard] journey that follows the release of a new album. In the opening verse the narrator sums up how he feels, physically, with "*My engine block is covered in blood, And my veins are pumping gasoline*" while his state of mind attests to the relentlessness of the road – "*I can't remember where I've been, I'm always one day closer to home, Then I go right back out again.*" Having scribbled album reviews for this publication for well over two years, it should be apparent by now that I'm a helpless sucker for story songs. As for story songs about horses, hell my shameful downfall began over three decades ago with that darned "Chestnut Mare." As you'll now have surmised, "Quick As Dreams," is an equine story song, and a humungous fine example of one if I may say so. In the liner Cleaves credits its inspiration as, precisely, Chapter 5 of "**Seabiscuit**," by Laura Hillenbrand [ISBN 0449005615]. Following in the wake of that American racetrack legend, is the country flavoured "Horses," that finds our hero yodelling. Rockabilly is the chosen beat for the love song "Hearts Break" – although I'm sceptical regarding the validity of the lines "*Empires crumble and fall from the Twin towers to the wailing wall,*" while the Slaidster drops back into *quality story book mode* for the penultimate cut "Borderline." It's a tale of deception and corruption on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border, for those Mexican males who strive, against all odds, to do their best for their families. As the chorus attests, "*When love for family is stronger than fear, When the desperation sets in, A man will cross any line that is drawn, And who's to say it's a sin?*" Having illegally crossed the border, Armando is deported back to Mexico, where he has little choice but agree to a financial offer made by "*a man with no name*" from Guadalajara. As the man said "*You can have all that you need, There's no contract to sign but the terms are your life, If you take my money and seed.*" Sadly, Armando's brother, an army officer, is in on *the illegal farming scheme* and harvests the crop for his own profit. As the song closes, Armando is handed a gun by the man from Guadalajara. The closing cut "New Year's Day" is another bona fide classic song [albeit autobiographical], opens at a wake, name checks "*Seekers of the Shade*" at Kerrville, Cancun, Maine and a number of localities in Austin, including Barton Springs where the late Uncle Jack commenced Slaid's baptism as a Texan. In tribute and heartfelt thanks Slaid writes, "*Your spirit will live on in what we do and who we are.*"

Much credit should go to the support players for displaying wonderfully sympathetic musicianship throughout this recording. So here's to Messrs. Morlix, Richards, Arthur, Plankenhorn, Brown, Standefer and more. This collection was recorded at Rootball Studios in Austin and produced by Gurf Morlix. That's three winners in a row for Slaid'n'Gurf. *Some things change, but mostly they stay the same.....*

Note.

[#] – Landau's quote appeared in a May 1974 issue of "**The Real Paper**," after seeing the musician from the Jersey Shore play Charley's club in Harvard Square, Cambridge, Mass.

Folkwax Rating 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 02/04