



### Tom Russell **"Modern Art"** Hightone Records

In addition to his song [of the same name], the *modern art* that Tom refers to in the album title is *music* – particularly, work created by contemporary *roots oriented* singer/songwriters – that is supported by literate lyrics. The fourteen pieces that appear here are a mix of six covers from the respective pens of – Emmylou Harris/Paul Kennerley, the late Carl Brouse, Michael Smith, Warren Zevon, Dave Alvin and Nanci Griffith/James Hooker/Danny Flowers, plus eight Russell originals of which a pair are co-writes. If asked to define **"Modern Art,"** I'd simply offer that it equals fifty-five minutes in songwriter heaven.....

Recorded at Mark Hallman's Congress House Studios in South Austin, the production is credited to Hallman, Russell and Tom's long time sideman, Andrew Hardin. Apart from the aforementioned participants, the *all star* cast of support players includes Nanci Griffith – who contributes three lead vocals, Eliza Gilkyson and Gurf Morlix.

The aforementioned covers were all written during the latter decades of the twentieth century. "The Ballad Of Sally Rose" was the title cut of Emmylou Harris' 1985 Warner Brothers album, a concept collection that Harris co-penned/co-produced with her, then, husband, Paul Kennerley. It appears that Griffith persuaded Russell to cut "Sally Rose." In the late nineteen-seventies/early eighties, Brouse, who passed on October 27<sup>th</sup> 2002, and Russell collaborated on a number of songs. "American Hotel" is Brouse's tribute to Stephen Foster, the early American composer who died penniless. Circa 1983, and co-produced with Craig Luckin, **"American Hotel"** [\$] was also the title of Carl's only album. In recent years Russell has been performing Michael Smith's "The Dutchman" in concert. Born and raised in New Jersey, these days, Smith is a resident of the *windy city*. To the best of my knowledge Smith first cut his song in 1970 [#]. According to Russell, Smith's tale of a senile ex-sailor and his adoring wife, Margaret, is his *favourite song* [\*]. Last year, song scribe Warren Zevon was diagnosed with terminal cancer. "Carmelita" hails from Zevon's self-titled 1976 Asylum album. Dave Alvin has collaborated on songs with Russell, and Alvin's "Bus Station," an old Blasters tune circa 1983, appears here as a duet with Griffith. "Gulf Coast Highway," another Griffith/Russell duet, is the closing track. The latter song first appeared on Nanci's album **"Little Love Affairs"** [1988].

Moving on, let's check out Tom's latest pieces of personal *modern art*. Russell's track record is littered with songs that have drawn inspiration from America's sporting heroes, particularly *pugilists* and *ball players*. Proving that he hasn't destroyed the mould, "The Kid From Spavinaw" relates the story of Oklahoma's Mickie Mantle [b. 1931 d. 1995] who "*went up to the show*" in New York to "*live in the house that Ruth built*." "Muhammad Ali," is set to a reggae/calypso beat and is the probably the least essential offering in this set, while "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" is one of the finest ballads to pass this way in a long time. To say that Andrew Hardin's restrained guitar playing on the later cut is stunning, way undersells his contribution. As for the lyric, essentially a song about the loss of *true love*, Russell merges nursery rhyme/fairy tale themes with significant snapshots from real life.

Among his many occupations, Charles Russell, Tom's [late] father was a horse trader. The hard rocking "Racehorse Haynes," co-written with Hardin, has nothing to do with the equine arts rather Haynes is a criminal lawyer – "*He ain't no hack, He's Man O'War on any of your fairground tracks*." Precisely the type of guy you need *in your corner*, if you're standing in the dock facing a first-degree murder charge. "Modern Art" is autobiographical, and from his birth in 1945 Russell traces episodes from his life story. With the arrival of The Beatles in 1964, Tom fell headlong in love with music. Seven years later, in

Vancouver, he formed his first band and started to *make up* songs – “*Some’s real, and some’s pretend.*” And that’s what Russell deems *modern art*. On the cut, Tom even retained the closing comment “*I didn’t know that was the end, sorry*” – delivered by fiddle player, Elana Fremerman [Hot Club Of Cowtown].

The seven and a half minute “Isaac Lewis,” is *based* on the *true story* of a Welsh sailor who set sail for Van Diemen’s Land [now Australia], where he fell in love with Emma Grey. Setting sail on one final voyage to the Northern hemisphere, the ship founders in a storm. A stranger than fiction occurrence, Lewis’ body is washed ashore, literally, one hundred yards from his father’s Welsh home. Since the passing of his own father, a few years ago, Russell’s lyrics have begun to reflect upon his own mortality. It’s an age thing, the moral of this song being “*before it’s too late, tell your loved ones what they mean to you.*”

As Andrew Hardin plays acoustic guitar in the background, Russell recites excerpts from “Crucifix In A Death Hand” the 1965 poem by the late Charles Bukowski, *the bard of booze, broads and America’s true underbelly*. Set in Los Angeles, the reading complete, Russell and Hardin seamlessly segue into a verse from Warren Zevon’s “Carmelita.” With Eliza Gilkyson on harmony vocals, “Tijuana Bible” is based on the Lana Turner/Johnny Stompanato murder scandal of 1958, although Russell has appended a degree of *fiction* to the *storyline*. During an interview one time, Russell told me about his childhood musical influences and right there in the opening verse of “Tijuana Bible,” he relates “*The Collins Kids were playing rockabilly on the tv.*”

For those of you out there prepared to grab a rarity, Village Records, were recently selling, *for a few dollars more*, “**Modern Art**” together with a four song CD EP. The latter features two non-album cuts – “Yosemite” and “If God Created The Grape [How Can The Wine Be Bad ?].”

**Note.**

[\$] – The album included “The Dance,” a Brouse/Russell co-write that will, one day, be a hit song.

[#] – On the Decca Records album “**Juarez.**”

[\*] - For all thirty issues, to date, of my fanzine Kerrville Kronikle, “The Dutchman” has retained the # 1 spot in the Kerrverts Festival 50 song chart. The thoughts of some old fools seldom differ.....

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood  
Kerrville Kronikles 03/03