



Michael Smith **"The Gift of The Magi"** Bird Avenue Records

"The Gift of The Magi" is a mix of guitar instrumentals and songs, *mostly* composed by Chicago based singer/songwriter Michael Smith. Smith was commissioned to write this score by Judith Svalander, for a production that was first staged by the Judith Svalander Concert Dancers at the Raue Centre for the Arts in Chicago, during late 2001. On this recording, Michael and Jamie O'Reilly recreate the score accompanied by a string quartet, plus guitarist Pat Fleming and vocalist Anne Hills. The recording opens with Michael on acoustic guitar performing the melody of John H. Hopkin's "We Three Kings."

The score, based on O' Henry's story of an impecunious young couple, Della and Jim – the James Dillingham Youngs - barely into their twenties, who are so much in love that, individually, they sacrifice their most precious personal possession, in order to buy the other a much desired Christmas present. Smith, in the role of narrator, opens Henry's tale with "Narration 1," featuring extracts from the opening paragraphs of the original text that finds Della, at home, counting and recounting her savings. A mere *"one dollar eighty-seven cents,"* is far from sufficient to buy her beloved Jim what his heart desires. The string quartet and acoustic guitar instrumental "I Wish Someone Would Take Me Dancing" follows and gives way to the first song, "Nineteen And Five." In this waltz, Smith [in the role of Jim] cleverly sets the scene historically, with reference to current events such as the Wright Brothers flight at Kitty Hawk, trolley buses, the wonder of electricity in the home, the gramophone, motion pictures – and goes on to draw the conclusion, *"It's like living a Jules Verne dream."* Later in the song, Jamie picks up the narrative with a *"wish for an old fashioned Christmas."* O'Reilly in the role of Della, praises her beloved in "Gotta Like A Guy." Advancing O. Henry's narrative, Jim delivers an adoration of Della, "Long-haired Woman."

Having concluded that she requires more funds for her present, Della visits the salon of "Madame Sofronie" - *Hair Goods of All Kinds* - and poses the question, *"Will you buy my hair?"* Shorn of her beautiful long brown hair – *her finest possession*, and \$20 the richer, Della goes shopping as the string quartet performs "Troika Ride." The reason - it's reputed that Madame Sofronie is an Eastern European gypsy princess. Almost at the same time as Della is purchasing a gold fob chain for twenty-one dollars, in "Pawnbroker's Lullaby" Jim hocks *his finest possession*, a gold watch. The watch, a family heirloom, had been purchased many years previous by his paternal grandfather. Arriving home on Christmas Eve, with his present of tortoise shell combs [for Della's long hair], Jim is initially startled to find his short-haired wife – *"My hair grows awfully fast"* – and as time ticks away, in their impoverished state, the folly of their actions and depth of their love for one another unfolds. Based on the poet Henry Longfellow's words [December 1984], and arranged and set to music during the following decade by J. Baptiste Calkin, Della sings the carol "I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day," and it's followed by "The Magi" a Jim/Della duet recalling Christmas Eve's past and present. "Narration 2" includes a quote from the closing paragraph of Henry's text – *"Of all who give gifts these two were the wisest."* Smith's musical adaptation draws to a close with another duet, the uplifting "On Our Own," and an acoustic guitar rendition of the carol "Silent Night" is followed by the closing song "A Wanderer Am I," a *time traveller's* reflection upon the nativity and more.

I never fail to be amazed and concurrently pleased by the diversity of Smith's musical talent, and though tailored to, and confined by, the strictures of O. Henry's narrative, **"The Gift Of The Magi"** remains, nevertheless, a worthwhile addition to his extensive catalogue.

Folkwax Rating 7 out of 10

Arthur Wood
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