

Live From 2008 Kerrville Folk Festival – Threadgill Theatre and Mainstage

Last year I penned a feature about the history, to date, of Kerrville Folk Festival live recordings **[link to the feature - <http://www.visnat.com/entertainment/music/folkwax/getarchivedfeature.cfm?featurenumber=908>]**. I rounded off the piece with a review of four of last year's releases. Here are my thoughts on a quartet of discs released during this year's main event.....

The 1977 Kerrville New Folk Songwriting Contest winners were Tim Henderson [Austin], Rick Beresford [Nashville], George Ensle [Houston], Eric Taylor [Weimar], and the late Jubal Clark [Austin] who passed away in 1997, plus Shelley McIntyre [Houston]. The judges for that year's contest were Townes Van Zandt, Steve Young and Bobby Bridger. This year Messrs. Henderson, Beresford, Ensle and Taylor reunited for an in-the-round performance at the new Threadgill Theatre on the evening of 29th May.

Henderson, who suggested the reunion to festival producer Dalis Allen last year, introduced the proceedings with *"I don't know how to say how proud I am to be standing with these three guys, and how sorry I am the fifth one ain't here. But you know it's been a hellish good time."* Over the ensuing two hours, including a short comfort break, the quartet delivered five complete rounds while indulging in some amusing between song banter. Actually Messrs. Beresford and Ensle managed to slip in a sixth song each. That's twenty-two songs all told, but who is counting.

Their Thursday evening Sundown Concert has been captured on a two disc set, with, respectively, durations of just under fifty and over seventy minutes. On Disc 1, through their songs the quartet regaled the audience with tales of an establishment that had seen better days ["Ballad Of The Beer Cafe" Beresford], carny performers ["Carnival Jim And Jean" from Taylor's 2007 solo release **"Hollywood Pocketknife"**], beloved family members ["Uncle Jack" and "Saving Me" from Ensle's **"Liveset"**] and neighbours [the "Mexican Eagle" being a humorous Tim Henderson creation]. There was even a tribute to one of the Lone Star state's culinary staples ["Chicken Fried Steak" Beresford]. Ensle introduced his unrecorded "Hillbilly Heaven Billy Bob's Backyard" with the insight that although *"Houston bred"* he now resided in *"South Austin."* He then proceeded to regale the audience with the 'un-green' tale of 'near neighbours' Bubba and Bubbette who delight in picking up junk from other local gardens and dumping it in their own. As for geographical diversity Henderson pitched in "Texas In His Ways," while Taylor transported us north to Long Island for "Manhattan Mandolin Blues."

At the outset of Disc 2, at least as far the title was concerned, Henderson journeyed even farther a field via the sad tale of "China Blue," a young mother driven to suicide. The cast list appearing in Taylor's "Hollywood Pocketknife" includes Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Robert Mitchum, Charlie Chaplin and more, as their 'one time' limousine driver recalls with '20/20 focus' their rise and, in some instances demise. Elsewhere on Disc 2 a woman recalls her youth ["Back When I Shined" Beresford], while Ensle delivered the almost self-explanatory "Everyday Heroes" and, later, "Build A Bridge" the title cut from his latest CD. Henderson, meanwhile, recalled the late Martin Luther King ["The Dreamer"] and reprised his classic "Maria Consuelo" a song that appeared on the 1981 Kerrville **"Live Highlights"** recording. Backtracking even further, Beresford's "Sweet Virginia Lace" appeared on the 1978 Kerrville release, the song having helped Rick win New Folk a year earlier. For the record, a Texan by adoption, Henderson was born in West Virginia. The penultimate cut on Disc 2 is Ensle's anthem "It's A Texas Thing" and Taylor drew the proceedings to a close with an almost five minute monologue on East Texas history, particularly relative to the Angelina River, that he segued with a heart-rending, eight minute version of "Peppercorn Tree."

Last year, due to a severe electrical storm, Michael Smith's scheduled open-air mainstage appearance on Friday 25th May was transferred to the newly covered Threadgill stage. This year on Tuesday 27th May, at the same stage, Michael performed for the first hour of a two hour midweek Sundown Concert on a bill shared with California based musician Joel Rafael.

What makes this nearly sixty minute long recording a must have for Smith aficionados is that it features a number of previously unrecorded songs. I'm referring, initially, to "Barbara Dodd" and "Tom Dundee" which open the collection. The former is a bittersweet recollection of first love – and could

easily be an outtake from “**Michael, Margaret, Pat & Kate**” one of the finest song cycles albums released during the 20th century - while the latter is a humorous tribute to a fellow, Chicago based folk musician, and Smith’s compatriot in Weavermania!

“The Princess And The Frog” is a chuckle filled, tongue twisting, contemporary fairy tale set to a brisk marching pace. Michael performed it at Threadgill last year and ‘the 2008 reprise’ was warmly received by the capacity audience. Reflections upon life and reincarnation underpin “We Become Birds” a tune that dates from “**Time**” [1993] Smith’s third and final Flying Fish. Over the years Michael has scored the music for numerous theatre productions, and “The Bees” featured in his recently completed musical interpretation of Oscar Wilde’s children’s short story “**The Selfish Giant.**” He followed with a long time personal favourite “Spoon River” – for thirty years at least, which I initially heard via the late Steve Goodman’s rendition on “**Jesse’s Jig & Other Favourites.**” Inspired by Kansas born, Illinois bred poet Edgar Lee Masters’ “**Spoon River Anthology**” [1915] Smith’s waltz paced “Spoon River” melody supports a ‘Civil War era’ movie style lyric - “*Come to the dance Mary Perkins I like you right well, The Union is preserved, if you listen you hear all the bells, There must be a heaven, God know I’ve seen mostly hell, My rig is outside, come ride through the morning in Spoon River.*” “Fear,” written by Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, appeared in her second collection **Tenura** [translates as “**Tenderness**”] [1924]. Two decades later Mistral became the first female Latin American poet to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. The narrator of “Fear,” a mother, expresses concern that her daughter is growing up, and may soon leave her. Recalling that he was a massive Kingston Trio fan during his teen years, Smith joked “*If the father, son and Holy Ghost had played the guitar like The Kingston Trio, I’d still be Catholic,*” and went on to relate that Trio founder Bob Shane had recently released a version of Michael’s “The Dutchman.” Smith then performed this folk classic c/w final verse choral support from the Kerrville audience.

Smith returned to the stage and began his encore with “I Came To See The Little Girl Dance” a Byron Cameron song that captures ‘the special magic’ that is Kerrville, and closed with his own enchanting “Such Things Are Finely Done.” Cameron a longtime supporter of folk music in Texas, and a sometime songwriter, was killed during March 1995 by a drunk driver. On his web site, recalling the 2008 Kerrville Folk Festival, Smith writes “*I got a Kerrville T-shirt, I love Kerrville, I can’t explain, you have to go there.*” God bless you Michael, precisely my sentiments....

Jud Caswell was a Kerrville New Folk Songwriting Competition winner two years back, and in my opinion the progress evident in his writing over the ensuing years has more than justified the win. Friday 23rd May saw Maine bred Caswell open that evening’s mainstage concert with the ‘New England’ themed title song from his most recent release “**Blackberry Time**” and followed with another cut - “Too Late” - the lyric portrays a relationship in crisis. Happily married, for Mothers Day this year, [by way of atoning for “Too Late”] Jud decided to pen a positive love ode for his wife. “Only You” was the result. Caswell introduced “Stocks” from “**Between The Pavement And The Sky**” [2001], as his ‘corporate evil’ tango, and moved on with “Meeting Mairghread” a melodically Celtic flavoured tale of male indiscretion that appeared on “**Lost & Found**” [2004]. Taken from the same recording, Jud wrote “Up Through The Snow” for his friend Chelsey and a Relay For Life event [+]. Returning to “**Blackberry Time,**” Caswell reprised “The Men Behind The Bushes” a stinging political indictment that he felt he had to perform one more time, because it had “*an expiration date of 20th January 2009,*” and the Mainer completed his set with “For Sale.” Returning to the stage, Caswell encored with “Holding It Together” another classic example of rustic New England portraiture.

Sara Hickman is quite simply an irrepressible bundle of fun, and her edgy live performances can feature extraordinary, not to be missed moments – while, make no mistake, Hickman adopts a ‘sledgehammer encased in a velvet glove’ approach when her lyrics focuses on ‘a serious issue’ affecting society. Sara’s 2008 mainstage Kerrville appearance on the evening of Sunday 25th May, peppered with humorous asides and expressions of compassion, was broadcast by Internet based XM Radio as part of a concert celebrating the 20th anniversary of Folk Alliance. Sara was second on the evening’s bill, 2007 New Folk Songwriting Contest winner Anthony da Costa opened the concert accompanied for part of his set by the voice and fiddle of friend Abby Gardner. Performances by Eliza Gilkyson, Kevin Welch and Tom Russell followed Hickman’s tour de force.

U Utah Phillips had passed away two days earlier, and was memorialized by Sara at the start of her set with a haunting, goose bump raising, a cappella rendition of her inspirational "It's Alright" - a song that appeared on "**Newborn**" [1999] Sara's first collection of children's music. According to Hickman she attended her first Kerrville festival at the age of seventeen, "*eighteen years ago*" and then broke into "Shadowboxing" from "**Necessary Angels**" [1994]. Supported by vocalist Kristen DeWitt, Sara strummed her acoustic guitar ala Pete Townshend and delivered an explosive interpretation of "Necessary Angels" a tune that finally appeared on her 500 copy limited edition self-release "**One Flower To The Left**" [2000].

Since October last year Hickman has been involved in the year long **Music For Life** concert tour of Texas. Sub-titled **Sharing Conversations on the Death Penalty**, Hickman hopes that the event will generate discussion about the state's continuing use of the death penalty, and brought the 'issue' to the attention of the Quiet Valley Ranch audience by performing the Tricia Mitchell/Monte Warden co-write "20 Years To Life" from her double album "**Motherlode**" [2006]. Hickman prefaced "Joy" with the insight that a homeless woman she met in Dallas, her inspiration, had been "*one of the happiest people I've ever had the privilege to know,*" and followed with "Life" from "**Spiritual Appliances**" [2000]. Inviting the audience to sing along – from a lyric sheet that had been left on the benches in the arena - Hickman performed the unrecorded "It's Later Than You Think." Subjectively speaking the lyric rebukes America's leaders for their warmongering, advocating that it fuels homeland poverty and more. Sara completed her set with "I Wish You Well" from her third collection of children's songs "**Big Kid**" [2003]. Dipping into "**Motherlode**" once again, supported vocally by DeWitt, Hickman encored, and climaxed, her Kerrville 2008 performance with an outrageous rendition of Amy Rigby's "Are We Ever Gonna Have Sex Again." It was all simply too much fun. By the way, did I tell you about the multi-coloured bouncing balls that, at the outset, Hickman launched into the audience....well, maybe another time.

Note.

[+] – Relay For Life is a charity that raises funds for the American Cancer Society to fight the disease and generate awareness of cancer prevention and treatment [<http://www.relayforlife.org/relay/>].

Arthur Wood
Kerrville Kronikles 07/08
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