

One Night @ Momos – Three Straight Sets, Connections Galore And A Kerrville Twist

The original plan was simply to go see Danny Schmidt – a 2007 Kerrville Folk Festival Songwriting Contest winner – sing some tunes in ‘a round’ at an Austin, Texas venue called Momos which is located on West Sixth Street. The date was Tuesday 20th May – two days before the 2008 Kerrville festival was scheduled to spring into action, one hundred plus miles away, at the Quiet Valley Ranch out in the Texas Hill Country. Sixth Street can be a wonderful and diverse *trip* if you are in any way musically inclined, with just about every genre imaginable purveyed nightly in its clubs, bars and restaurants. The entrance to Momos is located just off Sixth Street on Rio Grande and involves ascending a flight of stairs to the club’s extensive indoor and outdoor floor areas.

I had contacted Schmidt a few weeks prior to leaving this sceptred isle for my 2008 Kerrville/Texas sojourn, and closed my initial communication with the enquiry *“Is woman who rocks in her chair while singing, headed Kerr way this year?”* His reply amounted to *“Actually she’s singing at Momos later the same night as my show, if you feel like staying up late. She’ll be with her band....it should be good.”* Danny’s reply confused me somewhat and with no time prior to my departure for further communication, I concluded *“The woman must have hit the big time.”* The truth of the matter proved to be somewhat simpler. Carrie Elkin had simply relocated from Boston to Austin, and recruited locally based players – but more of that later. Proof of her presence in Austin manifested itself within a few minutes of arriving at Momos, when I found myself, stood at the bar, in conversation with Carrie.

I guess you’re wondering what the specific thrust of this piece is going to be. What it’s not going to be, is a blow-by-blow account of the shenanigans that unfolded onstage at Momos over the ensuing handful of hours, but rather a synopsis of what I saw and heard entwined with reviews of the latest recordings by the artists who performed that evening. Sat in the middle of the stage, as it were, between two roses, Schmidt’s in-the-round companions were, respectively, to his right Vanessa Lively and to his left Betty Soo. Lively opened the first round followed by Schmidt and Soo. While introducing her first song Betty mentioned that the guy ‘sitting in’ to her left, with his back against the wall [at that end of the Momos stage], was *“Richard.”* Now Richard was wearing shades, but if you are sat on the stage of an Austin club holding a fiddle, then you have to be Richard Bowden. And if you are at all familiar with top notch Texas born fiddle players from the closing decades of last century Richard comes from the top of that heap.

OK, back to the round. We reviewed Danny Schmidt’s most recent release **“Little Grey Sheep”** back in mid-January this year [here’s a link to that review - <http://www.visnat.com/entertainment/music/folkwax/mp3/album.cfm?aaa=zzz&reviewnumber=2494>]. **“A Chain Unbroken”** is San Antonio born and bred Lively’s sophomore recording. Strange to relate, particularly for an Austin based musician, Lively’s second album was recorded over a two month period during the winter of 2007 in a studio in Mossley, a suburb of the city of Manchester in North West England. Stefan Pope, an Englishman that Vanessa befriended in Ecuador while recording her debut **“Let Me Rise,”** assisted Lively to produce both releases. **“A Chain Unbroken”** features ten Lively penned originals, plus a cover of Oaxaca, Mexico born Lila Downs hypnotic Latin flavoured *“Dignificada”* [translates as *“Dignified”*]. The latter lyric relates how, Digna Ochoa, a human rights lawyer, was murdered [actually, read assassinated] in her Mexico City office during October 2001. Released earlier this year, highlights on **“A Chain Unbroken”** include *“The Only Day There Is,”* *“Before Her Time”* and the saxophone propelled album closer *“Alleluia.”* Lyrically Lively’s songs feature repeated references to ‘love,’ ‘grey skies’ and the ‘wind,’ but rarely possess tangible storylines. The album liner consists of basis fold over that, artwork apart, mainly features track-by-track details of the session players, studio etc. The song lyrics are posted on Lively’s web site at <http://www.vanessalively.com/>

On a typically blow-torch hot hill country afternoon, four days after my Momos escapade, sheltered under the [relatively] new corrugated metal and timber canopy that tops the Kerrville campgrounds located Threadgill Theatre, as a finalist in this year’s New Folk Songwriting Contest, Betty Soo performed *“Glass Heart”* and *“Never The Pretty Girl.”* Some thirty hours later Soo was, deservedly, confirmed as one of this year’s half-dozen New Folk winners. A week earlier Betty enjoyed similar success in the Singer/Songwriters Contest at the Wildflower Arts & Music Festival, held annually in

Richardson, North Texas. A Korean-American, Betty grew up in the town of Spring, Texas which is located to the north of Houston. Her latest release "**Little Tiny Secrets**," also her sophomore effort, was released last year. Many of Tom Russell's recent album releases have been accompanied by a separate EP. Concurrently released with "**Little Tiny Secrets**" was Betty's four song "**Never The Pretty Girl**." Commerce does not however rule over all else in Betty's world, and the proceeds from sale of her EP are being donated to International Justice Mission, a non-profit human rights agency [you can learn more about this organisation at www.ijm.org].

Both discs were produced by guitarist Stephen Doster [Nanci Griffith, Hal Ketchum, Tommy Elskes] and recorded in Austin. Let's begin with the EP, the winner thereon being the aforementioned "Never The Pretty Girl," a 21st century hook laden creation in the vein of Janis Ian's 1970's classic "At Seventeen" – *"If you'll take a chance on a plain face, You'll find a heart that's up for the race, You'll find a head full of thoughts of love, You'll find a hand that will fit like a glove, And if you come back for a second look, You'll find a tender heart loneliness shook, You'll find eyes filled with the glow of you, You'll find us two."* Simply divine and a tune that cries out for the listener to hit, replay. The ten cut "**Little Tiny Secrets**," begins with the truly optimistic 'musician on the road' themed "Coming Over Me", divulges the intimate thoughts and memories running through the mind of a woman living on the edge ["Stay"], waltzes it way through the delightful "The Story Of Us," while, propelled by a jazz shuffle, "Secrets" is a black comedy replete with asides that the narrator proffers in a sly, conspiratorial fashion. Conscious or unconscious [when composing it], Soo's anthemic song "Revival" is a spot-on exposition of the Kerrville ethos *"It could always be this way."* "If You Fall" possesses the feel of a song Dar Williams would have penned during her early career peak, and the hits simply keep on coming with Soo's up-tempo "Easy Living," while the 'reality check' album closer "Goodbye" is generously laced with humour. Betty's comprehension that discernable melodies cry out for cleverly plotted poetic lyrics is way beyond evident on "**Little Tiny Secrets**," and given a full FolkWax review this album would be a 'shoe in' for at least an 8. Betty's web site is located at <http://www.bettysoo.com/>

Since we've already established one English connection, here's another. The last occasion on which I saw Richard Bowden perform was, a few years back at The Musician, a Leicester, England venue, as accompanist to artist/playwright/songwriter Terry Allen and his son Bukka. Strange to relate the next act scheduled at Momos that Tuesday evening was none other than Bukka, accompanied by his Screen Door Music cohort, and cellist par excellence, Brian Standefer. The pair performed a short set, previewing Allen's upcoming weekly summer residency at the club. His performance complete, Bukka told me that he had, finally, released his sophomore solo album late last year. "**Sweet Valentine**," his debut disc, surfaced nearly nine years earlier. Furthermore, it appears that a follow up to the Y2K "**Screen Door Music – The Blue Album**" instrumental recording by Screen Door Music – Bukka, Brian and Robbie Gjersoe [guitar, backing vocals] - is also in the works. A couple of years back Screen Door Music produced the excellent various artists, 'nation at war' themed, Red House Records release "**13 Ways To Live**."

Featuring ten Bukka penned originals, in addition to stalwart support from Messrs. Gjersoe and Standefer, the latter also engineered the recording, for the "**Confidante**" sessions Allen [keyboards, accordion, lead vocal] enlisted 'locals' Chris Searles [drums, percussion], George Reiff and Chris White [bass], Richard Bowden [fiddle], Pam Miller [background vocals] and Will Sexton [guitar]. The album opener "Cadillac Hotel" is prefaced by a sombre sounding cello figure and midway through the melody changes tempo, while Bukka's [female?] narrator, her hotel window open, recalls hearing a street musician play "fourth storey blues." Optimism for the future permeates "Beterside," loss and regret underpin the emotive "Behold What You Found," while the "Baby's Gone" narrator appears overpowered by melancholy. Employing the poetic device of an artist creating a picture, the narrator in "World Of Pretend" transports the listener from that first awkward "*Hello*" through to the event of two bodies merging into one. "**Confidante**" closes with the angst filled love ballad "Wash Out And Dry," although I have to profess adoration for the racy lyric and waltz paced melody that graces "Naked Display." The marriage of Standefer's cello and Allen's keyboard and voice make for a heady mix, as they relate the latter's lyrically dark-hued tales. Bukka's web site is located at <http://www.bukkaallen.net/>

At the outset of this piece I mentioned “*woman who rocks in her chair while singing*” and I guess it’s time to explain the source of that comment. When Danny Schmidt played the Kerrville New Folk Winners show last year, he was accompanied vocally by Elkin. Both performers were sat on chairs. I soon concluded that Elkin possesses a ‘big voice’ that belies her slight frame. Schmidt’s performance climaxed with a rendition of *the still to be recorded* “Serpentine Cycle Of Money” and I recollect that, perfectly balanced on the rear legs [of her chair], Carrie simply sang her heart out. With Elkin the next scheduled Momos act, as the Tuesday evening progressed, I figured that if I was in for a penny I may as well be in for a pound. It was going to be a late night.....

Elkin’s band consisted of Mark Addison [keyboards], Mark Williams [cello, bass], Dustin Welch [banjo] and Doug Marcis [drums] plus ‘sitting in’ was guest guitarist/vocalist, Colin Brooks. Brooks’ current combo The Band Of Heathens had played an album release set, just up the road, at Waterloo Records earlier that evening. Elkin’s latest recording, “**The Jeopardy Of Circumstance**” was produced by Addison, Brooks and Amy Burchette. Unlike the foregoing trio of recording artists, it’s Carrie’s fourth solo release. There is also another British connection – with Elkin’s disc already being available in the U.K., publicist Rob Ellen and his North of Scotland based Medicine Music had scored enthusiastic reviews for it in a number of nationally distributed U.K. music publications.

Questions about faith and spirituality subtly flavour the storylines that grace “**The Jeopardy Of Circumstance.**” The narrator in album opener “Obadiah,” might just be Lily Downs the central character in Sue Monk Kidd’s debut novel “**The Secret Life Of Bees**” [2002]. “Roots & Wings” contrasts mankind’s desire for ‘a place to hang ones hat’ with the urge to be going. A soulful goodtime sounding number “Ode To Ogallala” is full of suggestion and warm memories, while the waltz paced “Questions About Angels” poses interesting questions regarding morality and wealth. Now mature in years the blind male narrator in “Year Before The War” reflects on his two marriages and the vicissitudes of life, and Elkin [once again] courageously employs a male voice in “Shell Of A Man.” Melancholy, loss and love permeate “Black Lung” a word movie, while, based on what I’ve said so far, “Gospel Song,” the blissfully wayward sounding closing cut, requires no explanation. Across ten tunes, employing nearly twenty instruments, Elkin and Co. have created 3D Technicolor musical backdrops, while Carrie’s lyrics evoke mystery and magic and cleverly draw the listener in. Carrie’s web site is located at <http://www.carrieelkin.com/>

Having related what I witnessed when she vocally supported Schmidt a year back, I told Elkin following her Momos set - “*I have never seen a performer so in love with the act of singing.*” That’s the gospel truth, and from what I’ve subsequently learned I’m not the only one to believe or state that. Onstage Carrie was simply a force of nature, offstage her eyes retain an impish 24/7 twinkle. So twinkle, twinkle.....

And there you have it, a night filled with music, connections galore and a Kerrville twist. Austin I love ya.....

Arthur Wood
Kerrville Kronikles 06/08 & 07/08.
[2130 words]