

Mark Erelli - A Career Overview – The Early Years

A couple of months prior to jetting off to the 1999 Kerrville Folk Festival, I received a review copy of a ten track album titled **“Mark Erelli.”** Released by the Massachusetts based imprint, Signature Sounds, the contents were nothing less than stunning. “River Road,” “Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained” and “Northern Star” were marked down, [in my book,] as *classic songs* from the get-go. Presumably a *debut* recording, the question was – who was Mark Erelli ?

Within a couple of months all those questions and more were answered. The thirty-two contestants for the 1999 Kerrville New Folk Songwriters Contest included, Mark Erelli. Around 8.00pm on Sunday May 30th, Mark was confirmed as one of that years half dozen winners. That result had never been in doubt, in my opinion. Erelli is a composer who possesses skills that belie his tender years. The word consummate best describes Mark’s talent. Currently in his twenty-sixth year, this son of Massachusetts released his sophomore effort **“Compass & Companion”** a few months ago. From one viewpoint, the disc proves conclusively that **“Mark Erelli”** was no fluke. Let’s go back to the beginning however.....

I interviewed Mark a couple of days after his Kerrville win, *“I was born in Boston and grew in the suburb of Reading. I have one sister, she’s three years younger. Our family name is Italian. I’m guessing that my surname has been shortened over time.”* As for musical heritage in the Erelli dynasty, it amounted to *“My grandfather played piano and my Mom likes to sing around the house. My sister and I took piano lessons for a couple of years when we were kids.”*

Almost every teenager flirts with the fantasy of becoming a rock star. Mark first picked up a guitar at the age of twelve. There was only one problem. *“I thought if you played any instrument for a week, you’d figure it out. In the end I took guitar lessons for three months at a local music store. My rock star dreams didn’t work. It took me forever to change chords. Going from G to C could be measured in hours, not seconds.”* In Middle and High School, Mark took part in school productions. *“I played the Pharaoh in **“Joseph And The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat.”** I figured I wasn’t getting anywhere with the guitar thing, so I did the musical. I didn’t play guitar again, all through High School. I also took part in productions of **“Bye Bye Birdie,”** **“A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum.”**”*

That’s not to say that young Erelli’s rock star dreams faded in totality. *“In Middle School and early on in High School, I was into heavy metal and hard rock. Kids at that age are, plus MTV came along. Writers coming up now are a little different from the past. From the first day that MTV came on I stayed glued to the screen for five years. It was heaven. I started singing by emulating people I heard. Theatre was a great help, because you learn to project your voice. I was in three short-lived High School bands, either as the lead singer, or I would sing and played drums.”*

This may be the first time that you’ve stumbled across bands such as Freddie and Slip, Dead Flowers – named after a Rolling Stones song, or for that matter, Organic Icecube. *“In Dead Flowers we did one original of mine. The first song I ever wrote called, **“Hell In The Sky.”** It’s a long, slow Neil Young kind of thing. By the time I wrote it, I was into classic rock. We played Allman Brothers Band and Rolling Stones songs. And covers of blues songs.”* As with every budding musician, thoughts of making a recording surfaced with Organic Icecube, who performed mainly original material. *“We went into a studio in Boston and recorded all through the night. We also made one full length tape on our own in a basement, as well as the five song, studio EP. I was bitten by the bug. It was like **“Wow, we can do this.”**”*

Mark and Tim Moynihan, the bass player in Organic Icecube, went on to attend Bates College in Lewiston, Maine together. The summer preceding Mark’s move north proved pivotal with regard to playing guitar. *“I played tennis at National level right up through the end of College. We’d go on trips to Florida in the summer to train. At night the other kids would go to the beach. I wasn’t into that and my tennis coach had brought his guitar. I picked it up, and all of a sudden I could play chords and it made sense.”* By his late teens Mark was listening to the music of Jackson Browne, The Eagles and James Taylor and subsequently discovered singer/songwriters, John Gorka, Greg Brown, Patty Larkin and Bill Morrissey. *“By the end of High School I also discovered Chris Smither. He was the guy that got me into folk music.”*

Arriving in College, with an insatiable yearning to learn more about the instrument, he borrowed Tim’s guitar. *“It was a classical, nylon string model. I would play in the dark stairwells at College. The guitar’s action was high, the strings were hard and it sounded horrible, but I learned a few songs. **“Hell In The Sky”** being one of them.*

The first night I played it – I opened my eyes and the lights had been turned on. I looked up and friends from the floor above me and the floor below me, were gathered on the staircase.” Those friends soon persuade Mark to perform at the College coffeehouse. “Basically, it was an open mike. There were one hundred and fifty people in the audience and I only knew three songs. I still couldn’t really play the guitar, but I could sing loud. I could belt it out and people seemed to identify with that. Eventually I got my own guitar and started getting serious about it and wrote more songs.”

Three years after moving to Lewiston, Mark successfully completed his studies. By this stage Erelli had formed a band, which included Tim on bass. *“I decided to stay in town an extra year, to work on my music. The guys in the band were going to be there for another year anyway.”* Throughout his time at Bates, Mark would book musicians to play at the College. *“The Student Activities Office booked people as well, and I would perform opening slots for their gigs, with artists such as John Gorka, Greg Brown, Catie Curtis, Dar Williams and Arlo Guthrie. My band would occasionally support me.”*

Erelli and his band also began performing farther afield, in other local colleges and at the Portland, Maine club Raoul’s. *“I started to get opening slots down there. With a band and as a solo act for Gorka and Brown.”* Just prior to Mark’s graduation from Bates, the band made a four-song tape titled **“Words Unspoken.”** The four songs subsequently reappeared on the ten-track CD **“Long Way From Heaven.”** *“I felt like I had to produce a CD so that people would take me seriously, because I was so young. I was twenty-two at the time. I felt like I needed to show people, “Hey I have more than two songs.” As it transpired, I wasn’t ready for it. I stand by the songs on the first album. At the time, for the amount of playing and writing I was doing, the performances were as good as I could get.”*

Released in April of 1997, **“Long Way From Heaven”** included versions of “Do It Everyday” and “River Road,” songs that reappeared on the **“Mark Erelli”** album. Having just released the album, Erelli headed back to his native Massachusetts and the town of Northampton. The plan for the ensuing two years, being to take a Masters degree in Organismic and Evolutionary Biology. *“That’s the official title”* according to Mark.

I asked Mark if the choice of Northampton had been deliberate, since the town sustains a vibrant community of musicians. *“There were a lot of songwriters there. It seemed like a good music scene. I didn’t want to move to Boston because of the hassles of city living, so I attended the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Back then, people thought music was a nice little hobby for me. As soon as I moved there, it became painfully obvious that I couldn’t do both – together and indefinitely. It really wanted to do music. Anyway, I finished the Masters degree, but early on I’d go off to Boston, to Maine, to New Hampshire, to Pennsylvania – every weekend – anywhere that would have me. The last three-quarters of a year I was there, I tried to stay in New England and Massachusetts. I’d play a midweek show in Boston, and left for home at midnight. Then I’d have to be up, and in school at eight the next morning ready to work.”*

During this time, Mark mostly played as a solo act. In 1997 while attending the North-East Folk Alliance Conference, he met Mark Thayer from the Signature Sounds label. Thayer in turn convinced label co-owner Jim Olson, that Erelli was a musician with prospects. *“Mark asked if I’d cut some demos. I went down and reeled off, I think, eight or nine songs totally live. He loved all of them. Mark then called Lorne Entress, my drummer, and said, “I’ve got a guy here that would be great with a band. If you’re looking for something, you should get in right now.”*

Based on the demos cut in December 1997, Mark signed a deal with Signature Sounds the following September. *“I wanted to sign with a small label. Preferably local, if there is one, and I wanted to release an album just as I was getting out of graduate school.”* The foregoing plan could not have been executed more precisely. Mark graduated in the Spring of 1999, just as his debut solo album was arriving in record stores nation wide. Supporting players on the album included Rani Arbo and Dave Dick for the now defunct Salamander Crossing, and Duke Levine from Mary Chapin Carpenter’s band.

The CD release party was held May at Club Passim in Boston, and resulted in a **Billboard** for the disc. At Kerrville, I asked Mark about how he approached songwriting, *“From being open. You can be open on a variety of different scales. You’re open, obviously, to what is going on around you. For example “River Road” - I lived across the street from this bar in Lewiston. This little hole in the wall. People would be stumbling out of there at all hours of the day. I’d wake up for breakfast and see guys coming out who had obviously been going there their whole life. They weren’t going anywhere. I tried to write the song for them. About them. As if it was being spoken by them. Only later did I conclude that there was more of me in there, than I realised.”* At the

beginning of this piece I mentioned Mark's song "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained." *"I think the whole issue, of betrayal and loss, where things are never quite fulfilled, is stuff that we've all experienced in one way or another. That's a disintegration of a relationship song and a perfect example of a song I really wrote for me. To try and get me over the hill that I was climbing at the time."* As for "Northern Star," Erelli recalled, *"After College my girlfriend kind of drifted apart. We never really said goodbye. She became a world traveller and would send me postcard every once in a while. We started corresponding again for a while. She said 'I still fell this strange connection to you. I'm going to go out tonight and look in the sky to see if the Northern Star and the Southern Cross are visible at the same time.' That line became the germ for that song."*

With the arrival of **"Compass & Companion"** Mark tightened up his already polished songwriting skills another couple of notches. Kelly Willis duets with Mark on the title cut, and I'll close by offering Mark's synopsis of some of the songs featured. *"With 'Compass & Companion' my inner censor told me that no one cares about lonely musician road songs. I turned it around and wrote about a night ride home with my lover by my side. It's a real challenge to articulate all the different ways you can love someone. 'Why Should I Cry' was written after listening to too much Hank Williams. I love western swing, and it was fun to write and sing because no one ever expects a 'deep' swing tune. 'My Love' was inspired by the wonderful Cole Porter, Gershwin and Beatle chord changes taught to me by, my good friend, Cliff Eberhardt. I'm always trying to write a classic, a 'Yesterday' or 'Crazy'. I will probably never do it, but I always make myself try. 'Little Sister' is a joke. I called my sister up to congratulate her on graduating from college. She already had a highly paid job organised, and I thought 'My little sister makes more than I do, there's got to be a song in there somewhere.' 'Take My Ashes to the River' was started at Kerrville '99 at about 3 am, while wandering the campground with Jonathan Kingham. We finished two verses there and the last verse at Falcon Ridge the next month. Everyone who's ever heard the song has been really intrigued. I wanted my version to be Appalachia meets 'Wrecking Ball'. 'All Behind Me Now' was finished song two years after I started it. I couldn't really finish it till I actually started to feel as fortunate as the character in the song does. Write what you know is what they say, but they never tell you it might take forever till you really know it."*

As for my final word, Erelli's "My Love" is the equal of any well know *standard*, whatever the composer.

Arthur Wood.
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The Out-Takes.

One of my goals in making the album was to represent how I sound with a band. The first goal however, was to do the songs justice. That's always the first goal. The second goal is to show that I can play with a band. The third goal was to make something that was going to stand up in my catalogue. Hopefully my catalogue will stand up against other people's catalogues.

When I went in to do this album. I got up every day at quarter of seven, ate a good breakfast and warmed up my voice. Then I went to my voice teacher and warmed up again with her, and hit the studio at 11:30 am and sang probably 25 takes a day until 10.00 pm at night, for 5 days straight. I worked really hard on every aspect of making the album. I could not be more satisfied with the way it turned out. Now the important thing is not what I think about it, but what others think of the album. I know it's good, but I don't come to see me play live and buy albums off myself!