

Tom Russell “The Man From God Knows Where” Interview

Over the last decade and a half, Tom Russell’s solo career has been built upon the release of over a dozen solo albums that should have brought him international recognition as one of North America’s finest folk/country songwriters. If that recognition is judged in terms of amassed wealth and chart success, then Tom Russell is a relative failure. His material certainly does not engage the listener’s intellect by pandering to commercial considerations. So here’s the truth, Tom Russell is one of the finest songwriters ever to have lived. His words reflect on a panoply of subjects and events, derived from the history of his homeland. His latest recording, titled **“The Man From God Knows Where,”** takes that storytelling exploration of the ages one step further by focusing on the Irish and Norwegian branches of his family who arrived in North America many generations ago.

Here, Tom talks about the songs on the album.....

Was it always your intention from the outset to use material by other writers, including traditional material. The original “American Primitive” theme would undoubtedly have dictated the use of traditional material.

Yeah, there were the old melodies that I loved. Once I knew Delores and Iris were going to be involved, I wanted to hear these things that always gave me chills. I wanted “Wayfarin’ Stranger” and “The Old Rugged Cross.” I thought *“What a great contrast”* after we talk about massacring the Indians and this huge theme of taking their land – immediately after the song “Sitting Bull in Venice,” we have this stark ancient spiritual “The Old Rugged Cross.” A white spiritual, sung by Iris. I thought that was a great contrast and she sang it with Kari, while playing the 800-hundred year old Barony piano. It was a moving experience. I also knew that I wanted to throw “Casey Jones” in there, because it’s referenced that that was a song my father sang, as learned from his father-in-law.

The only co-write you have on the album is “The Dreaming.”

I’d had the lyric for years and I loved it. I showed it to Nanci. I just wasn’t getting a melody. I thought it could be a great drinking song and that it would stand outside the production. Katy Moffatt helped finish the melody.

Was there other material that you had written for the project.

Not a load. There was a black blues called “The Streets of San Juan Hill.” We dropped another “Casey Jones,” I think we had in there. There was some instrumental stuff. God, I’m drawing a blank – nothing significant.

I presume that you drew upon your family archives for the project. Did you have to do much research.

No, there wasn’t that much there. There had to be a lot of imagination and sketching characters and putting them together from what I had heard. Some characters like “Patrick Russell” were verbatim of what they had said. His account was transcribed by his wife. Of course, I knew the story of my father’s life and my take on it. Other characters like “Mary Clare Malloy,” “Ambrose Larsen” and “Anna Olsen,” I sketched from aural history and facts that I wanted to put in there.

Did you make any interesting discoveries along the way.

Oh yeah, lots of them. “Mary Clare Malloy” is in there, basically, because I went out to Ellis Island. One of the things that amazed me, was that when people came to New York between 1890 and 1920 and they sailed into the harbour, the doctor would go on board the ship and really just cursorily look over the first and second class passengers. They landed directly into New York. Then the boat went over to Ellis Island and the third class passengers were processed, sometimes for weeks. The difference between a first and third class ticket may have been five or eight dollars. There was certainly a class distinction.

I thought it was also quite chilling where the lyric describes how the passengers were marked with a chalk “X” if they were mentally ill, or an “E” which meant they were sent back to Ireland.

Yeah, I got all that stuff at Ellis Island and made notes about it. I wanted a character telling that part of the immigrants story and created "Mary Clare Malloy," which is my mother's family name. I used that and the fact that I'd heard about a ship full of seven hundred "*picture brides*" coming to America.

I was going to come to them a little later, so what were the "*picture brides*."

They were mail order brides. Men in the mid-West who didn't have wives could contact an agency. Maybe the agency had a picture of the woman and they would send it off, and the guy would write back and say "*I'll marry her.*" Eventually these women would be put on a ship. Somewhere I heard about this ship with seven hundred picture brides coming to America and being sent out to the mid-West to their new husbands.

In the opening song "The Man From God Knows Where," can you explain the line "*I've come to hear you, now, so maybe I'll be saved.*"

Well, as the next lines says, "*Cursed are we who forget the past.*" It's a gnostic principle. Everything you learn about yourself or bring forth from the ground or from your roots will save you. Everything you do not learn about yourself, or turn your back on, will destroy you. Sort of that simple principle really. I'm going off under the guise of "**The Man from God Knows Where.**" I'm riding off and listening to all these people's voices, and trying to understand their lives. To find out who they are. To find out who I am. What part of me is from part of them.

"American Primitive man, American Primitive Land," your original theme, appears in the lines of five songs, while there are four versions of the album title song - - -

And I had to blend the two. I had the earlier theme and I knew that the actual people who rose up out of the ground – like "Patrick Russell" – were American Primitive people. That was going to be their refrain that I wanted to simply run through the piece. With a little twist each time, like "*Wash my face in a frying pan*" – these are refrains that come out of old folk songs really. Then I got "The Man from God Knows Where" so I had another refrain. That basically went with the narrator, the guy that is riding across the landscape. One refrain is associated with the narrator and the other associated with the people themselves. I think it was essential to have those links throughout the whole work, otherwise people might get a little lost. Also the narrator, "The Man from God Knows Where" can mention Stephen Foster and set up the appearance of Sitting Bull, and Walt Whitman even. That wonderful little piece of tape we found on Walt Whitman could be introduced, because I figured Whitman's writing and the poetic landscape of early American was similar to what I was attempting.

Are Patrick Russell, Mary Clare Malloy, Ambrose Larsen and Anna Olsen all known ancestors.

Patrick Russell is my great grandfather on my father's side. Ambrose Larsen is, or at least his real name was Ludwig we think now, and he was another one of my father's great grandfathers on his mother's side. Anna Olsen is more of a fictional Norwegian character. didn't have any Olsen's in the family. I wanted a name that wasn't specifically Norwegian, so we changed it to Olsen. I wanted somebody from the North of Norway, with that accent – where Kari is from actually. I created that and wanted her to tell that story, more or less about what happened to her. And about her neighbours who hanged themselves. I wanted these themes of suicide and madness, which I became familiar with in doing my research. The fact that everything wasn't hunky dory out there.

What about Mary Clare Malloy.

Again she's a – my sister's name is Mary Clare and my mother's maiden name is Malloy. She's a collage of people. I wanted to have somebody that came through Ellis Island, since a lot of my ancestors appeared to come through Quebec, Canada and walked down into the United States. I wanted somebody coming through Ellis Island and created her so that I could tell different historical parts of the story. The same way that "The Outcast" was created to tell that story – and really, he is the opposite of "The Man from God Knows Where."

Do you foresee protests about the lyrics of "the Outcast" once the song becomes more widely known. Particularly from minority groups, since the lyric pulls no punches.

People have to see it in the right light. Of course a lot of it is tongue in cheek, black humour and – I haven't had much negative reaction. I do it onstage every night, but I do a little preamble before I perform it, about how this guy rises up out the gutter and that he's a swindler and he's the anti-christ in a way. He's a carnival barker. He wants to swindle them out of their money. If I give that preamble, people are going to take it in a better light. I love characters like this, because I saw this thing as a stage play. A Broadway musical type thing. I always liked that kind of negative character – the Iago character. I saw a rock version of "**Othello**" when I was a kid in L.A. Jerry Lee Lewis played Iago dressed up as an Elizabethan costume and playing the piano. I see this guy as kind of like that. The evil guy in the wings. I thought the piece needed that character.

Where did you get the idea for "Sitting Bull in Venice." It's linked with the closing lines of the preceding track.

I wrote the song before I wrote the link. I saw the photo of Sitting Bull on a gondola in Venice in a book, and was amazed. I also thought it was stunning in an ironic way, so I wrote the song. An Irish journalist asked me, years ago, when he knew I was working on this piece, whether I was going to include any references to Native Americans. I thought about it a long time, because I really started my career in Native American bars in Vancouver. I preface it live by saying that "*The irony is that my people were coming over here on boats. They may have passed Sitting Bull going the other way.*"

Did you perform "Chickasaw County Jail" for your father before he passed away.

No. In fact I couldn't have written it until he had died. I couldn't have had that – a lot of people in my family had really repressed a lot of that information. Especially, my little sister. We thought we were Ozzie and Harriett, but not really. He had some hard times and the message was that he survived them.

Do you think "Love Abides" is the best song that you've ever written.

[Laughs]. I don't know but I'm glad you like it if it is in that territory. It's a very moving song for me. I think Iris helps on it too. I wanted this piece to end very strongly. I wanted it to end very positively, with a love song. And to tell the listeners that "*Look, if you can make it through this entire record and listen to these people's sometimes very dark story, we're all rewarded with a positive piece*" – that really all of them were searching for a place where love abides.

Are the "Three crosses by the roadside" in that song, an Easter reference.

I live right outside El Paso. My girlfriend and I were walking up the road and there were three little crosses in the dirt by an intersection, which basically means that three teenagers were killed there in an auto-accident a couple of years ago. The Mexicans, when that happens, put little wooden crosses up right beside the road.

Arthur Wood.
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