



Dave Gunning “Two-Bit World” self-release

In Nova Scotia where he was born and bred, recent years have seen Dave Gunning referred to as an *up and coming* young singer/songwriter. On the strength of “**Two-Bit World**,” his fourth solo recording, I’d contend that those years are now *consigned to memory* and that he has truly arrived. And then some.....

Canada has produced some truly fine songwriters in the last decade [Miles, Keelaghan, Finnan etc.], and the latest addition to that spectacular *Roll of Honour* is Dave Gunning.

In next week’s issue of Folkwax in Part 3 of the “**Color Came One Day**” interview, commenting on his approach to songwriting, Chuck Brodsky delivered the insight “*I like to make juxtapositions over what we have lost, versus what we think we’ve found.*” Gunning’s “**Two-Bit World**” opens with “The New Highway” a song that does precisely that. In the opening verse the narrator provides the historic insight “*My father came to Westville and helped to build the town, They damned near broke their backs, trying to break the ground*” and then adds “*But some dreams are not for catching, they seldom ever stay,*” a line that’s repeated in the closing verse. In the second verse the narrator fondly recalls his late mother, a tailor, and the “*burlap britches*” she made for him. The bridge [to the song] reveals that the “*mainstreet’s dark and silent*” and the coal mine has now closed, while in verse three the narrator recall his millwright brother, “*he helped me build my home,*” and the wife and two children who left because he [the narrator] couldn’t provide a “*steady income.*” With the advent of the new four lane highway, the town died, and in the closing verse, Gunning delivers the cautionary conclusion “*All things come to pass, you see it everywhere you turn, It’s just a big race to the finish line, I hope someday we’ll learn.*” “The New Highway” is one of a pair of songs, on this collection, that Gunning co-wrote with J. P. Cormier. Of course, Cormier produced Brodsky’s latest album, which makes this songwriter world an amazingly small place.

The ballad paced “Saltwater Hearts” [co-written with Fred Lavery] is a love song, that possesses a sub-text relating to disasters at sea – “*Boats afloat and shipwrecks never found, Carried chests that were buried in the ground.*” In fact the narrator could very well be one of those souls that, lost below the waves, “*forever sleep without a sound.*” Gunning quite literally takes the traditional “Pills Of White Mercury” by the *scruff of the neck*, and delivers a spirited rendition that makes the song his own. Geographically speaking, it’s set in my native North East Scotland. The opening verse mentions the River Ugie, which sheds its waters into the North Sea, on the northern outskirts of the fishing port, Peterhead. At the outset, the narrator “*spied a dear comrade, dressed in white flannel*” who had died of syphilis, a disease from which, because of his own *loose social habits* – and despite his parent’s repeated warnings, the narrator is also suffering. When Gunning introduced this song during his Kerrville 2004 mainstage set, he commented that he had first heard it performed by a Scottish band. By way of settling his affairs, in the closing verse the narrator requests “*Now get you six strong fellows to carry my coffin, Six pretty maids to bear up my pall, And give each of them a bunch of red roses, So when they pass by me they’ll not know the smell.*”

The principle character in “Let Him Be” [co-written with John Meir] is Willard Kitchener MacDonald, who was born in Somerville, Mass. in 1916. A *conscientious objector*, in 1945 Willard jumped a troop train bound for Halifax [and Europe], and despite being given a Govt. amnesty five years later, spent the remainder of his life practising self-sufficiency while living in a cabin the backwoods of Central Nova

Scotia. Known locally as the Hermit of Gully Lake, MacDonald probably passed away last winter, although the recluse's remains were only discovered in late-June 2004. Also a sometime musician, Gunning had met Willard, and considering his passing, this song is a poignant celebration of the Hermit's life.

"So I Sing," the second Cormier co-write, features the random thoughts a person who claims "*I'd rather be a flower on the wall,*" while "Parallel Lines" [co-written with Steve Bowers] is a fond recollection of young love viewed sometime later in life by one partner. That partner confirms his suspicion that the other is having an affair with "*I thought in your sleep that you mentioned him*" and, obviously confused, adds "*But I can't read your mind through these parallel lines.*" Mother Marijohn Wilkin and Danny Dill co-wrote "The Long Black Veil" back in simpler times, and it gave Lefty Frizzell a # 6 Country Hit Single in 1959. Set to an almost martial beat, Gunning gives this tale of cheating, murder and hanging, as related by the ghost of the person *hanged* [for the murder], a powerful and eloquent reading.

Dating from the 17th century "Broom O' The Cowdenknowes" is the second traditional song on "**Two-Bit World.**" As the tale unfolds, a banished sheep-herder recalls in vain his lost love, the daughter of the owner of the herd that he should have been tending. Cowdenknowes is a village located near the Scotland/England border, and broom is a yellow flowering shrub that is found all over rural Scotland. The legend goes that circa the late 18th century, in Pictou, Nova Scotia, Gunning's hometown, one of its residents was the bastard son of King George IV. The "Prince Of Pictou," who had an eye for the ladies, died at the relatively young age of 33, and in this retelling of his life in exile, the bittersweet moment comes when the lonely prince delivers the barroom toast "*I wonder....does he ever drink to me?, I wonder....does he ever think of me?*" The later song was co-written with album producer, Jamie Robinson. Remaining in Pictou, in the local graveyard, on a granite base, there's a two-foot high figure of a circus clown, Twitter Johnson. "Twitter's Song," co-written with John Meir, is a memorial in word and melody to Pictou's "*three-ring King of the carnivals and summer fairs.*" The closing cut, "Grey," which Gunning composed on his own, relates the feelings of desperation of a soldier in an undefined war. That said, the song title could lead one to think of the years 1860-1865 in a land not all that far from Nova Scotia. Could be, on the other hand.....everything's open to interpretation.

Currently this album is available on the web at <http://www.davegunning.com/generalstore.html> It's an recording that bears repeated listening and one that on each such occasion, will leave the listener *rich from the journey.*

Folkwax Rating 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood
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