



Mickey Newbury **"Blue To This Day"** Mountain Retreat Records

At the rear of the **"Blue To This Day"** liner booklet there are a handful of tributes/reminiscences by Newbury's closest friends and associates, and in his contribution Bob Rosemurgy succinctly describes the contents of this CD - *"In this, his last release of new songs, Mickey does let his humour show, along with the influences of jazz, Tex-Mex, rock'n'roll, gospel and other forms that always set Mickey's music outside any industry-created category."* In terms of the foregoing rich blend of musical genres, on **"Blue To This Day"** it's my conclusion that Newbury consciously chose to reprise music of all shades from the era in which he lived. If you like, these are his *musical back pages*. I know for a fact that Mr Rosemurgy is not alone in believing that Mickey Newbury was a totally unique composer, one of America's finest. I've been a helpless Newbury addict since picking up a mint, sealed vinyl copy of **"Looks Like Rain"** 30 years ago for around 25 cents. A Texan by birth, in recent times a resident of his beloved wife's home state of Oregon, Mickey Newbury departed this earthly plane on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2002 aged 62 years.

Commencing with his sophomore solo album **"Looks Like Rain"** [1969] Newbury began inserting sound effects between many of the songs on his recordings. **"Blue To This Day"** opens with the sound of a passing freight train, and listening to it for the first time in the context that *Mickey is gone*, the sound somehow drew to mind thoughts of the train that carried Jimmie Rodgers' body home to Meridian, Mississippi [from New York City] in 1933. On that occasion thousands of ordinary folk lined the track throughout the 1200 miles long journey to offer a final farewell. As the sound of the train finally fades, the track segues into the ballad "Some Dreams Never Die" an evocation to never giving up on life. It opens with the simple image of *"Reach into your pocket, Cast a dream into the sky, One dream will always fly, Some dreams live forever."* Initially underpinned by the sound of an acoustic guitar and a sonorous fiddle, the narrator, in "The Two Step Goes On" relates how a love whose *"Smile was wickedly free"* initially, departed after he *"Treated my good woman bad."* Despite the loss the narrator concludes *"Same song and dance, And the two step goes on."*

One of three songs on this disc that Newbury recorded earlier in his career, the self explanatory "Song Of Sorrow" previously appeared on **"After All These Years"** [1981]. The six-line prayer "Father's Amen – Interlude" opens with *"Bless this bread that we now break,"* and merges seamlessly into the gospel tinged "Brother Peter." Lyrically, the latter cut focuses upon discipleship. The opening line of the jazz tinged ballad "Mississippi Moon" – *"Way down south in the land of cotton"* paraphrases a line from "You're A Grand Old Flag," while *"Old times there are soon forgotten,"* the second, paraphrases "Dixie." Of course both lines also paraphrase the opening lines of Newbury's "An American Trilogy" which first appeared on **"Mabel Frisco Joy"** [1971]. The latter is merely one of numerous musical cross-references – in lyric and melody – that permeate this collection.

My figuring, initially, was that the images *"Will you kindly help me to my feet"* and *"A gentle man is waiting in the street"* in "Help Me Son" were religious in nature, but by the third verse the storyline suddenly took a sharp left turn with *"I have been cut and shot right to the bone."* The narrator, an old gunfighter – *"I am deathly tired and all alone,"* asks a youngster to pick up his guns and walk him to his horse. In the process and in true stiff upper lip, shoot out at *high noon* fashion, the old man proffers the sage advice regarding the *gentle man* he has just left lying on the ground, *"He will live to kill another day, Never turn your back on him and say, It is done."*

"House Of Blues" is a goodtime sounding number that explores a failed relationship, as in "*Honey but it's all right if it's all wrong, It is time for me to be moving on.*" "Little Blue Robin" is a wonderfully *moral little tale* that imbues robin, mockingbird, frog, bald eagle and sundry other characters with human characteristics. Additionally, the mockingbird is the state bird of Texas. When robin is jailed after being accused of stealing, his friend, mockingbird's song, robin and his companion, crow, subsequently break free, turn *outlaw*, and for countless years undertake a fruitless search for mockingbird's song. As the final verse relates "*Mockin' died thinking, His friend had done him wrong,*" which is why, in closing the lyric relates, the little red robin "*is blue to this day.*" I have this nagging feeling, however, that the events portrayed in this tale parallel a real event in Mickey's musical life. To the sound of falling rain, way in the background a pedal steel guitar prefaces "All The Neon Lights Are Blue," with the melody of Hank Thompson's "The Wild Side Of Life" [or is it Kitty Wells reply "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels"?] Whatever, this road song is the third song title on this collection to feature the word "*blue*" [singular or plural] and that four-letter construction also turns up in the lyric of "Down And Dirty," the melody of which just happens to be underpinned by a blues riff delivered, mainly, by guitar, bass and harmonica. As for Mickey's tribute to good old fashioned rock'n'roll that arrives in the form of "Shuck And Jive" a humorous tale of a night club singer who learns, almost in an instant, to "*shake his thing*" after a "*woman with a Texas drawl*" draws a .44 handgun.

As for "Tilde," it's initially founded around the repeated line "*Bring me little water,*" delivered by a hot and weary cotton picker. The foregoing sequence of four words can also be found in Harry Belafonte's spiritual, which bears phonetically similar title, "Matilda." Whatever, it's all part of what we know as *the folk process*. Musically, this near eight-minute long gem is symphonic in execution and runs the gamut from a simple vocal only, *field recorded blues shout* to a sweeping orchestral soundscape during the closing two minutes. By way of highlighting further musical cross-references, the foregoing track opens with a melody that's reminiscent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement of Dvorak's Symphony No. 9, aka "From The New World." The penultimate cut, "Remember The Good," a testament to fondly remembered lost love, previously appeared on "**Frisco Mabel Joy**" [1971].

The original version of the sophisticated lullaby "Goodnight" closed Newbury's "**Lovers**" [1975], and here it forms the opening sequence of the, near seven-minute long, final offering on "**Blue To This Day.**" As "Goodnight" ends Mickey simply utters "*alright,*" while in the background distant rolling thunder is superseded by the sound of falling rain replenishing the earth. A two-and-a-half minute long interlude of Stephen Foster's "Beautiful Dreamer" follows, performed by piano, cello and violin, and in the closing minute of this track, like a ghostly spectre in the background of another soundscape, featuring woodland birds singing [and the distant tolling of a church bell, or is it a church clock marking the hour?], Newbury can be faintly heard singing two lines of a song, the title of which I have yet to figure out.

If your collection does not yet contain at least one Newbury recording then, in my opinion, it is sadly lacking genuine greatness. "**Blue To This Day**" is as good a place as any to start this thoroughly worthwhile musical voyage. Considering that in the later years of his life Mickey struggled daily with emphysema, it's little short of a miracle that his last few albums were recorded. That said, they stand as a testament to this craftsman's tenacity and his love for his chosen profession. That those projects reached fruition is also due, in no small way, to the faith of a steadfast helmsman, Bob Rosemurgy. As the person who ensured that these recordings entered the public domain, he also deserves undying thanks.

Mickey Newbury undertook a lifelong journey in word and melody and we're all the richer for it. He truly was a beautiful dreamer. Mickey, God bless.....and goodnight. I'll never fail to hear you in my dreams.

Folkwax Rating 10 out of 10

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