

Tom Pacheco talks about “The Long Walk”

Last week Tom Pacheco talked about the events leading up to, as well as the recording of an album in Norway in August/September 2003 as part of the band, The Long Walk. This week Tom talks about the songs on the album.....

Part 2 - “The Long Walk” – the songs on the album

FW The album opens with “Norfolk, Little Rock, Memphis,” about a young homeless, unemployed couple seeking work. To complicate matters she’s pregnant. How old is that song.

TP It goes back to Texas, and I wrote it in 1983. I only played it for a brief time. I happened to be going through my songbooks, because I wanted to put some songs together that would make sense and hang together on this album. I spotted that one. With the economy going the way it is now in America, and other places, many people are trying to find work. Butch Hancock was in the audience the first time I played that song at Emma Joe’s. He came up to me afterwards and said, “*That is a great song.*”

FW The second track “There Was A Me Before There Was You,” is basically about being suffocated while in a relationship. Was it something that you experienced or something that you observed.

TP It’s something that I think can happen in all relationships, at some time. I’ve seen women who are with very abusive controlling men. And vice versa. They tend to forget that, before they were infected by this – quote - virus of infatuation, love, sex and all that, they were human beings. They were people that lived and loved all of the simple things. They start to lose themselves completely, whether they are men or women.

FW The lyric opens with lines of utter and total beauty. In fact you wonder, where it is going. All of a sudden you’re sucked in, but then you discover that it’s a place you really don’t want to be. Have some listeners seen it as a bitter song.

TP Yes. But by the end of the song, the guy or girl, depending on who would sing it, has actually gotten out of that relationship.

FW And there is actually daylight at the end of the tunnel.

TP I wouldn’t want to leave people feeling that way. The closing lines are “*See that flower on the blacktop breaking through, There was a me, before there was you.*” It’s meant to be a very positive song, after having experienced all this horrible stuff.

FW This question could relate to “Che,” “Graeme Livingstone” and even “Juan Romero.” And, come to that, even “The Last Rolling Stone,” but let’s stick with “Che” for the minute. In constructing a lyric based on history are you a meticulous researcher.

TP Very meticulous. Absolutely checking every single detail. It was such an incredibly complicated life. I mean to write his whole life, I would have had to record five albums.

FW You’ve told the story, edited it very, very tightly and as a result kept it moving along and evolving.

TP Absolutely. For example, they actually found his body not long ago. His hands were cut off, because they wanted fingerprints to prove that it was Che. Felix Rodriguez, a member of the CIA, was present during the execution of Che Guevara. You know that line “*They cut off both his hands and took whatever they could steal*” – the guy that shot Che was named Mario Turan. He took Che’s wristwatch and handed it to Felix Rodriguez who still has it to this day. Felix is probably eighty years old now, but he’s one of those guys who are always in the shadows.

FW In “The Journal of Graeme Livingstone” lyric you mention The Ten Bells Pub and Annie Chapman. So you were actually in the part of London where the Ripper carried out his murders.

TP I was playing The Sptiz. This woman said to me, *"Tom do you know where you are."* I didn't know what she was getting at. I said, *"I'm in East London."* She said, *"Come here"* and she took me to the front door, and pointed across the street and there was The Ten Bells. Of course I went into it, then she proceeded to show me where all the murders happened - Cleveland Street, Hanbury Street – all those places. When you write songs, there's nothing like being right where something happened. I can't always do that obviously. I could smell the air. I could see those old buildings, as well as the cobblestone streets and those winding alleys. I saw a couple of the buildings where the murders occurred. I came back and I said *"Graeme I'm going to make you famous."* He said, *"What are you talking about."* I said, *"You have the perfect name I'm looking for. I'm going to have you be the man that killed Jack the Ripper"* [Ed. Note. Graeme Livingstone is the name of Tom's English booking agent/tour manager]. He thought I was insane.

FW Based on your lyric, was the woman that took you around the streets called Annie Chapman.

TP No, Annie Chapman was one of the women who was murdered.

FW So your intention in the line "I walked with Annie Chapman once through Spitalfields as well" was that you were following in her footsteps.

TP Exactly. The intention being, that Graeme Livingstone had known this woman before she was murdered. It makes it a little more personal, by using the name of an actual person involved in the story. I think Annie Chapman may have been the fourth or fifth murder. I always try to make things as realistic as possible, while adding stuff – I don't like to write, just a straight historical song. It's good to add something different. I tried to find out how many women Jack the Ripper killed. It's still in question. There were many unsolved murders in East London in 1888. Some could be attributed to him. As he perfected his technique, the murders got more and more bizarre. I settled on six, some say five and some say twelve. That's one of the things that you don't know. And of course, us not knowing really who he was, as a songwriter, it gives you -

FW An open end.

TP An absolute open end. The story of Jack the Ripper has been told many times, but this was meant to be a completely different approach, by bringing in historical characters like Jack London, who probably would have been fascinated by Livingstone. And Woody Guthrie. Even though he became very wealthy Livingstone's heart was still in the right place, with the people.

FW At the outset, in London, Livingstone is as unsavoury a character as the Ripper. He travels to another country, reforms himself - it's against the odds that that would happen, but this is, after all, a fiction.

TP And Graeme Livingstone is the person who killed Jack the Ripper.

FW But Livingstone had warrants out for his arrest in London, yet ends up in America and, in the process, finds redemption.

TP That's a theme I tried to keep running through the songs on this album. Transformation and redemption. Even in the song, "Following Ricardo," shooting the guy will bring some sort of justice for the narrator and his wife, and for other people who have been damaged by Ricardo. In "You Gotta Have Money" I tried to show that having money is not the end or be all of everything, and to think twice about what you are doing and to help other people if you can.

FW I think you should sell the story of "Following Ricardo" to Hollywood.

TP Well maybe [Laughs].

FW I don't know if, again, I'm reading something too literal into the song. The narrator who is shadowing Ricardo, his wife has been murdered.

TP No, not murdered. Beaten up and raped.

FW But the husband [and narrator] has discovered who did it, and he's followed Ricardo literally to the point where he is yards away from him.

TP Yes. The song starts where the song ends. He has cornered Ricardo near a lighthouse at night.

FW When Ricardo rapes the narrator's wife he's "holding a knife." I assumed he used the knife, although checking the lyric, you don't say that.

TP No, he didn't use the knife. That's how a lot of rapes are. In the song he rips her wedding ring off her finger, "the bone when it broke sounded like castanets." Ricardo has probably killed before, or certainly will kill somebody soon. He's a sleazy type of character, the type that you see all over the place more and more these days.

FW By the end of the song, it's significant that the narrator hasn't pulled the trigger.

TP Right. And I will tell you that I cut a verse out of the song. A graphic verse where the husband says what he's going to do when he finally confronts Ricardo. But I figured that -

FW It might have tipped the story over the edge.

TP It would have been way over the edge. It's better to leave a little space and mystery. The husband has Ricardo cornered, but I leave it all open, because life is so unpredictable. It's possible that he'll say, "*I'm not going to do it.*" Maybe he is going to do it. Ricardo obviously beat the hell out of his wife - and to take her wedding ring - that's what made the narrator angry, when he saw Ricardo pawning the ring.

FW How old is "The Last Rolling Stone" as I'm sure that I've seen you play it in concert a couple of times.

TP That's an old song. I keep adding and taking stuff out. I wrote that song in Texas, but I've changed it a lot. It sort of evolves all the time. I have the Bush and Cheney line in there now. And there's the line about the last acorn seed on Earth.

FW That line harks back to your 1976 debut album "**Swallowed Up In the Great American Heartland**" and "The Tree Song." Later in the Rolling Stone song, you mention "spaceships glowing in the dark" and that cross-references songs on your sophomore album "**The Outsider.**"

TP Absolutely.

FW "Juan Romero," the song about the busboy that pressed a rosary into Bobby Kennedy's hands after he was shot, previously appeared in an acoustic setting on "**Bare Bones II.**" Were you a strong supporter of John F. and Robert F. Kennedy.

TP Yes. I thought Bobby Kennedy would have been a great President. I liked John, but John did things that I didn't like. Of course I was quite young at the time. I campaigned for Bobby Kennedy in 1968, when I was almost 22. He had a way of connecting with all kinds of people, Puerto Rican's and Mexicans. When he was young he worked for Joe McCarthy, but he really grew and grew. 1968 was such a terrible year because Martin Luther King was shot, and then we ended up with Richard Nixon as President.

FW I think that there's a degree of irony that "Juan Romero" is followed by "The Journal Of Graeme Livingstone." In the latter song Livingstone helps Joe Kennedy ship illegal whiskey into the States.

TP Exactly. That's why we put them together. According to the song, Graeme Livingstone was responsible for the Kennedy family becoming rich.

FW Was it the band that wanted to revisit "Juan Romero."

TP No, it was Tom Skjeklesaether. He has all my albums, and said *"You know, the acoustic albums that are out on John Tobler's label. I would love to hear some of those songs fleshed out more."* He pulled played it for the band and they really wanted to do it. This version retains the simplicity of the story, yet fleshes it out a bit.

FW At the beginning of the song, you have Juan Romero, in current times, working in a road surfacing crew. Is that based on actual fact.

TP Yes. Absolute fact. That's his job. I've heard two stories, and one of them is that he's actually part owner of that company. It's a small company, but he owns his own house in Los Angeles. Has a bunch of kids, and is from all reports is a very honourable, hard working, decent man. It's true that he did say that he wished he had taken the bullet, because of what Robert Kennedy meant to all the Mexican people in California at that time. I think he has only ever done a series of interviews once, and that was probably somewhere around the anniversary of Bobby's death.

FW Tell us about "You Gotta Have Money"

TP We wanted a fifties styled rock song, similar to what The Beatles did with "Dizzy Miss Lizzy." And actually have it say something, while retaining a chorus that all the kids could sing along to instantly. It's a serious song. It's not a funny song at all. It's a song about greed, and you see this in America – well all over the world, but unfortunately a lot of bad things start here and travel elsewhere.

FW How about the closing song "Living Alone."

TP That song came from two things. I read about all those old people in Europe who died in the excessive heat last summer, who were mostly living alone. In addition I visited my father before he went into a home. I was thinking, *"God, he had all these children."* Nine children in all, as my father was married twice. I visited him and I saw one toothbrush. That what's really hit me, because I remember there being five or six, when kids and grandchildren were around. We live in a "me" culture and it's heartbreaking. 15,000 people died in France, 5,000 in Italy. The shocker was that many of the families were away on holiday. They didn't want to break their holidays and so all these dead people were placed in refrigerated trucks, until the kids came back and buried them. I thought *"My God these parents did everything for these children,"* Fed them. Helped them. What is happened to our culture and to our world. I phone my father every couple of days, and go see him every two or three weeks. It takes about five or six hours to drive to where he is. He's in a rehabilitation centre, not doing well. But he's still my father.

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