



All photos © Arthur Wood

## DREW NELSON TALKS ABOUT MAKING TILT-A-WHIRL

**D**rew Nelson was raised in Michigan in a musical household—"...mostly gospel; some folk crept in..."—his maternal great-grandfather, a grocery store owner, played mandolin, guitar and banjo and performed vaudeville music in local grange halls. "My grandma would tell me I reminded her of her dad. So it's really interesting that I ended up doing this." Growing up, Drew sang in church, witnessed musical gatherings with family friends on his parent's front porch, listened to forbidden radio stations under the bedclothes, and assumed ownership of his older brother's guitar: "I took a pretty good whuppin' for that." In junior school he was a member of the choir, and in high school performed in plays. "All this time, I was playing guitar, writing songs, buying tutors, going to friend's houses and listening to stuff and figuring it out."

Drew Nelson's fourth album, *TILT-A-WHIRL* was released by the Minnesota based imprint Red House Records on Valentine's Day 2012. Already knowing some of the story behind the release—he'd written the songs but had no idea how he was going to fund recording them, until a guy handed him a cheque—I asked Drew to explain further. Whilst Drew had been attending a party at producer, Michael Crittenden's house, a friend commented: 'You need to make another record.' A casual 'how much' conversation ensued, including reference to the cost of Drew's third studio recording, *DUSTY ROAD TO BEULAH LAND* (2009), at the end of which his friend enquired: 'Am I an investor or a patron?' With the songs written and financing in place, another obstacle arose. Crittenden's Mackinaw Harvest studio, where Drew had cut all his studio recordings, was fully booked for the ensuing six months.

Crittenden's facility is located in Drew's home town of Grand Rapids, Michigan. "I was destroyed. Within a day he called me back and had a cancellation. He had two weeks open up. This was a week away, so I called all of the people I wanted, and they were all available."

Crittenden has been involved in making all of Drew's studio recordings. How had the pair had met? "I was listening to a community radio station while driving to work on the other side of the state. It was winter time and snowing and I was at the point on the drive where the signal started to get fuzzy. These guys were in the studio playing a session and their song simply touched me. I pulled over to the side of the road and before I knew it, I was in tears. It hit me like a ton of bricks."

Drew got back on the road and didn't think any more about it. A few weeks later on New Year's Eve, his little sister was home. "She invited me to this club and the band playing there was the guys on the radio. Michael was the lead singer of Troll for Trout. I talked to him that night, told him I wrote songs and we started hanging out. Later, he invited me to play a cover gig and I did a couple of songs. At the end I said: 'I'd like to thank Michael for letting me play tonight, and for producing the CD we're going to make.' I hadn't even asked him. He's funny and real gruff. He walked up and said: 'I reckon we've got some work to do.' That was in early 1999 and now it's 2012. He's a dear guy."

Prior to recording *TILT-A-WHIRL*, had Drew considered working with another producer? "I think at some point I'll probably make a record with somebody else, just because it might be time to, but not in this instance. Michael and I have talked about that. It's probably good for an artist to try new things, but no, not this one, I really wanted Michael."

The session players on *TILT-A-WHIRL* proved to be a marriage of old and new. Crittenden (acoustic and electric guitar, bass, piano, shaker, tambourine, string arrangement, vocals), Brian Morrill (drums) and Dominic Stucha (bass) reprised past roles, aided by new boys, Mark B. Schrock (bass, mandolin, violin, vocals) and Drew Howard (pedal steel, electric guitar, Dobro) and more. "Mike Lynch was scheduled to play B3. He was in a great Irish rock band called The Lash. The day before Mike was due to show up; his Facebook page displayed a picture of him in an arena and the caption: 'Just got the Kid Rock tour.' In

the end, Crittenden stepped into the breach. "Michael told me: 'When I attended Berklee, I used to write B3 parts for class.' So he played the B3." Bettye LaVette's guitarist, Brett Lucas also contributes: "That's my brother-in-law. He's always gone with Bettye, so for him to be home was really cool." TILT-A-WHIRL sees Jen Sygit sing on five songs, including her contribution on St. Jude; their voices complementing each other's perfectly: "She's from Lansing, Michigan and has two albums out. There's something about the way we sing, like John Gorka and Lucy Kaplansky, I can really envision us working together. She's amazing; a little spitfire."

I asked Drew how he and Michael had approached the sessions on this occasion: "On ninety percent of this record, the band is playing live. That was a new approach for me. We overdubbed a few things, but not many. I went in and redid the vocal, because it gets real soupy when singing over all the instruments." Apart from what appeared to be their great working relationship, was there a particular quality that Michael Crittenden, the producer, possessed. "He's a great psychologist and knows exactly how to motivate people. With some folks he's real sweet and encouraging. Alternatively, sometimes he gets me really mad, just to get the take."

"We were overdubbing Drew Howard's Dobro solo on *Dust*. We ran his acoustic Dobro through a distortion pedal and out through an amp, so he's already upset that we are doing this," he laughs. "He plays a solo. Michael leaned over and said: 'If we were making a demo that would have been a pretty good solo, but damn it we're making a record—do it again.' Nobody could believe that Michael said that. Drew got mad and the next take is the solo that you hear on *Dust*. He can get performances out of people that I don't think they know they have."

Drew had mentioned earlier in our conversation that he had to pluck up the courage to contact Red House. Following the demise of founder, Bob Feldman, Eric Peltoniemi (the label's first employee) was appointed label president. "We had pitched them DUSTY ROAD TO BEULAH LAND and nothing came of it. One time I was playing there and stopped in, unannounced, at Red House's Minneapolis office. In Eric's office, on his filing cabinet, there was a copy of BEULAH LAND. I thought that was neat. Once we had the finance in place, I called Eric and told him: 'I'm making a record. As we go along, would it be okay if I sent you MP3s?' He said: 'I'd love to hear what you're doing.' That's how it started."

Having completed the recording, on the next occasion that Drew was performing in Minneapolis, he set up a lunch appointment with Eric. "He started pitching Red House to me, which was bizarre. I was sitting there thinking: 'Shouldn't I be pitching me to him?' My approach was: 'I don't want you to think that I'm a bigger deal than I am. I'm still trying to figure out, am I touring enough and all that stuff.' Then Eric said the neatest thing: 'I love this record and I'd like to put it out.' By then, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Since the age of nineteen, I had wanted to be on Red House Records, so we shook hands. From there it took a year for the album to come out. They have been absolutely wonderful to me."

I asked Drew what his thoughts had been before the recording sessions: "I was going to make an album that I really wanted to listen to. I didn't want it to be labelled musically. I was going to have fun making a rock'n'roll record—I wanted to do something that I really felt in my heart, so the rock record is the one that the folk label signs. I don't know how that works," he laughs. "So many people, in so many different little ways, have



helped make this record possible. I feel really lucky to be a part of it, and humbled that it's here. Forty year old guys don't get record deals every day. That's not lost on me. These folks have taken a risk, and I really want to live up to the faith that they have shown in me."

Rodney Bursiel's unique approach to photography has graced recent albums by Grace Pettis, The Waymores, Carrie Elkin, Danny Schmidt and now, Drew Nelson.

"Red House took this record, and didn't change a thing on it. They didn't change the song order; they didn't say: 'We need a little more organ here.' When they suggested who they wanted for the artwork, and who they wanted to master it, I said: 'You guys make records all the time, you know what you're doing, I'm not going to get in the middle.' They contacted Rodney. I was coming down to Texas to work on the release of the DARK RIVER compilation album, and it worked out that we could do the photos. He's just a dear man, and we've become friends."

On the album cover, a barefoot Drew—with his left leg raised behind him—is playing guitar, whilst off to his left, in the background, a wooden chair is tilted up on one-leg. Whose idea had it been for this particular shot? "We were in this old warehouse, taking shots inside and outside. With photographs, I never know what to do with myself or where to look. Rodney really put me at ease. The chair was just there in the warehouse."

TILT-A-WHIRL is a fairground ride designed, around the late 1920s, and was manufactured by Sellner Manufacturing of Faribault, Minnesota. We call them waltzers nowadays. To design the ride, Herbert Sellner sat his young son on a chair and rocked it back and forth on top of the kitchen table. Drew commented: "You're kidding. I don't think Rodney knows that. That's wild. Like I said earlier, I feel like I've been along for the ride on this whole thing, so there you go. To use the name TILT-A-WHIRL we made a donation to the Amusement Park Hall of Fame and Museum, which I was more than happy to do." Suffice to say, the cover picture is a clear case of accidental serendipity.

Had Drew any final thoughts about his latest recording? "I didn't make a record till I was twenty-seven. I feel with TILT-A-WHIRL I'm really finding my voice, and I'm still trying to move forward as a writer." As for the friend who enabled the making of TILT-A-WHIRL: "I'm thrilled to say I've been able to pay him back." **Arthur Wood**