



Chip Taylor & Carrie Rodriguez **"Red Dog Tracks"** Back Porch Records

Chip hired Carrie as his *on the road* fiddle player in 2001 following the annual Austin, Texas based South-by-South West Music Conference, and a few months later having asked her to sing at a gig this *unintentional and unlikely duo* was born. To date, the partnership has resulted in three full studio albums and last year's, mini live 'n' studio combo **"Angel Of The Morning."** Like its studio cut predecessors **"Red Dog Tracks"** was recorded by Hank Bennert, and production of the album is, once again, credited to Chip and Carrie. It's funny how uncanny connections crop up in the music world. This album was recorded at one of NYC's finest facilities, Avatar Studios [formerly Power Station], although when I first spotted the recording location in the liner booklet, I figured that it was an intentional stab at humour. Let me explain - back in 1992, a barely teen Carrie acquitted herself with great aplomb playing fiddle on her father David's self-released cassette, **"Avatars, Angels And Ashes."** For the record, in Hindu Mythology an "avatar" is a deity who descends to earth in an incarnate form. Enough said, **"Red Dog Tracks"** and its Avatar connection, is a whole other entity.....

At some point, without appearing ageist, you have to ask how the combination of a time served musician, hit songwriter and successful full-time gambler for a significant chunk of the closing decades of last century, now in his sixty-fifth year, and a Berklee College of Music graduate, barely into her mid-twenties, succeeds as a musical union. Yet it does, and in spades. And there's been more spades in the pack, with each succeeding release. Hell, it's not as if, these days, Chip needs the grief of being a guitar tottin' road warrior, nor does he probably lack a mountainous heap of \$. The latter factors, however, make this duo all the more real, since, as Townes once told us, they're doing it *"for the sake of the song."* On **"Red Dog Tracks"** Taylor remains the principle songwriter, and there's only one Taylor/Rodriguez co-write "Once Again, One Day.....Will You Be Mine." According to Chip the recording sessions lasted something like four days and most of the cuts that appear on **"Red Dog Tracks"** are first or second takes. The support players include Grammy winning guitarist Bill Frisell, *the Clark Kent of the electric guitar* according to Spin Magazine, and his regular percussionist Kenny Wollesen. The upright bass of Jim Whitney has been a consistent feature of previous Chip 'n' Carrie studio outings, while, on banjo, Richie Stearns is a time served alumni of Donna The Buffalo and The Horse Flies. And of course, we should not forget the sterling quality of Miss Rodriguez's contributions on fiddle, or Chip's guitar and harmonica playing. If anything sparked my curiosity prior to hearing this collection it was whether the diverse expertise of the session players would fuse in the confines of the Avatar? Thomas by nature, though not Thomas by name.....

Based on the contents of their previous releases, this pairings countrified approach to duet singing obviously raised the spectre of oldsters like Johnny and June, Tammy and George, even Emmylou and Gram, and has certainly proved a match for contemporaries like the Millers, Buddy & Julie. The latter list is endless, and Chip and Carrie already deserve a place in that hallowed fellowship, merely for their achievements on **"Let's Leave This Town"** and **"The Trouble With Humans."** With **"Red Dog Tracks,"** I feel the pair has set the bar at a whole new, and higher level. There are two discernible attributes that pervade this [new] disc, the first being that the tracks sound easy going. They give the impression that the various musical contributions – vocal and instrumental – quite simply fell into place without expending too much sweat or real effort. Of course making it sound simple is the hardest thing in the world to achieve in the studio, so let that be my first testament regarding **"Red Dog Tracks."** Secondly, there's a lyrical [and therefore vocal] intimacy expressed here that will make your prudish maiden aunt blush profusely if she ever draws within earshot, particularly during those moments [and there's a few] when the flame that passes back and forth between Chip 'n' Carrie, literally, burns white hot. So, strike two for my testaments.

OK here's a breakdown of the contents of **"Red Dog Tracks."** "Must Be The Whiskey," the album opener, amounts to their *Alberta Autobiography* and recalls a whole series of incidents during their most recent tour

through the Canadian province. The closing line *"Little sister's got her – sugar daddy"* sums up the lyrical spit and vinegar that underpins the musical hoedown, "Keep Your Hat On Jenny." In a nutshell, it's the sassy and intimate tale of one man, with a wandering eye [and hands], and two sisters, the older sister and man being a married couple. Devil water reappears on this disc in the opening lines of "Big Moon Shinin'," and runs to Chip's delivery *"I am a 12 year old MacAllan scotch – on the third shelf of the bar, Waitin' for you to just...drink me up,"* to which, up close and intimate, Carrie replies, *"I'm some sweet words from the sky – floatin' down from a Van Zandt star, Waitin' for you to....think me up."* Over six minutes in length "Big Moon Shinin'" is one of the aforementioned cuts that burns and burns till it's [participants are] white hot. The duo's first tilt at gospel music on **"Red Dog Tracks"** surfaces with "Oh Set A Light," in which Taylor, at one stage, offers the insight *"I have gambled for the gold – and lay with naked bodies, And spent my anger on you Lord – when you took my daddy home."* The lyric goes on to seek forgiveness, and in the chorus hints at a return to the innocence of that first earthly garden with, *"Oh set a light – see me see me, Climbin' over your garden wall."*

As I said earlier "Once Again, One Day.....Will You Be Mine" is their only collaboration as composers on this set, and in terms of the storyline the song title pretty well explains it all - forgiveness is sought by one of the parties in a relationship, after that person has been unfaithful. Taken at a slow ballad pace, Frisell's intimate and understated playing compliments what amounts to another red-hot and intimate cut. Conversational in approach, between lovers, and set to a shuffle beat "Private Thoughts" is insightful, intimate and amusing. Once again Frisell shines on guitar with a mid-song and end of song instrumental, and Chip blows some fine harmonica while Carrie's fiddle work is to die for. As for their parting shot [and offer of intimacy?] *"Come on – let's feel somethin' we'll remember in the morning"* there goes another white-hot moment. It is little wonder therefore that, immediately following, they duo has slipped in the subjectively light-hearted Clarence Williams cover, "My Bucket's Got A Hole In It." Nothing cools like a well targeted bucket full of icy water. Loose styled, the cut also gives the session players an opportunity to stretch with some improvisations on this country hit for Hank Williams [# 2] and T Texas Tyler [#] from way back in late 1949 [+]. The love song, "The Wonder Of You" another conversational piece, is book-ended by the latter cut and the Hank Snr. composition "I Can't Help It [If I'm Still In Love With You]," which gave the country music legend a # 2 hit single in the summer of 1951.

Set in Pascagoula Bay, Mississippi close to the Alabama border, the story in "Red Dog Tracks" lyrically unfolds, once again, through the medium of conversation. A dark tale of late night happenings, and a cheating lover, go and buy the album and figure out whether a murder takes place. "Elzick's Farewell" is a public domain tune that has been arranged by Carrie. It opens with Frisell noodling, for some ninety seconds, in a random fashion on guitar c/w sixties style feedback, and then evolves into a traditional sounding workout principally featuring Carrie's fiddle and Richie's banjo. Once more working in a gospel song mode, Chip penned "Son Of Man" with the intention that the gospel group, Bells of Joy, would cover it. When they deferred, he and Carrie tried it out during some live shows and got a great response. On "Son Of Man" Chip's irreverent lyric includes the chorus, *"When the Lord ain't lookin' – just sneak on in, Sit yourself down – make yourself at home, And when he asks you – the nature of your visit, Tell him "I am here to roll that stone"."* By the way, while we're pursuing this particular train of [devout] thought, check out Chip's latest web project, the Church of the Train Wreck which currently can be found at <http://www.trainwreckrecords.com/church.html> and will soon be located at <http://www.churchofthetrainwreck.org/> The second cut "Keep Your Hat On Jenny" runs out at about three and a half minutes in length, and for the same duration, "Jenny Reprise," the closing track, amounts to a fun filled, instrumental only, free for all.

Already one of my year-end "Best of" contenders, **"Red Dog Tracks"** quite simply never ceases to shine like the polished diamond that it is.

Note.

[+] – Ricky Nelson also enjoyed a # 10 Country Single with the tune in 1958.

Folkwax Rating 9 out of 10

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