



Mark Erelli “**Hope And Other Casualties**” Signature Sounds Recording Company

Back in early 2004 when I interviewed Mark regarding his western-swing flavoured outing “**Hillbilly Pilgrim**,” he recalled his conversation with Signature Sounds Recording Company boss Jim Olsen prior to going into the studio. Paraphrasing that conversation, Erelli told Olsen *“I’ve got this serious record I want to do, with all my own songs. After that, if you’ll let me, I’d like to this kind of really fun western swing, kind of hillbilly record. I knew exactly who I wanted to use for the second record.”* Supported by members of Boston based combo The Spurs, Mark proceeded to record the latter album. *“I went ahead and made the western swing record. It turned out to be much easier I think than had I gone the other way.”* Two years on, Mark has pretty much recorded *“the serious record,”* with, as ever, assistance from his constant musical companion Lorne Entress. With the odd contribution, vocally and instrumentally, from others, the pair sang and played most of the instruments that you hear on “**Hope And Other Casualties**” and co-produced the collection.

If there’s really a heaven someplace then in the opening cut “Here And Now,” the narrator not only marks out our earthly existence as a living hell for the marginalized in society but calls for a volte-face. Reminiscent of the finely observed title sequence of a movie, the listener is introduced to the storyline via a series of crisp, no nonsense, images - *“Cobblestone pillow, Newspaper sheet, Ten below zero, Sleeping on the street.”* The lyric goes on to comment on the greed of those privileged to exist on one side of *“the golden door,”* while, as the song closes, the narrator calls to mind how, one day, we all depart this early plane, *“Someday we all will be at peace, And all of our suffering will cease, There’s more than enough to go around, Why not here, Why not now.”* “Imaginary Wars” could have done with a marginally shorter electric guitar and bass intro, but that apart, and featuring a Lori McKenna backing vocal, it’s one of the best conceived and executed story songs I’ve heard in a long time. Mark recalls how the pine forest in which he played GI Joe as a youngster, became a sub-division during his teen years. *“All for a buck they cut down all those trees, They subdivided all of my fondest memories”* sums up the aggressive face of commerce, but Mark didn’t sit back defeated *“I ripped down flags and I pulled up stakes, But what difference can one boy make, Them pines still fell like thunder on a summer afternoon.”* Erelli’s point being, *“We don’t keep track of what we’ve lost, we can’t calculate the cost, When there’s no place left for a boy’s imagination to run wild.”* Progress always comes at a price.....

Lightening up somewhat, at least subjectively, these days Mark is once more a Maine resident, the state where he spent his college years. In “Snowed In [Drive All Night]” he marries a song about road travel in winter to expressions of love for his wife – *“Forty miles an hour from Connecticut to Maine, That’s as fast as I could go”* and *“Now you might think I’m crazy, But if you ever met my baby, You’d know why I’m out here in this stuff.”* This is the second occasion on which Mark has officially released “The Only Way” on a recording, post 9/11 it appeared on a 2002 Signature Sounds EP of the same name, and the latest version features a Kris Delmhorst backing vocal. During 2003 Ellis Paul covered the number and took the lead vocal when it appeared on “**Side Of The Road**,” the Rounder/Philo released duo recording with Vince Gilbert. While many song poets came up instant knee jerk reactions to the cataclysm – as did the power brokers in Washington - Erelli’s song, he was a mere 27 years of age at the time, took a more thoughtful and measured approach, that envisioned a way forward for all involved. While *“It was a nightmare, no tongue can tell, The streets of New York City looked just like the gates of hell, In a flash the smoke and ash pouring down like rain”* captures the full-on horror of the event, relative to the souls who were lost or injured that day Mark adds *“I know that we owe them more than to be afraid,”* then

delivers the summation *"So why seek vengeance, What comes of war, I know freedom has a price, But it doesn't keep score."*

When it first appeared on Mark's web site as one of his free monthly mp3 downloads, "Evening's Curtain" was titled "Darkness On The Deep," a hymn to those brave souls who chose to make their living on the, sometimes storm tossed, *"great salt sea."* The tempo of the album version is greater than the aforementioned mp3. As the lyric unfolds it mentions the real-life loss, in mysterious circumstances, during October 2003 of the "Candy B II" a Waldoboro, Maine registered vessel. At the time it sank, it was working out of Provincetown, Massachusetts fishing for scallops. Although Erelli doesn't identify where Private First Class Jason Miller has been serving, it's this soldier's homecoming that forms the initial focus of "Seeds Of Peace." Considering that the song first appeared as an mp3 download in early March 2003, Afghanistan appears the logical suggestion. Relative to his nation's recent foreign adventures, in the second verse Erelli ponders the repercussions at home, *"What's become of my country torn by contradiction, The spirit of freedom propped up by a culture of fear, Where it's unpatriotic to protest or even to question, Have we learned nothing from history or the last couple of years."* Later, Mark adds *"I will not be shamed into silence by partisan thunder, And I won't fall in line and march to the drums on the wind"* and ultimately concludes *"How long must we wait until the seeds of peace find purchase in this land?"* Co-written with Maryland bred, Nashville based songwriter Julie Lee "Undone" is introduced by the sound of [possibly Native American] shakers and an acoustic guitar that picks out a cyclical blues figure. In this two verse and [supporting] chorus number, Erelli "crystal ball gazes" regarding the commodity that, in a not too distant decade, will become scarce on a worldwide scale – I'm talking about water, the liquid without which all forms of life would perish. Rather than being a tribute to the financially open-handed approach of an avid sport fan, "Seasons Pass," a ballad, lyrically reflects upon the annual climatic cycle and opens in the Spring with the appearance of *"Daffodil and tulips."*

In the up-tempo "Hartfordtown 1944" the narrator, a youngster grounded by his parents, recalls the *"dry and dusty summer day"* the circus comes to town, and how, as an onlooker, he witnessed the tent burn down. On the afternoon of Thursday July 6, 1944 at a location on Barbour Street, Hartford during a performance by the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, one hundred sixty-nine people, mostly children, perished in the ensuing blaze. As Erelli attests, the Flying Wallendas were performing when the fire broke out, and it spread rapidly because the tent canvas had been waterproofed with a mixture of gasoline and paraffin. The magnitude of the catastrophe was compounded by, steel railings that fronted the bleachers and an animal chute that blocked the main exit – Albert Court's big cat act having immediately preceded the Wallendas appearance. The gospel tinged "Passing Through" is the second of two songs here that Mark co-wrote with, his friend/occasional touring companion, Catie Curtis [the other is the opening cut "Here And Now"]. Redbird - Peter Mulvey, Jeffrey Foucault and Kris Delmhurst - contribute backing vocals, and the title of the album is referenced in the closing verse. Subjectively, the lyric is an exposition of mankind's Biblical "three score and ten" on this earthly plane, and how we should all ensure that we leave a useful and life sustaining legacy to our progeny. Ron Sexsmith's "God Loves Everyone" appeared on the Canadian's 2002 recording **"Cobblestone Runway,"** and this paean to unconditional heaven sent love closes this reflective, finely observed collection of Erelli originals.

I've already noted that some of the songs, five in all, namely "The Only Way" (December 2001 and April 2004), "Seeds Of Peace" (March 2003), "Snowed In [Drive All Night]" (March 2005) and "God Loves Everyone" (September 2005), plus "Evening's Curtain" [formerly titled "Darkness On The Deep" (November 2003)] have appeared as free mp3 monthly downloads on Mark's web site [<http://www.markerelli.com/music.html>], although it's new studio versions that feature on **"Hope And Other Casualties."** Right down to the layout and fonts used – album title, Mark's name and the track list, the lettering on front of the **"Hope And Other Casualties"** liner booklet pays homage to Dylan's January 1964 CBS release **"The Times They Are A-Changin'"** [+]. Come to think of it, the Bobsters album title is even reflected in the content of Erelli's dawn of the 21st millennium A.D. compositions. As for my comment at the outset of this review that this would be Mark's *"serious record,"* one that featured all his own songs, the machinations of a musician's life are nothing if not transient and Mark's vision has undoubtedly moved on since 2004.

Truth to tell, I've always been a sucker for story songs. Songs that take their inspiration from real life are doubly engaging since we humans should, but repeatedly fail to, learn from our past errors and omissions. Erelli is one of only a handful of song poets that I can think of – Chuck Brodsky, Richard Shindell and Tom Russell being part of this exclusive coterie – who, album-after-album, have never

failed to deliver musically attractive and lyrically challenging song collections. **“Hope And Other Casualties”** is Erelli’s fifth consecutive studio recording for Signature Sounds and all the way from the strident mandolin intro that launches “Here And Now” to the fading sound of the harmonica on “God Loves Everybody,” for me, it is a sparkling, multi-faceted, thoughtful and thought provoking gem. Without hope we humans would not journey on.....although sadly, there will always be casualties. Everything in life has a price.....

Note.

[+] – Where Bob settled for a black and white cover picture of himself, Mark has followed the same route except in aesthetically pleasing sepia tones.

Folkwax Score 10 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 01/06.

[1735 words]

{**NOTE TO FOLKWAX EDITOR** – Considering the length of the review, I’d suggest posting it as a feature} **2006’s First Album Of The Year**