



## **Wes McGhee Bead Mountain, Bad Roads & Borders (Album Review)**

**Terrapin/Steady Boy Records**

*A cleverly constructed backward glance at five decades of Wes McGhee music, familiar and less so....here's an Englishman whose musical heart and soul is totally Texan.*

### ***The Story So Far.....***

A search confirmed that there's not one Wes McGhee entry on No Depression, time to correct a criminal omission. This Lutterworth, Leicestershire bred singer/songwriter self-released his revelatory solo debut *Long Nights And Banjo Music* on Terrapin Records during 1978. As with the late Jack Hardy and similarly minded souls who, last century, fearlessly founded their own record labels, Wes was decades ahead of his time. The encouragement of a church organist father and friendships with music savvy kids on a nearby American airbase were pivotal factors during this younger's developing years.

Aged thirteen McGhee began cutting his (musical) teeth in local bands and half-a-decade later had graduated to performing in Germany's notorious *all night* rock clubs. Wes went on to sign a major label recording contract; sadly the deal turned sour when his musical direction was rejected by label bosses. The result, seven years in career (and contractual) limbo.

Post *Long Nights And Banjo Music*, Terrapin released five further McGhee titles on vinyl, the fourth a live double *Thanks For The Chicken* (1985) was recorded in Austin Texas. To date, it's the only vinyl collection upgraded to compact disc. The fifth vinyl release, *Zacatecas* (1987), was followed by a quartet of CD recordings on niche (British) independent labels, Minidoka and Road Goes On Forever, that merged material from earlier releases with new tunes. McGhee's most recent collection of new material was Terrapin's *Blue Blue Night* (2005), with an album of new material promised in 2015; during the past decade McGhee faced up to and battled COPD. While there isn't a cure, these days his condition is under control.

Back in 1978, buoyed by positive Stateside reviews of *Long Nights*, McGhee undertook his first transatlantic trip, including a planned two weeks in Austin, Texas. Falling hook, line and sinker for the city's burgeoning music scene, eight months elapsed before Wes returned to the UK. The following year he was back in Austin for a similar duration, an uninterrupted annual ritual that spanned the ensuing two decades. Rumour has it that, solely, the summer sound of 'bat on leather' – cricket, that is - brought Wes racing back to the U.K. Immediately embraced by Austin's music community, Wes formed close bonds with the late Roxy Gordon (d. 2000) and Joe Gracey (d. 2011). Stateside, Wes toured with Kimmie Rhodes, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock and Alvin Crow, guested on releases by Rhodes, Richard Dobson, Randy Banks, Heather Myles and Billy Swan, and there (and here) produced recordings for Gordon, Terry Clarke, Freddie Krc, Ponty Bone, and more.

*Bead Mountain, Bad Roads & Borders* was released Stateside late last year on Austin based drummer Freddie Krc's Steady Boy imprint; concurrently Wes visited Texas for gigs and radio promotion. The three-disc set was issued in the U.K. during February 2015.

### *Bead Mountain, Bad Roads & Borders – A Retrospective*

Time to cast an eye over the songs on this triple disc retrospective. The opening pair, respectively '1' and '2,' bear the headline title *Bead Mountain, Bad Roads & Borders*, while the nom-de-plume of third - 'bonus CD' - is the *Scars, Bars & Red Guitars*. Forty-five of the forty-six songs hail from the length and breadth of McGhee's back pages, although a deal of remixing and remastering, and even re-recording of a number of selections, were ingredients in the creation of the *Bead Mountain* set.

'1' opens with the gently paced, melody rich instrumental "Bead Mountain, Valera," moves on with McGhee's musical raison d'être "Texas #1" – including references to east Austin's highway I35 as well as the long-deceased venue, Soap Creek Saloon – then sweeps into the majestic *'flows like warm honey'* Tex-Mex inflected ballad "How Do We Get There From Here," and maintaining that stylistic approach Wes proceeds to kick-up his boot heels on the energetic "Texas Fever." In terms of songs of varying pace, the foregoing four-song template pretty much encapsulates what is heard across this consistently melodic forty-six song set.

Wes's Lone Star state inspired compositions are, frankly, more Texan than that purveyed by locally bred practitioners. Further Disc 1 highlights on this extravaganza include the sublime ballad "No Angel On My Wing" featuring an 'out of this world' saxophone solo from (the other) Al Stewart, "Devil From Del Rio" a Doug Sahm influenced (urgent) mover, while McGhee's take on the blues is, at turns, uptempo - "Loud Dirty Fast And Loose" – and slow burning - "Heartache Avenue."

A roots music collection would be incomplete without a railroad themed tune and "(They Used To Say) Train Time" launches '2.' Eventually turning his hand to penning a lyric in Spanish, the bittersweet "El Sol Que Tu Eres" (translates "You Are The Sun") is a gem, while the penultimate offering on the second CD is "Bead Mountain, Valera (Reprise)," and, from *Blue Blue Night* (2005), is followed by "Texas #2" comprising "Pt.1 Talpa" and "Pt.2 25 Years On." Confirming the math, "Texas #1" debuted on McGhee's sophomore outing *Airmail* (1980). According to his web site, McGhee's stated intention with the sixteen song *Scars, Bars & Red Guitars* was to deliver a *"set sequenced like a live show, beginning with the road worn opener "Endless Road" and ending with his popular closer "Moon On The Brazos"."* I can tell you that Wes's *in concert* approach succeeds in spades.

In no particular order, Wes was aided and abetted on U.K. recording sessions by time-served road companions – Bob Loveday, Luce Langridge, John Gordon, Dermot O'Connor and Patty Vetta - while those tunes captured over in the grand Old Republic feature - Lloyd Maines, Freddie 'Steady' Krc, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Kimmie Rhodes, Ponty Bone and more.

### ***The Epilogue***

A Scot must maintain his reputation for parting with money frugally. There are only two song composing guitar players on planet Earth consistently worthy of such expense, and both possess Texas connections. The first is Lost Gonzo Band alumni John Inmon, the second is the multi-talented Wes McGhee. Visit his *Bead Mountain* soon.....

<http://www.wesmcmghee.com/> and <https://myspace.com/wesmcmghee/music/songs>

***From the desk of the Folk Villager.***

aka Arthur Wood.

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