



John Stewart "**Havana**" Appleseed Recordings

Back in 1986 when Stewart made one of his early *in concert* forays to the United Kingdom, he sold a cassette titled "**Secret Tapes 1.**" Since that date, *big John* has continued to *unofficially* self-release cassettes [and latterly CD's], in tandem with the appearance of his official recordings. Appleseed's "**Havana**" first saw the light of day as a twelve-song cassette in 1998, and eleven of the tracks reappear here. Having just mentioned that Stewart has more recently embraced technology, self-releasing a number of CD's, two songs here, "Cowboy In The Distance" and "Waltz Of The Crazy Moon," previously appeared on "**Johnny Moonlight**" [2000] and "**Buster**" [2000]. What was it that Sgt. Esterhaus used to say at the end of each morning briefing at the Hill Street Precinct House ? "*Remember, let's be careful out there.*"

Ownership of the aforementioned unofficial recordings probably leans toward the domain of the battle hardened Stewart fan, but *forewarned is always forearmed*. What's more, this Appleseed collection features fifteen songs and to the best of my knowledge "Star In The Black Sky Shining" has never previously appeared on a Stewart recording, while John's *world weary* rendition of "Lucky Old Sun" is a cover of Frankie Laine's 1949 hit. So the poor battle hardened Stewart fan gets smacked by a double whammy !!! The accompanying liner booklet features, not for the first time, notes by Tom DeLisle, a Stewart fan of forty years standing. Across four pages DeLisle traces epochal moments in Stewart's career, first as a member of the Kingston Trio and then as a solo act, by way of recollecting concerts attended during that span of time. Two-pages of Tom's track-by-track analysis of Stewart's songs follow, with nary a mention of the original cassette..... *forewarned is always forearmed*.

On this collection there's evidence that Stewart's voice is succumbing to the passage of time. I'm not saying that he slurs his words, but in the past his diction has been clearer. John probably never was a full-blown baritone, circa "**California Bloodlines**" [1969], but currently his voice is a pale shadow of what it once was. Once there was a time when John's lyrics and song titles relied heavily upon the words "*horse*" and "*wind*" [**not** the flatulent type !!!]. These days, his battle hardened "Bloodliners" will attest, "*Johnny*" and "*dog*" seem to be undergoing heavy usage.

Mindful of the modern times we live in, and ever the technocrat, the album opens with a reference to John's long time bass man, Dave Batti and the World Wide Web. Lyrically "Davey On the Internet" is about as repetitious as some of the, fan fed, artist digests that are posted daily on the web, and contains – according to DeLisle - a wry reference to Stewart's "Bloodlines" web digest – which goes "*grapevine, looking for the iodine.*" Elsewhere, among Stewart's many amusing PC observations there's reference to "*dot com, CD Rom, AOL, you can't get on....download, upload, PC's on the overload....Netscape, escape, tomorrow is out of date.*" Conscious of his mortality and identity, in "Who Stole The Soul Of Johnny Dreams," Stewart surveys [his] life in this age of all pervading worldwide markets and astounding technological advances. According to John, "One-Eyed Joe" is now "*living down on the borderline*" with his partner, Sideways Sally. Obviously two of life's shadier characters, as you'd expect "One Eyed Joe" is a wanted man.

On the 1998 "**Havana**" cassette "Starman" bore the title "Dreams Of The Starman." In the opening verse a series of "*what if*" utopian life possibilities are set out, and Stewart further develops his overview of society in subsequent verses with reference to religious tolerance irrespective of faith, while prejudice is encapsulated by – "*And if those who just love one another, Would not be the targets of stones.*" The

domestic pets referred to in the title "Dogs In The Bed," are *figurative*, as Stewart restlessly muses, during the hours of darkness, about his personal transgressions, things that still have to be achieved and the finality of death. Stewart then extends the concept to embrace the world in general.

"Rock 'n' Roll Nation" and "I Want To Be Elvis," are songs spawned by the music that was conceived in America, and the artists who performed it, in the latter half of the twentieth century, while "Turn Of The Century (Diana)" reflects upon the princess for whom "*a legend was born*" when she passed in a tunnel near the Champs Elysee "*at the turn of the century.*" John's expresses endless admiration and love for his wife, Buffy Ford Stewart, in "Miracle Girl." Buffy has battled, and defeated, a number of serious illnesses in recent years. A song that focuses upon love parted by distance, "Cowboy In The Distance," was, supposedly, inspired by a nanny who worked for Rosanne Cash.

Probably the newest Stewart composition on this collection "Star In The Black Sky Shining" explores the mystery of life and touches upon reincarnation and spiritual revelation. "Rally Down The Night," includes "dogs" in the lyric, and also pursues a *mystery of life* theme. Cuba, and in particular Havana [if you recall, it's the title of this collection], is a place that Stewart would love to visit as he reveals in the closing "Waiting For Castro To Die."

As for those all important *finishing touches*, the rear of the liner booklet and rear tray of the CD case features a sepia picture of people standing in a street, credited to "unknown," on to which John's face has been "*pasted.*"

Folkwax Rating 7 out of 10

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