

David Ackles – Retrospective Of A Composer, And Truly Unsung Giant of American Music - Part 1

Lung cancer was diagnosed during the early nineteen-nineties and although he rallied after having part of his left lung removed, David Ackles finally succumbed to the disease on March 2nd 1999 in Los Angeles, California. During his lifetime Ackles only recorded and officially released four albums, the initial three of which – “**David Ackles**,” “**Subway To The Country**” and “**American Gothic**” – were recently reissued in the States by Collector’s Choice Music. In my opinion they are totally unique works, and this is the story of the man who created them.....

David Thomas Ackles was born on February 20th 1937 in Rock Island, Western Illinois. He had two siblings, his sisters, Sally and Kim. Show business had been in the Ackles genes for a couple of generations. His grandfather had been a music hall comedian while his grandmother had led an all-woman big band. As for David’s parents, his father was a talented amateur musician, while his mother, Queenie, who had been born in the UK, came from a line of vaudeville performers. David’s first taste of *the roar of the crowd and the smell of grease paint* came as a youngster when he and Sally performed as a vaudeville duo, The Ackles Twins. By the end of World War II the family had moved to the West Coast and David went on to star in the *Rusty the dog* movies. The first was “**The Return Of Rusty**” [1946] and from “**Son Of Rusty**” [1947] onward he was credited in the cast list as Tuck Worden. Subsequent titles in the series included “**Rusty Leads The Way**” [1948], “**My Dog Rusty**” [1958], “**Rusty Saves A Life**” [1949] and “**Rusty’s Birthday**” [1949]. This b-movie series was modelled upon the success of the Lassie and Rin Tin Tin films. At the tender age of twelve, David’s movie career came to a temporary end.

After graduating from high school, David enrolled in a degree course as an English major, at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. For his junior year, 1957/58, David transferred to Scotland and Edinburgh University where he studied West Saxon, the source language for English. As he told **Ptolemaic Terrascope** interviewer Kenny MacDonald in 1994, “*My father’s family came from Aberdeen, and most of my mother’s family are from England. I still have some distant cousins around Tring in Hertfordshire.*” When Ackles returned to USC he went on to major as a Communications [theatre, film and music] postgraduate. David became involved in film making once again, and appeared in “**Make It Move**,” a parody of “**West Side Story**,” and the first USC *student* movie to be made in colour. Directed by Larry Kent Johnson, the cinematographer was Gary Kurtz, George Lucas’ early career partner. The female lead, Maria, was played by current day KOGO radio talk show host Lynn Harper [using the name Debra Hunt], while David played the male lead, Tony.

When Jac Holzman launched his, New York based, Elektra Record label in 1951, the recordings he releases during the ensuing decade focused mainly upon the acoustic sounds of folk musicians and ethnic blues artists. During that decade, Cynthia Gooding, Sonny Terry, Oscar Brand and Jean Ritchie regularly recorded for the label. By the mid-sixties the imprint was issuing albums by *contemporary acoustic* performers like Bob Gibson & Bob Camp [and as solo acts], Judy Collins, Tom Paxton and Phil Ochs. When Elektra launched its 74000 series of releases in 1966, Holzman switched the label’s operating base to America’s West Coast, in the process embracing local *electric rock* bands such as Love, The Doors and Rhinoceros. While the focus of the label appeared to shift, the truth is, Holzman continued to release album by solo singer/songwriters although many of those acts used *electric* as well as *acoustic* instruments. Albeit, in some instances, for a short time, Tim Buckley, Steve Noonan [a friend of Jackson Browne] and David Blue all found a home on the label. Where the foregoing acts became Elektra recording artists in their late teens or early twenties, David Ackles arrived at the label in 1967 as a thirty-year old. Let’s backtrack a little however.....

Graduating from USC in the early sixties, Ackles went on to work as a pianist, gardener, playground director, private detective, security guard and automobile salesman, while spending his *free* hours honing his skills as a composer. As well as writing songs, he composed ballet and choral music. It is said that David composed “Blue Ribbons” after witnessing the 1965 Watts race riots, and while the event is not specifically referenced in his lyric, *blue ribbons* could be interpreted as a metaphor for a loss of innocence. David Anderle, a contemporary of Ackles at USC, was, by the mid-sixties, working at Elektra Records. After hearing the song Anderle approached Holzman, and Ackles was signed to the label as a writer. The song-publishing arm of Elektra Records was being managed, at that time, by Russ Miller. Another story suggests that Ackles wrote “Blue Ribbons” in the hope that Cher would cover it. Considering that, during the later half of the sixties, alongside more pop oriented material, Cher cut songs by Dino Valenti, Phil Ochs, Tim Hardin and Dylan, the latter does possible.

In any case, Cher never recorded “Blue Ribbons” and by 1968 David was not only a label songwriter, he had signed an Elektra recording deal. In his early years he’d performed on the vaudeville stage and starred in movies, but during his college years David fell in love with musical theatre. Aged thirty, he had no experience of performing his songs at open mics. What’s more, he had never been the opening act in club and bar gigs – the latter being the normal route for a musician/writer to score a solo recording deal. It’s also worth revisiting the word *theatre*, since Ackles compositions, from the outset, could almost be termed *song theatre* and consistently featured a powerful story line. Granted he could pump out a classy *love song* with ease, but the characters that were brought to life in his lyrics were mainly drawn from the wounded underbelly of life. Criminals, the disenfranchised, life’s losers constituted *the grist* that Ackles principally captured in his creations.

Since they already retained a business connection to Ackles, Andrerle and Miller shared the production credit on what became David’s eponymous, self-titled, ten-song debut recording. While he played piano and sang, Ackles was supported on the January 1968 recording sessions by Doug Hastings [guitar], Danny Weis [guitar], Michael Fonfara [organ], Jerry Penrod [bass], John Keliehor [drums]. Over the latter part 1967, apart from ex-Daily Flash drummer Keliehor, the foregoing quartet of players had gelled as part of a *supergroup* constructed by Elektra Records producers, Paul Rothchild and Frazier Mohawk [aka Barry Friedman]. Augmented by John Finley [vocals], Alan Gerber [piano] and Billy Mundi [drums], in May 1968, this seven-piece band recorded the album “**Rhinoceros**.”

Released midway through the year “**David Ackles**” opened with the blues tinged “The Road To Cairo.” As I said a couple of paragraphs back, Ackles was an accomplished storyteller and he launched his career with one of his finest. It has been stated in print, by some reviewers, that the song title refers to Cairo, Georgia but I tend to believe the song is set in Illinois. Cairo is the most southerly town in that state and the road weary narrator mentions “*I wrecked by Lincoln in St. Jo.*” There is a Saint Joseph in East Central Illinois [and none in Georgia], apart from which Ackles had been born in Illinois. Having left his wife and family at some indeterminate earlier time, the narrator is on his way home to Cairo. Picked up by a rich kid – “*Hey you got another cigar ? Son I sure like this car. Oh from your daddy as a gift*” - the story unfolds twenty-two miles outside Cairo, as the narrator experiences second thoughts. With the words, “*I been travellin’, Gone a long long time, Don’t know what I’d find, Scared of what I’d find,*” the narrator alights from the car under the pretext of buying gifts. The sound of Fonfara’s organ builds gradually over the five-minute duration, and is joined by the other instruments as the song builds to a final crescendo. “When Love Is Gone” is a languid, bass and keyboard driven, song of lost love. Years before Colvin’s “Sunny Came Home,” Ackles wrote “Sonny Come Home” a nightmarish work in which the lead character focuses initially upon things that are broken – glass, bicycle wheels, children’s toys - and closes the opening verse with a reference to “*old wounds,*” whose precise nature is not defined. Regularly called “*home*” throughout the song, as it closes Sonny cries in desperation “*I hear you, I hear you, But I can’t come home,*” as if trapped within some invisible mantle. Although bearing the title, “What A Happy Day,” Ackles employs a melancholic voice to deliver the lyric. As to the precise reason for the *happy day*, taken in a historical context, numerous interpretations are possible. The voice in “Down River” is that of a recently released ex-convict who returns home to find that his love, Rosie, has a new man. Appearing to take the news in his stride, with the casual parting “*I got things to do,*” Ackles goes on to repeat the name “Rosie,” over and over, as the volume of Fonfara’s organ builds. The penultimate song “His Name Is Andrew” presents the voice of a character who “*works in a canning factory, doesn’t have a friend, and chooses to wait for the end alone.*” Having previously led a religious life, aged twenty-one, Andrew strays on to a less than righteous path. Returning to the fold, doubt fills his mind when he hears a voice claim “*God is dead.*” Where Andrew feels that he has no need for human contact and obviously suffers because of that decision, the narrator of the gentle closer “Be My Friend” craves friendship. Mention of Gilead in the second verse, recalls the verse of the traditional hymn that runs “*There is a balm in Gilead, To make the wounded whole; There is a balm in Gilead, To heal the sin sick soul.*”

Following the appearance of “**David Ackles**,” a number of songs were covered. In the summer of 1968 the Brian Auger Trinity, featuring vocalist Julie Driscoll, enjoyed a Pop Chart # 5 in the UK with Dylan n’ Danko song “This Wheel’s On Fire.” Sadly, their follow-up single, “Road To Cairo,” which enjoyed significant airplay on BBC radio in the UK failed to chart. “Down River” was covered by Spooky Tooth on “**The Last Puff**” [1970], and The Hollies included it on their album “**Romany**” [1973]. In 1971 Martin Carthy’s “**Landfall**” album released by Phillips [and revived six years later by Topic Records], included Ackles “His Name Is Andrew.” “**David Ackles**” was reissued in the States in 1971, with new artwork and bearing the title “**The Road to Cairo.**”

to be continued.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 09 & 10/02

[1820 words].