



Michael Smith “**Love Letter On A Fish**” Tales From The Tavern Records

This fourteen song, nineteen track ‘live’ recording is sub-titled “**Live At Tales From The Tavern Too.**” The reason? Circa 2003, this Santa Ynez, California based concert series released a – now out-of-print - disc by Smith titled “**Such Things Are Finely Done.**” The latest collection was recorded at The Maverick Saloon on 12th March last year.

Humorous lyrics, the subtle variety, are a Smith speciality and from the outset he’s right on the money with “Dead Egyptian Blues.” Historic references, Egyptian and ancient rub shoulders with contemporary American parallels, as Michael recalls, *Mr. Tut* aka Tutankhamen, the one time ruler of that hot and sandy Middle Eastern land. Here’s a rib-tickling smidgen *“Your sarcophagus is glowing, but your oesophagus is showing, Who cares how rich you are love, When you look like Boris Karloff, And they even named this dog food after you”* [+]. Michael closes the number with imitations of Karloff as well as a mummified Tut attempting to hold the tune. Anne Hills, Michael’s buddy and occasional musical collaborator, covered “Rondi’s Birthday” on her 1993 Smith tribute collection “**October’s Child.**” A gifted poet, Smith’s lyric opens with *“Red leaves of October turn November brown, Winter’s always early in Chicago town.”*

Long time fans will be well aware of Smith’s love for westerns, and “Tom Mix Blues” and “Palomino Pal” – a tribute to Roy Rogers – are evocations of that love affair. Between the foregoing pair, Michael recalls Mix and how, as an adult, he met – shook hands with, but failed to engage in conversation - his childhood hero Roy. I recall first hearing the late Steve Goodman’s rendition of “Spoon River” over three and half decades ago, and every subsequent hearing continues to bring those chills. Set during the months following the American Civil War, as the lyric unfolds a vivid movie plays in my head, filled with images of riverboats, soldier boys *“asleep in the dirt,”* couples waltzing, celebratory bells and more. So much more.

Unimaginative love songs that lyrically plough the same old, same old – moon, June, spoon, oh woe is me - bore me senseless. The foregoing sentence has been heavily sanitised. Michael Smith however, has repeatedly proved that he is adept at focusing on the ordinary and conjuring the exquisite and extraordinary. A new oeuvre, “Barbara Dodd” recalls a short teenage infatuation with a girl from Passaic Valley High. “Panther In Michigan” and “Vampire,” both edgy creations in their own right, debuted on Michael’s self-titled debut for the much missed Flying Fish imprint, while “Tom Dundee” – a Chicago based folk musician and, like Smith, a member of the tribute quartet Weavermania - is an amusing and sly skit [wink, wink] that suggest Smith’s siblings and mother simply worship Mr. Dundee’s musicianship. Crossing the Styx, passing beyond the veil, whatever “We Become Birds” is a prayer that attests to the beauty that exists – should one dare to seek it - on this side of the veil.

Michael made his initial foray into musical theatre with the late Bob Gibson. Later, he contributed the score to the Steppenwolf Theatre Company’s [musical] production of “**The Grapes Of Wrath,**” and more recently he has written a number of musical adaptations of well known children’s stories [usually presented at Chicago’s Victory Gardens]. Based on Hans Christian Andersen’s “**The Snow Queen**” Michael performs the giggle-inducing “Love Letter On A Fish” – *“It would give me such a thrill to read “I love you” on each gill, Or ‘darling’ on a marlin, things profounder on a flounder”* - while from the more recent work Oscar Wilde’s “**The Selfish Giant,**” there’s “Bees, Bees, Bees, Bees, Bees, Bees, Bees, Bees.” Leavened toward the close with a degree of pathos, “Crazy Mary” works as a musical nursery rhyme and as one of those scary stories that children tell and retell each other. Remember those teen tragedy tunes that saturated the airwaves during the late nineteen-fifties. In that regard, Michael encores with the short but humorous “Teenage Heaven.”

Note.

[+] – No longer manufactured/sold Stateside, King Tut is the brand of dog food to which Michael alludes.

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 12/08.