



L. J. Booth **"The Ox That Pulls The Cart"** Firefly Jar Music

L. J. won the New Folk Songwriters competition at the Kerrville Folk Festival in 1989. In 1986 he had recorded and self-produced a ten-song cassette album titled **"Yarns."** Seven years later we got **"Big Hourglass,"** originally issued by the now defunct Austin imprint, Agua Azul. Almost a decade later, Booth has produced his third effort and the result more than justifies the wait. In between times, and based in Central Wisconsin, Booth has single-handedly been raising a family and plying his trade pounding nails.

Booth previewed a number of the songs on this disc during his Threadgill Theatre performance at last year's Kerrville Music & Wine Festival in early September. Frankly, those songs amount to the finest memories I retain of the four-day event. The closing cut "Box Elder" is a vignette that draws you in with the simple, opening image of a branch of the tree breaking, [yet again,] the wing mirror of a passing Federal Express van. In the chorus, focusing on the life cycle of the tree, the narrator attests *"And though I know you are guilty of nothing, Except for a strong will to live in the light, You throw your seeds on the wind like a thistle."* Although the narrator addresses other events and issues in the subsequent verses, the foregoing image could allude to many species that tread a path on this planet. Booth goes on to perfectly capture a crowded drinking establishment with the lines, *"I sat down in town, At the bar full of elbows."* Engaged in a conversation, the narrator's barroom neighbour confirms that cutting back a box elder can result in them growing back *"in a power of ten."* The neighbour goes on to state that the cross of Calvary was reputedly made of box elder, while subconsciously the narrator contemplates tomorrow's events with *"A cloud of blue smoke will rise in the morning, The engine will splutter, And the chain...it will spin."* Simple images, simple events they may be.....but simple stuff works.

The gentle "Rising Star" is a song about our collective heritage as a species – *"it's where we're from, it's who we are."* The opening half of the title cut amounts to L.J.'s childhood recollection of being raised in rural Northern India where *"the ox that pulls the cart"* was the main form of transport, and the same ox drew the plough that tilled the land. The crucial point being that, despite the *real* lack of substantial resources, all visitors were made welcome and offered food and shelter. The *bridge* ends with an image of America's final hours in Vietnam, while in the second half of the song Booth's faith in mankind is reinforced as Petersen, *"...a first lieutenant, In the jungles of their home"* allows some immigrants [Vietnamese, obviously] to work a piece of his land. In spite of all the suffering that has been endured, *"The open hand....of the humble heart"* shines through.

"Crow's Couch" is an acoustic guitar only instrumental, "Western Ridge" was co-written with David Wilcox and the remaining seven cuts are a fine balance of up-tempo and gentler songs, and all with a lyrical depth that bears investigation.

Folkwax Rating 9 out of 10

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