



John Gorka “The Gypsy Life” AIX Records

First, let me offer a little insight into AIX Records who have filmed, recorded and released this CD/DVD double disc set. Google “AIX Records” and you should come up with a ‘hot spot’ that proudly declares “*Audio fidelity beyond reality.*” And for good reason, since truth to tell it’s no idle boast. AIX Records is part of AIX Media Group and was established by Dr. Mark Waldrep in 2001 [#]. Dr. Waldrep is a professor of digital media arts at California State University, Dominguez Hills. A faculty member since 1995, he has over a quarter of a century of experience as a recording and mastering engineer and is also a classically trained composer.

I’ve already mentioned that this release features a video and audio disc. That said each disc is double sided, and, respectively, features interactive and linear DVD programmes, and CD-Audio and DVD-Audio soundtracks. Nineteen songs are listed on the liner – and form the basis of the live John Gorka performance filmed by AIX - but the DVD features a number of unlisted numbers, although all the songs featured have appeared on albums recorded by Gorka. Accompanying Gorka are fellow road warriors of the folk music persuasion, Susan Werner [acoustic guitar, piano and background vocals] and Amelia K. Spicer [background vocals], plus a compatriot from John’s days at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania’s Moravian College. Russ Rentler [mandolin] and John were once members of the Razy Dazzy Spasm Band, and a letter version of this aggregation featured Richard Shindell. I guess it’s also worth noting Werner’s Pennsylvania connection since this lowan studied for her master’s degree in voice and musical history at Temple University in nearby Philadelphia and first met John early in his solo career when he was a regular at Bethlehem’s folk venue, Godfrey Daniels. This quartet of support players is completed by Michael Manring, who has toured with John on a number of occasions.

Before delving into the musical contents of this release, for those Folkwax readers who have never witnessed Gorka perform, his, ‘sometimes,’ hesitating style of introducing a song, as seen on this video, is no different to his approach on the concert stage. It’s simply part of who he is. The song titles as listed on the liner, refer to the running order on the CD. While the CD features John’s songs sans his introductions, as we proceed I’ll refer to comments that he makes on the accompanying DVD. Penned when John was 25 years of age, in the opening song “Branching Out” lyric Gorka adopts the voice of a tree, and it first appeared on his now two-decade old debut recording “**I Know.**” Introducing the song Gorka remarks on how it has become, unintentionally [on his part], a children’s favourite. Next up, “Stranger With Your Hair” appeared on John’s debut as well as his sophomore collection “**Land Of The Bottom Line**” [1990]. I have to say that this ‘recollection of a love affair that simply won’t fade from memory’ is the composition that captured me ‘hook, line and sinker’ almost two decades ago. My Gorka addiction remains as pervasive here in 2008. Rewarding soldiers who perished on the field of battle is the focus of “Let Them In” [“**The Company You Keep**” [2001]] and the lyric takes the form of an open letter to St. Peter. The lyric is based on a 1942 poem penned by Elma Dean, and Gorka performs the song while sat at the piano - a Steinway naturally.

The narrator in “Mean Streak” [“**Land Of The Bottom Line**”] appear angry and bitter, but when he delivers poetic turns of phrase such as “*Standing on the corner in the shadow of doubt,*” I was soon engaged by his rhetoric. Like Fred Eaglesmith’s “White Rose,” Gorka’s “Flying Red Horse” [“**Out Of The Valley**” [1994]] pays tribute to the nation’s filling stations – in this instance Mobil - although there’s an

element of fantasy woven into the storyline. "Snow Don't Fall" the first tune drawn from John's most recent solo outing "**Writing In The Margins**" [2006], is followed by the blues inspired "When She Kisses Me" ["**Temporary Road**" [1992]]. Moving on, John performs two songs from "**Jack's Crows**" [1991] – the album title being a reference to Jack Hardy's song "The Crows." "Mercy Of The Wheels" is based on the premise of being able to travel back in time to tell those 'near and dear, and now sadly departed' that your life worked out OK, while "I'm From New Jersey" is a self-deprecating little number, filled to the brim with clam, understated autobiographical resignation. On the DVD, Gorka launches his performance with the latter number and as the closing note fades he adds, "*And Russ is from New Jersey too.*" Although he already had the idea for the song, in a short [DVD] interview segment Gorka credits Richard Ford's book "**The Sports Writer**" [ISBN 978-0679762102, 1986] with being the spark that finally ignited the song's lyric.

In the latter song Gorka references his maternal Italian ancestry and with lines like "*They possessed the world's delights, Espresso mornings, lasagne nights*" and "*They filled me up with what they'd cook, Then put me down with just one look*" he follows with "Italian Girls" ["**Land Of The Bottom Line**"] the slyly humorous recollection of 'culinary love' which he performs on his own. "Writing In The Margins," the title song from Gorka's aforementioned 2006 release highlights the 'human cost' of war and was constructed in the form of a 'letter home' after John had a conversation with a soldier who had served two terms of duty in Iraq – "*And yes, I choose to serve, But there is no glory in it, And my voice goes mostly unheard*" and "*There's not a lot of rich boys wearing DCU's and sand, But I'll think about that later, When I make it home again.*" "Love Is Our Cross To Bear," a bittersweet love song, appeared on "**I Know**" and "**Land Of The Bottom Line**," and while "Houses In The Fields" is performed live on the CD, on the DVD it features as a promotional video filmed back in 1991 in support of "**Jack's Crows.**" The lyric focuses on a present day ill - financially strapped 'maw and paw' farmers forced to sell the ground on which generations of ancestors lived and laboured, more often than not, to developers or faming conglomerates.

By way of introducing the title cut from "**Land Of The Bottom Line**," John reflects that all-in-all the album "*Had no happy songs on it whatsoever.*" In the lyric Gorka ponders on his, once, nascent musical career and on the choices he made, and opens with the lines "*Couldn't bribe a wino on what I used to make, My fortune was as sure as the wind, But I was free to wander and time was on my hand, It was mine to burn and bend.*" "Always" ["**Old Futures Gone**" [2003]] is a paean to those in society who chose to 'walk life's path' alone. Far from marking himself out as a vociferous protestor in the mould Dylan or Ochs, in a quiet but 'clear' way Gorka's lyrics have consistently made their point when focusing on politics and war. The most recent example "Road Of Good Intentions" ["**Writing In The Margins**"] includes the stinging indictment, "*There's more fiction now in Washington, than in Hollywood*" "*And the soldiers and their families, with life and limb they pay, While the ones who sent them marching get to dance the night away.*" "Blue Chalk" appeared on "**Between Five And Seven**" [1996] and is followed by "Lightning's Blues" another cut from that collection. The latter lyric was inspired by events that John once observed on 6th Street in Austin, and he closes his performance with "The Gypsy Life" ["**Temporary Road**"] a song he wrote soon after cessation of hostilities in the first Gulf War.

In a recording that spans two-decades and has witnessed the release of ten albums, Gorka has yet to release a live recording. "**The Gypsy Life**" very much serves that purpose. Just over sixty-seven minutes of 'live performance' music on the CD translates into two hours of song introductions, performances, music videos, interviews, rehearsals and more on the DVD. In addition to the songs listed on "**The Gypsy Life**" liner, the DVD includes three music videos - "I Don't Feel Like A Train" ["**Temporary Road**"], "Good Noise" [+ ["**Out Of The Valley**"] and the aforementioned "Houses In The Fields." From a Fall 2006 appearance at McCabe's in Santa Monica, the DVD also includes a main stage rendition of "What Was That [That I Just Said]" ["**The Company You Keep**"] and, with Amelia present, a backstage rehearsal of "Amber Lee" ["**After Yesterday**" [1998]]. Back on the McCabe's stage John sings "Unblindfold The Referee" ["**Writing In The Margins**"] c/w a fluffed opening line. Also on the DVD, and filmed by Waldrep & Co., featuring a support vocal from Spicer, John performs Townes Van Zandt's "Snow Don't Fall" ["**Writing In The Margins**"], and as the closing credits roll, filmed in black and white, there's a rehearsal room performance of "How Legends Are Made" ["**Land Of The Bottom Line**"]. And once you've absorbed all the featured music, you can sit back and enjoy the many DVD extras, including interviews in which John offers an insight into the creation of most of the songs performed and even a pair that aren't - "Semper Fi" and the wry country tinged "Pilot Light."

Gorka, an astute observer of the absurdities of this life we journey through, possesses the lyrical skill to make the listener giggle out loud with the turn of a phrase, and in the ensuing line have you choke back a poignant tear. That's a skill that few possess. Quite frankly, there's enough content here to keep a real music lover amused and engaged for a lifetime.

P.S. to Dr. Mark – Having observed Ms Werner in action I trust you observed the breadth and depth of this lowan's musical talent. Is a Susan Werner performance DVD on AIX Records out of the question?

Note.

[#] – The company was founded in 1994 as AIX Entertainment.

[+] - If you're quick you'll spot elements of Mary Chapin's road band, the Mobil horse and Jonell Moser on support vocals.

Folkwax Score 10 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 12/07.

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