

CD SPECIAL • MICKEY NEWBURY

Mickey Newbury

AN AMERICAN TRILOGY

Saint Cecilia Knows Records/Mountain Retreat Records

★★★★☆

A veritable cornucopia of delights from one of America's genuine musical treasures...

When America's electrical components outlet Radio Shack, trading as Tandy, entered the UK retail market, circa the 1970s, one of their promotional offers was ten shrink-wrapped American pressed vinyl LPs for the princely sum of £1. I must have stumbled across Mickey Newbury's name sometime, subconsciously retained it, because I scored a mint copy of his sophomore solo album LOOKS LIKE RAIN. Unwrapped and placed on the turntable, the stylus alighted on the disc's run-in groove and within minutes I'd fallen headlong in love with one man's words and melodies. Still am. I will be forever.

Mickey Newbury was born in Houston during May 1940. By the mid-1960s he had gravitated to the Nashville area which is where most of this four CD box set was recorded during the period 1969-1973. The location was a former two-car garage turned home studio, Cinderella Sound in Madison, just north of Nashville. The studio was owned by guitarist Wayne Moss, alumni of Nashville's, then, young upstarts Area Code 615—their *Stone Fox Chase* became the OGWT (Old Grey Whistle Test) theme—and later Barefoot Jerry. What I'm talking about here are young musicians who redefined the limits of country music.

Disc 1, LOOKS LIKE RAIN, released in October 1969, was produced by Mercury Records executive Jerry Kennedy assisted by Bob Beckham. The support players included Kennedy (guitar, sitar), Farrell Morris (percussion) and 615 alumni Kenneth Buttrey (drums), Charlie McCoy (guitar, bass, harmonica) and Moss (guitar). Forty-two minutes long, the disc featured nine Newbury compositions, four of which were teamed as two-song segues. Sound effects—thunder, rain and train—from a Mystic Moods Orchestra recording graced the between song gaps. The latter became a sonic Newbury trademark, as did the choral backdrop of angelic voices. The folk-styled LOOKS LIKE RAIN was a million miles away from typical Nashville typical fare and Newbury's enigmatic 'little movies' were, more often than not, melancholic, with in the murder ballad tradition *San Francisco Mabel Joy* embracing every known human emotion. Simply put LOOKS LIKE RAIN is a seven-opus symphony that, for me, still induces chills.

'FRISCO MABEL JOY, Disc 2, was produced by the late Dennis Linde, hit songwriter and for a time an Elektra recording artist, and Jac Holzman's label issued this eleven song, almost forty minute long, collection during October 1971. Farrell, Moss and McCoy reprise their roles aided by fellow 615's Buddy Spicher (fiddle), Weldon Myrick and Bobby Thompson (pedal steel). Linde added backing vocals, as did the late Don Gant (Neon Philharmonic). Compared with its predecessor the album possessed a fuller band sound. *An American Trilogy*, a medley of the nineteenth century songs *Dixie*, *All My Trials* and *The Battle Hymn Of The Republic*, when released as a single, peaked at number 26 on the US pop chart. Four decades later, this majestically sweeping reflection on US social history has been covered almost five-hundred times, most notably by Elvis Presley. Bittersweet melancholy continued to pervade lyrics, exemplified by *How Many Times (Must The Piper Be Paid For His Song)* and *You're Not My Same Sweet Baby*.

Production of thirty-seven minute long Disc 3, HEAVEN HELP THE CHILD, released in January 1973, was shared by Elektra's a&r vice president Russ Miller, Linde and Marlin Greene, another Elektra recording artist. As for the session musicians, on this occasion they were legion. The 615 boys were back, as were members of Nashville's new and old guard. Bassist Emory Gordy soon enlisted in Emmylou's Hot Band, while Chet Atkins had resided in country music's capital for a quarter of a century. Townes Van Zandt reinterpreted his compositions on recordings—too many times—and Newbury adopts that approach with half of the eight HEAVEN HELP THE CHILD selections. There's *Sweet Memories* and *Good Morning Dear* from Mickey's 1968 RCA Victor debut HARLEQUIN MELODIES, *Sunshine* from that label's 1972 revision SINGS HIS OWN, while HEAVEN HELP THE CHILD closed with a redux of *San Francisco Mabel Joy*. Having alluded earlier to Newbury's little movies, *Cortelia Clark*, the gospel tinged tale of a blind African American street musician and his young, narrator, companion, is quite simply a blockbuster. Travelling to Guthrie to see the Bluebird Special train pass through town, Cortelia enquires: 'Is the engine black or red son, That's the loudest thing I've ever seen.' The ensuing waltz-paced *Song For Susan* was written for Susan Pack, a former Miss Oregon, one time New Christy Minstrel, who in 1969 became Mickey's beloved wife.

BETTER DAYS, Disc 4, contains fifteen selections, some rare some less so. There's a handful of simple voice, acoustic guitar and vocal chorus demos (for Acuff-Rose, Newbury's publisher), a Mercury Records single that teams an alternate take of *Sunshine* with the only recording of *Sad Satin Rhyme*. There's also a home demo of the previously unreleased *Flower Man* and the traditional *On Top Of Old Smokey*. A six-song session recorded in Los Angeles on November 25, 1970 for radio station WKFM's Skip Weshner Show, constitutes the disc's end portion. From the, then, forthcoming 'FRISCO MABEL JOY Mickey delivers an instrumental take of the *How Many Times (Has The Piper Been Paid For His Song)* melody, and the songs *How I Love Them Old Songs* and *You're Not My Same Sweet Baby*. The session also featured Newbury's only performance (ever) of *Better Days* and *I Don't Want Me No Big City Woman*.

Discs 1 through 3 have been beautifully re-mastered, using the recently rediscovered original tapes. The colourful shade of a Tiffany table lamp appeared on the rear cover of Newbury's AFTER ALL THESE YEARS (1981) and again on the ten-CD box THE MICKEY NEWBURY COLLECTION (1998). A Tiffany shade has for years been the opening image on Newbury's web site. Maintaining that thematic connection, a colourful Tiffany style pattern is reproduced on each disc in this set. Rare photographs grace the liner booklet, alongside extensive liner notes, and insights from the session musicians, as well as friends and acquaintances Guy Clark, Steve Earle, Jac Holzman and the late Larry Jon Wilson. In addition to this CD box set, each album has been issued individually on vinyl. **Arthur Wood**

<http://www.mickeynewbury.com/>



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