



Peter Mulvey **"The Knuckleball Suite"** Signature Sounds Recording Company

If there's one thing that I've learned about Peter Mulvey since first hearing **"The Trouble With Poets,"** circa 2000, the listener is constantly going to be challenged by his lyrics and his intended meaning. In an era when the American nation is politically and economically separated by a cavernous divide, Mulvey's **"The Knuckleball Suite"** attempts to show us what we've lost. In the process he invokes, by name and achievement, historic world figures, many being American, their common bond being they were [mostly] upright citizens. Infer what you will from the latter sentence, regarding our current day "torch bearers"! Peter has also added some fictional Americans to the melange. Furthermore this Milwaukee, Wisconsin based song poet has proved in the past, via his compositions, that there is a part of his persona that will forever be Irish, and the Emerald Isle is referenced on a few occasions in this thirteen track song cycle.

Before we delve into those songs individually, let's examine the word knuckleball. A baseball term, dating from early last century, it refers to a baseball pitch where the spin of the ball is deliberately minimised. Because the ball in flight lacks spin its path is unpredictable. So welcome to **"The Knuckleball Suite"** a musical collection that is built on the premise, *"What direction, musically, is Mulvey going to go on the next cut?"*

Thornton Wilder's three act play **"Our Town,"** spanned the years 1901/1913, and was set in the fictional New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners. By the third act, Simon Stimson, the choir director/organist had passed, having taken his own life. It appears that Simon's weakness was the spirit in the bottle, although it was with a rope around his neck that he drew his final breath. If that's the background, you had better be alert at the outset of "Old Simon Stimson" because it kicks off with a [very] loud electric guitar solo. Stimson's name only appears in the opening line of the opening verse, and while there is a later reference that *"the bottle empties quick these days,"* as this song unfolds you get the impression Mulvey is recalling his early career as a guitar carrying, road warrior - *"Once I could get by on the forty dollar door, In a car all made of duct tape, on a pallet on the floor"* - while there's a sure-fire twinkle in his eye as he delves into a series of poetic, sometimes incompatible, images – for instance, *"ferocious as a lamb"* and *"Stormy as a teacup."* The Abilene in "Abilene [The Eisenhower Waltz]" is a reference to the city of that name in Kansas. Although Ike was born during 1890 in Denison, Texas his family settled in Abilene in 1892 and was there that he grew up and graduated high school. The song's narrator, a present day truck driver, gives thanks for Ike's post WWII vision of linking the nation with interstate highways [*]. Reflecting on the current state of the nation, the trucker offers *"Oh God bless you, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Though this is not our finest hour, Highwaymen have made off with your creed."* The lyric also references Ike's April 1953 "Cross of Iron" speech that, thematically, focused on maintaining peace in the world.

If the title "The Fly" appears familiar it's because the song was made famous by Irish rock band U2. With a lyric by vocalist Bono, and music credited to U2, the song appeared on their album **"Achtung Baby"** [1991]. Characterised by an electronically generated almost industrial sounding backdrop when performed by this Dublin, Ireland based quartet, "The Fly" became a # 1 Pop single in the UK, but only reached # 61 in the U.S. chart. Here, Mulvey interprets the melody as a jazzy shuffle, while delivering his vocal in an up-close confessional style. Pursuing further an Irish theme, in the lyric to the pop driven "Girl In The Hi-Tops," which immediately follows, Mulvey recalls a post-gig conversation with a young woman, about poetry and literature and the fact that she was planning to live in Dublin for a year. Back in 2001 Mulvey delivered the "live in Boston underground" collection **"Ten Thousand Mornings"** and the fifth cut here is titled "You And Me And The Ten Thousand Things." Sung over another jazz based shuffle,

Mulvey suggests in the opening verse that the world is going to “hell in a hand basket,” and over the ensuing four verses, and the bridge that evenly divides that quartet, Peter offers some amusing insights into the contradictions of life. Humorously, Mulvey has a Roman Emperor and a Chinese philosopher, who lived four centuries apart, “*Set sail in a sieve on the ocean blue,*” while in the century just ended Irishman [Samuel Barclay] Beckett could have met the older Norwegian [Edvard] Munch for “*martinis and lunch,*” but the contention that they would have endlessly “*laughed*” during their visit seems like another instance of Peter devilishly looking at the listener, then casually winking. Midway through the ensuing “Horses” there’s a sublime acoustic guitar, percussion and swirling keyboard instrumental break.

Lyrically “Thorn” is part travelogue [Wailing Wall, the Barrier Reef], and part snapshot of the narrator’s favourite things [a stand of willows, a little jewelbox]. While the locations and things seem unconnected in the first and second verse, in the closing verse Mulvey invokes Aesop’s Androcles and the turning of the seasons with “*You my little thorn, You my lion’s paw, You my lonely winter playground, You my April thaw.*” Co-written by Mulvey, album producer David Goodrich, and Tim Gearan, a brisk walking blues pace is maintained throughout the song of praise to “Lila Blue.” In “Marty And Lou” the August 2004 theft of Munch’s painting “The Scream” is referenced, while each of the three verses closes with the obtuse “*these days it’s all about the monkeys.*” Co-written by Mulvey and another Milwaukee based musician, Paul Cebal, “Brady Street Stroll” is a tribute to a road near Cebal’s home in the Cream City, while the album title track delivers a sketch of life in a small town America bar. A blues rap set to a solid and urgent backbeat, the almost five-minute long “The Fix Is On,” penned by Mulvey and Goodrich, closes with a two-minute long slide guitar work out. In the short closing cut “Coda: Ballymore” there’s mention of the [River] Liffey which eventually reaches the sea at Dublin – “*just a little river out in Ballymore,*” and of Oscar Wilde’s Paris, France burial place. As for Wilde’s birthplace, of Anglo-Irish stock, this playwright, poet, novelist and short story writer was born in Dublin. Connections, connections, connections.....that’s the nature of this knuckleball.

Note.

[*] – While serving in Germany during WWII, Eisenhower noted how Germany’s autobahn system aided the rapid movement of large numbers of troops and vehicles.

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 03/06.