



Ian Tyson **"Songs From The Gravel Road"** Vanguard Records

The gravel road in the album title, about a mile long, leads from Tyson's main house on his Longview, Alberta ranch, to the stone cottage where he has done most of his songwriting in recent decades. The road and the cottage are places of contemplation for this young septuagenarian - born September 25th 1933 in Victoria, British Columbia – and on the twelve track **"Songs From The Gravel Road,"** his first studio recording of new material for six years, Tyson not only pursues the familiar theme of the cowboy's life, but reflects on the loss of love and the state of the North American nations – for instance, in the opening cut "This Is My Sky" he muses, *"Sweet America comin' off the rails, That's what lies and money do."* As for his homeland, in "Moisture," Tyson comments *"This country never could handle success."*

Inspiration for the latter comment comes from being an observant near neighbour, while Tyson's less familiar thrust in the area of love songs is drawn from the recent breakdown of his 20 year marriage to his second wife, Twylla Dvorkin. Truth to tell, this album is a curious mixture lyrically and in terms of the overall sound. Recorded in Toronto and produced by Danny Greenspoon [Great Big Sea, Spirit of the West, Victoria Williams and Clay Tyson], apart from the presence of the in concert duo, The Two Gord's – Gord Matthews [guitar, vocals] and Gord Maxwell [bass, vocals] - on the closing pair of bonus live cuts, Tyson has employed some of the Canada's finest pop and jazz session players on the ten studio recordings. Musically speaking, the expected cowboy country edge is still present, albeit restricted to just a few songs, and as a result this set will initially confuse Tyson regulars. Listen to it a couple of times and you'll find at least a couple of outstanding additions to Tyson's oeuvre.

Tyson is equal part musician and historian, who delights in eulogising in his songs a disappearing lifestyle and the larger than life characters it creates. On his most recent recording, the live collection **"Live At Longview,"** Tyson introduced us to "Jerry Ambler" the rodeo champion. One cut on this collection focuses upon the saddle that Ambler used to win the 1946 World Saddle Bronc Riding Championship. Ambler was killed in a road accident twelve years later and "The Ambler Saddle" eventually became the property of another rodeo rider, Jim Houston, who gifted it to Bill Smith of Cody, Wyoming. On Ambler's aging saddle Smith became a three time Saddle Bronc champion [1969, 1971 and 1973, and in an illustrious career came close to taking the title on a couple of other occasions]. "The Ambler Saddle," as told by *the voice of the saddle*, is a perfect example of Tyson preserving a great and true story using song as the vehicle.

Returning for a second to the opener "This Is My Sky," Tyson partly delivers this cut as a spoken rap. The disappearance of large ranches, the once great buffalo herds, the big Alberta sky, long roads and the lonesome prairies feature in "Land Of Shining Mountains," while the introduction of the *"only girl he wanted"* who *"was bound for leaving"* isn't all that surprising considering my comment in the second paragraph. Later, "Love Without End" concludes that *"Maybe love without end, Is for God's eyes only,"* and this gentle, laid back ballad features some fine muted trumpet playing by Steve McDade. Loosely speaking, "Silver Bell" links South Texas and Alberta and is a sentimental Christmas song – *"Hang it on the little tree, Behind my momma's house,"* while in "Road To Las Cruces" the narrator takes a trip through New Mexico in search of Katherine, the queen of El Paso. The latter, and "The Ambler Saddle" are probably the best cuts here. Cindy Church shares the lead vocal on "Range Delivery" a reggae tinged remembrance of a wild child who loved to ride among *"the rocks & the rills."*

The traditional "One Morning In May" is the only cover song, in which, as per the genre norm, a married soldier and a pretty lady share an assignation. If there was an act of infidelity then the married soldier

was probably the initiator. As such, thematically, the cut pursues an undercurrent prevalent in this collection. Like "Love Without End," the up-tempo "Always Say Goodbye" and the ballad "So No More" are self-explanatory titles, you got it, inspired by the loss of love. While probably factual true, sadly the meteorologically inspired "Moisture," the penultimate [and first bonus cut] amounts to something of a throwaway piece musically. The latter tune was recorded live at East Longview Hall, as was the closing old yellow dog song "Casey's Gone." The latter pairing are possibly out-takes from "**Live At Longview**"?

As I said earlier, "**Songs From The Gravel Road**" is not your average Ian Tyson song collection....musically or lyrically. I guess heartbreak makes the creative juices flow.....

Folkwax Rating 7 out of 10

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