



Tom Russell & Ian Tyson “**Mano A Mano**” Canyon Productions

The derivation of “**Mano A Mano**” is Spanish and Italian, and translates as “*hand to hand*.” Initially a bull fighting reference, it described two matadors competing in the ring for the approbation of the crowd. In recent times, specifically in Spain, it has come to mean two people competing to outdo each other. Filmed over two days – mornings actually - during last year’s annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, the main feature is a songwriting workshop given by ‘the master’ – Ian Tyson [b. 1933] – and ‘the student’ – Tom Russell [b. 1950]. Russell has openly admitted to being an avid Ian and Sylvia fan during his teen years, and in recent decades has been involved in musical projects with both members of the Canadian folk duo. Russell and Tyson first collaborated as songwriters during the mid 1980’s, and, in addition, Tom has produced a number of Sylvia’s solo recordings and also collaborated with her on songs and a book – oddly, or is that logically - about songwriting.

In terms of the structure of the workshop, adopting the role of nascent songwriters/musicians, Messrs Tyson and Russell initially focus on traditional, old cowboy and even pop songs. Russell mentions that “*Stealing existing melodies is the way to begin*” but, additionally, there is no substitute for comprehensive research – in other words, do your homework! In this segment Russell, joined by Tyson, performs “Rambler Gambler” from the first Ian & Sylvia album. There is also a rendition of “Spanish Is The Loving Tongue,” following which Russell performs “Seven Curses” which Bob Dylan based on the traditional “Old Reilly.”

Tyson recalls how, with his ‘creative juices in full flow,’ he wrote his first song in just half an hour, in Albert Grossman’s East Village apartment, after Dylan had performed one of his latest creations – possibly “Blowin’ In The Wind” - at The Kettle Of Fish. The first song Tyson wrote? The classic “Four Strong Winds.” In terms of the creative process Russell alludes to “*What goes in, comes back out*” – of course, bearing the writer’s own particular stamp. Russell admits that “Gallo Del Cielo” was not his first composition. It was however, based on a collage of stories people had told him and was written in a garage in Mountain View, California.

Tyson and Russell met during the early eighties when they shared a bill at The Bottom Line. The relationship blossomed, and in time they began composing songs. While “Navajo Rug” is probably their best known collaboration, there have been numerous others, including “Claude Dallas” and “The Banks Of The Musselshell.” Alluding to a finished song, Tyson offers “*They’re like your kids, off they go,*” and recalls how, circa the early nineteen sixties, his first wife Sylvia wrote “You Were On My Mind” while taking a bath in a Greenwich Village hotel near Washington Square. As for Russell’s take on collaborating with his hero, he admits that initially Tyson made him “*pay his dues.*” It was like going back to school.

In the final songwriting segment the time-served scribes reflect on their most recent work, Russell on his “**Love And Fear**” album, and Tyson on a song he recently completed about/for his estranged, young daughter. Moving on to take questions from the audience, one member asks both performers how they manage to keep getting up on stage? Ian’s reply is short, “*Alimony,*” and goes on to quote Hank Williams “*Heartbreak don’t hurt your songwriting.*” Accompanied by a bass player and lead guitarist – the two Gord’s [Matthews and Maxwell], at the close of the main feature, Tyson, decked out in a Hawaiian shirt, performs “Elko Blues – The Roan Mare” from his 1999 album “**Lost Herd.**”

The sequences from the Elko workshop last for approximately eighty minutes, and a ten minute long interview with Ian follows. One final thought, the black and white liner cover picture of Messrs. Tyson and Russell is not contemporaneous. I'd peg it as dating from the 1980's. How time flies.....

Folkwax Score 7 out of 10.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 12/08.

[650 words]