

David Ackles – Retrospective Of A Composer, And Truly Unsung Giant of American Music - Part 2

Last week in Part 1, we traced David's life from his birth in Illinois in 1937, through to his early teen career as a movie actor and on to his college years at USC. Ackles lyrics consistently avoided naval gazing self-introspection, a forte of many writers during that era. Much like an actor temporarily adopts the persona of the person he is playing, Ackles inhabited the story songs he wrote and sang. As last week's episode closed, it was 1968, and David had released his debut solo album. It yielded two singles in the UK, "Down River" and "Laissez Faire," but neither charted.

The following year Ackles recorded his sophomore album. Where David's debut had clocked in at thirty-eight minutes duration and ten songs, **"Subway To The Country"** only featured eight Ackles originals and lasted thirty-four minutes. Russ Miller was retained as the producer, while the Doug Hastings was the only debut album session musician. Miller brought in the late Fred Myrow to arrange and conduct the strings, and the session players included Jim Horn [sax], Larry Knechtel [keyboards], Jim Gordon [drums] and Elektra recording artist, Lonnie Mack [guitar]. If the latter amounted to the changes, Ackles new songs continued to plough the *song theatre* genre, albeit orchestrated on this occasion.

Although the copy I own states *"radio play only,"* it is claimed that this 7" single was included with initial copies of Ackles second album. The album title track appears on one side and an interview with David on the other. In relation to the album title track, David talks [during the interview] of New York being his least favourite city, and that children who grow up there rarely experience the magical and multi-faceted joy of a rural upbringing. The album's opening track, "Main Line Saloon," sets the scene with *"It's a bar that never closes"* and *"I recommend you take a friend, And hold your noses."* David goes on to paint a suitably horrific picture of addiction with *"All you see are yellow fingers, Trying to hide the face that crumbles"* and *"On the day your arms are christened."* In closing the song Ackles employs discordant piano sounds to define the final madness that addiction brings.

In "Candy Man" a harpsichord and kettle-drum immediately create a nightmarish feel, while the lyric explores the tenet that we humans should respect each other. Oscar, a one armed veteran returns from an unnamed war and buys a candy store in the *"nicest part of town."* Dubbed *"The crippled clown"* by local adults, he wreaks revenge by placing pornographic pictures in the bags of sweets he sells to local kids. Facing imprisonment, Oscar exposes society's double standards with the stinging words, *"I only did to some of you, what you all did to me."* By its title alone, the lyrical inspiration for "Inmates Of The Institution" is somewhat obvious, while the doom laden orchestration mirrors the European feel of Brecht/Weill/Blitzstein's "Pirate Jenny" and Peaslee's "Marat/Sade." Two years earlier, Judy Collins had included the latter song on her **"In My Life"** album. With the atmospherically orchestrated ballad "That's No Reason To Cry," Ackles delivers another true love song. When compared with Ackles' subsequent masterwork, "Montana Song," the Coplandesque sounding album title track could easily be interpreted as a late twentieth century antidote to the generation who sought their future [and financial fortune] in the city. With *"If I ever get three bucks together, I'm gonna buy three tickets on a train, I will carry you through clean smelling rain, One boy to a shoulder, Hey ! We better go quick before we get older,"* Ackles encompasses environmental degradation, simple family values, the need to impart knowledge and so much more.

"American Gothic" was released 1972, and completed Ackles' trio of Elektra album releases. At the close of 1972 the now defunct UK weekly music publication, Melody Maker, awarded it the title of Album of the Year. Produced by Elton John's lyricist, Bernie Taupin, Ackles penned much of the material while resident in Southern England. On the album liner David commented, *It seems like you get a sharper perspective on your own country when you're away from it."*

Maintaining the aforementioned European/Brechtian feel, the album title cut deals with marital infidelity and opens the eleven-track, forty-four minute set. Horace Jenkins finds solace in booze and *"sends for pictures of black stockings,"* while Molly, his wife, *"sells her wares in town"* to farmhands. "Ballad Of The Ship Of State" is a barbed observation of the way government's treat their armed forces, whether alive or dead, once the fighting has ceased [#]. The song lyric marks one of the rare occasions where Ackles uses humour to deliver his palpable sense of outrage. Long before they were fashionable causes, the disappearance of family values within the context of small town America and the treatment of Native Americans [and for that matter, all other creeds] came under Ackles' lyrical microscope, as "Family Band" and "Ballad For Billy Whitecloud" respectively attest. "Love's Enough" and "One Night Stand" find Ackles in love song mode, while the good time "Oh, California!" stylistically recalled Ackles early days in vaudeville. The melancholic "Waiting For The

Moving Van" is a reflection upon life and on all the jobs we intended to complete, but somehow never found the time. None of the foregoing, however, prepares you for the symphonic, ten-minute long album climax [and closing track], "Montana Song." Before music videos were *de rigueur*, I repeatedly played out in my mind's eye, the panoramic story line that gradually unfolds through the late nineteenth and into early twentieth century America. Having established the family's identity, in a new country, through the ownership of a piece of land, the next generation deserts the farm for the city, in search of the greater financial benefits gained through factory work. Add to that, the many illicit pleasures offered by the city. *"I went out to Montana, With a Bible on my arm, Looking for my fathers, On a long abandoned farm, And I found what I came looking for."* Heartfelt and timeless, sums up **"American Gothic."** Coplandesque ? – absolutely, in terms of its orchestration. The term *classic* Ackles Americana, undersells this masterwork. Americana being far from a widely used term at that time.

On one of the album liner photos, David stands holding an upturned gardening fork, with his wife-to-be, Janice Vogel, by his side. The picture mimicked "American Gothic" [1930] by Iowa born, Regionalist painter, Grant Wood. David and Janice were married in 1972. Their only son, George, was born five years later. During the early nineteen-nineties, George played bass in the Christian music band, Tuesday's Child.

Sadly, none of Ackles Elektra albums proved to be major sellers and Holzman released David from his contract. Clive Davis the head at CBS Records, and an admirer of Ackles work, then signed him. Shortly afterwards Davis left the label, and although David went on to record **"Five & Dime"** it literally died *in the starting blocks*, due to a lack of promotion. A more pop oriented effort than his previous releases, considering the critical kudos poured upon his previous efforts, particularly **"American Gothic,"** I wonder if the approach Ackles adopted was deliberate ?

Self-produced, with assistance from Douglas Graham, the *5 cent* side of the disc album opened with the vaudeville styled melody of "Everybody Has A Story." A melancholic sounding string quartet supports Ackles piano on "I've Been Loved," as he focuses upon memories of past loves among the aged. The most pop oriented track Ackles cut was surely the Beach Boys' pastiche "Surf's Down" featuring support vocals from Dean Torrance [ex Jan and Dean]. As you might guess, there's also *10 cent* side, and it opens with the popish "Run, Pony, Run." The collapse of the coal waste tip at "Aberfan" [in Wales] occurred in October 1966, and Ackles recalls the sad event in his dramatically orchestrated song of the same name. The *5 cent* side ends with the heartbreaking love song "One God Woman's Man" and mention of an unsent postcard, while, in the *10 cent* closer, "Postcards," the narrator muses, *"May I write you from time to time ? A picture postcard from the five and dime ?"* It was almost as if Ackles was saying *"farewell for time being."* Sadly he never officially released another recording during his lifetime.

Disillusioned, Ackles never pursued another recording deal, and after struggling as a songwriter for a time, he moved on to the next phase of his life. According to the IMDb web site, in 1981 Ackles co-wrote, with Douglas Graham, the screenplay for the TV made, mystery movie **"Word Of Honour."** It starred Karl Malden [Lieut. Mike Stone in tv's **"The Streets Of San Francisco"**] and Rue McClanahan [Blanche Deveraux in **"The Golden Girls"**]. He also worked on **"Father Of The Year,"** and a children's television series, while writing ballet scores as well as his totally unique songs. Eventually, and with some reluctance, David entered the world of lecturing. His subject, songwriting.

In 1981, David was involved in an almost fatal auto accident. A drunk driver ploughed into Ackles' car leaving him with a badly damaged hip. Confined to a wheelchair for six months because of his pinned hip, another year elapsed before David could sit down at a piano, let alone play. He eventually struggled back to fitness, and in the early nineteen-nineties completed work on a musical titled **"Sister Aimee."** Almost concurrently David was diagnosed as suffering from lung cancer and following removal of part of his left lung he appeared to recover. In the mid-nineties, David and Janice settled on a six-acre horse farm in Tujunga. Cancer returned in 1997 and two years later David Ackles passed away.

It is my understanding that Ackles continued to record his compositions, from the mid-seventies through to the late-nineties, albeit of demo quality. None of them have seen the light of day commercially. In 1997 at his former alma mater, USC, where he worked as Assistant Professor in the School of Theatre he directed a student production of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's **"Threepenny Opera."**

Almost thirty years after his recording career ended, all too abruptly, I still believe that David Ackles music is totally unique. In Ackles *canon*, portraits of utter misery stood shoulder to shoulder with glimpses of startling beauty, yet never seemed at odds. On March 18th 1999 [two weeks after David's passing], I wrote, *"This*

century and millennium will soon be gone, but one David Ackles song will shine on as a beacon in the canon of 20th century American contemporary music. I refer to "Montana Song." Like Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" it captured, perfectly, a facet of the vast and rich tapestry that is America. David Ackles, thank you for your precious spirit and for sharing your music with us.." On reflection, Ackles produced many gems.....now you can hear many of them again, thanks to Collectors Choice Music.

Note.

[#] Although not referenced, the Vietnam War was still raging at the time. Thirty years, and numerous wars later, the contention posed in the song remains accurate and true.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 09/02 & 10/02

[1830 words].