



John McCutcheon “**Mightier Than The Sword**” Appalsongs Records

In the liner notes that accompany this collection, McCutcheon offers an insight into his lifelong love of the printed word. Towards the close of the narrative John sums up his love affair, *“I’ve turned to reading to both lift me out of my ordinary life and to plunge me more deeply into it.”* I offer the foregoing insight as an introduction to “**Mightier Than The Sword**” wherein, John collaborates with some of his favourite authors, in some instances on both words and music, in others by supplying the music that supports the writer’s words, or, finally, McCutcheon has taken a writer’s words or idea and fashioned a song. This recording was co-produced by McCutcheon and John Jennings, leader of Mary Chapin Carpenter’s road band. Having established that he’s been an avaricious reader from an early age, before looking in more detail at the contents of “**Mightier Than The Sword**” it’s worth offering the insight that McCutcheon has been a social and political campaigner for much of his adult life, in parallel with holding down a career as singer/songwriter. That aspect of his art becomes apparent as the songs unfold.

Also much beloved by Indiana based song poet Carrie Newcomer, the Arizona & Appalachia based writer Barbara Kingsolver’s essay collection “**Small Wonder**” [2002] contained a narrative titled “And Our Flag Was Still There.” The song of [almost] the same name penned by John and Barbara, is a powerful reflection on the many ways in which the “nation’s flag” has been “used,” some would say “hijacked,” throughout the nation’s history. Subtly the chorus attests *“For the saints and sinners, Yes, our flag is still there.”* McCutcheon’s music supports the words of Cuba born children’s author Carmen Agra Deedy in “La Mujer de Don Miguel” [translates as “The Woman Of Don Miguel”]. A funereal sounding piano introduces “Claudette Colvin Goes To Work” which John penned with Rita Dove, former Poet Laureate of the United States and currently Poet Laureate of Virginia [+]. Dove also contributes the spoken words “*Stay Still*” to the track. Based on a poem in Dove’s collection “**On The Bus With Rosa Parks**” [1999] the lyric focuses on the later life and thoughts of Colvin, who worked for some 35 years as a nurse’s assistant in a NYC nursing home, but also recalls how, in early 1955, as a fifteen year old Montgomery, Alabama schoolgirl Colvin refused to give up her seat to a white person. Her actions preceded those of the late Rosa Parks by some nine months. When the fiddle kicks in with a hoedown paced melody, it’s time to roll up the carpet for a knees-up, and “Good Ol’ Girls,” inspired by the work of Lee Smith, writer and former professor of English at North Carolina State, proceeds to paint a portrait of a wayward girl – *“Her turn and talk and hide are rough, Life with her could get plumb rough.”* When Sister Helen Prejean’s book “**Dead Man Walking**” [1983] was made into an Oscar winning movie a decade later, it greatly raised people’s awareness of the American penal system and the death penalty. At the time, the film spawned a “music from and inspired by the movie” collection that included Mary Chapin Carpenter’s “Dead Man Walking [A Dream Like This],” a track she co-produced with Jennings. McCutcheon’s “Dead Man Walking” lyric presents a condemned man’s thoughts and actions during the hours leading up to his execution.

Employing a hammered dulcimer at the outset of “Cultivo Una Rosa Blanca” [it translates as “Cultivating A White Rose”], McCutcheon’s melody initially establishes a Latin rhythm [for a few bars it sounds remarkably like the intro to “Guantamera”] and later, with the appearance of an accordion, his melody possesses a Celtic feel. With a lyric by Cuban poet Jose Marti [he wrote the “Guantamera” lyric], John shares the vocal with Signature Sounds recording artist Rani Arbo. Two cuts here feature the words of the late Woody Guthrie. First, there’s the tender night-time, love song “Harness Up The Day,” while “Old Cap Moore” is credited in the liner as a co-write. Subjectively the latter song balances the generous acts of a bakery worker toward local urchins, with the profit-motivated avarice, and stupidity, of the bakery owner. Co-written with Lee Smith, “Single Girl” finds a woman recalling a trio of former lovers. As the

song closes Johnny, her latest [and fourth] amour, arrives at the door and deluding herself [again], she adds, *"I know he's different from the rest, Aw hell, just one more try."* "Sail Away" was inspired by Carmen Agra Deedy's fictional tale **"The Yellow Star : The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark"** [2000]. McCutcheon's lyric relates how during WWII, following Nazi occupation of their country, Danish Jews were ferried to neutral Sweden by Danish fishermen.

The closing quartet of tracks features a pair of collaborations with Chilean poet Pablo Neruda [b. 1904, d. 1973]. Neruda's words to "Para Mi Corazon Basta Tu Pecho" [it translates as "For My Love You Are Enough"] feature stunning images like *"You undermine the horizons with your absence."* The closing cut "Ode To Common Things" was inspired by a Neruda poetry collection of the same name published in 1994 [*]. As for John's melody, one phrase hints at that of Dave Mallett's "The Garden Song." Wedged between the foregoing pair, is the [folk] rap style, spoken narrative "It's the Economy, Stupid" inspired by Wendell Berry's novel **"Jayber Crow"** [2000]. Underpinned by percussion and jazz styled trumpet fills, this almost eight minute long, verbally incisive cut reflects upon the late 20th century changes in rural and urban life, as, on a world scale, manufacturing industry shrank in the Western hemisphere and capitalism became a driving force in the East. Doesn't that kind of beg the question, where next for capitalism? "Jayber Crow's Silly Song About Jesus" employs Wendell Berry's words and at the outset poses the question *"What kind of car will Jesus drive, When he comes back again?"* Significantly, Berry later offers the [utterly contemporary] caution *"Satan's car has no reverse, And he is driving fast."* As a collection title, and based on the insights I've offered, there's no need to explain the source of the title **"Mightier Than The Sword."** Honesty, humility and humanity are touchstones that have permeated McCutcheon's lyrics in the past. As an interpretation of the words of others McCutcheon's **"Mightier Than The Sword"** is a delightfully rich and varied collection subjectively, and for his generosity in sharing it with us I [unequivocally] thank him.

Note.

[+] - Rita Dove is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

[*] – The collection gathered together previously published poems by Pablo Neruda.

Folkwax Score 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 03/06.