



Ralston **"Carwreck Conversations"** Soft Butter Records

Ralston Bowles is his full name, and he's from West Michigan. Following Pierce Pettis' lead, Ralston opens this disc, his solo debut, with a Mark Heard song - "What Kind Of Friend." The lyric poses a number of questions concerning the nature of friendship in terms of truth or deceit, and the late Mark Heard [1951 - 1992] included the tune on his 1991 Fingerprint album **"Second Hand."**

Contemplation of the *main* liner photograph and the album title **"Carwreck Conversations,"** obviously excluding the foregoing opening cut, raised the possibility that this could be a thematic selection of tunes. Not so. The long and short of the title is that the two words arrive in the second cut, "You Already Knew That." It's a tale of a couple that is splitting up, presented in terms of a *car-wreck*. In the opening line Bowles intones *"Better call an ambulance, I think there may be need,"* and hell if he doesn't go on to lose his girl - *"You just left me for the medic."* By way of respite from the electrical sound-storm that closes "You Already Knew That," "What About Me" is an acoustic guitar picked ballad in which the narrator comes off as a somewhat shy, retiring individual who enquires *"Will I ever know romance?"* and *"Should I just take a chance?"* It appears at the age of thirteen, many years ago, *"Christmas gained new meaning, When a mistletoe hung season, Left this young heart dismayed."* Since then it seems that his encounters with the fairer sex have amounted to, well, nada.

Set to an initially choppy backbeat, the narrator in "Everybody But You" poses the question, at the end of each of the three verses and in the chorus - to his sweetheart, I guess? - *"Everybody wants something from me but you."* As this three-minute track draws to a close it lapses into a thirty second long, Bo Diddley style electric guitar work out. "James Dean" finds Bowles [that narrator] driving the road where the movie star breathed his last, and he goes on to enquire, *"When I go will it be like James Dean? I don't want to die slow."* The May Jean in the middle verse is a reference to Ralston's hospitalised mother - *"Her mind takes short vacations as she stares at the wall"* - who passed as he was completing the song.

A Springsteenish sounding organ supports Bowles throughout the ballad "Fragile," a song of apology by the narrator for any harsh words or pain that might have been inflicted. It's not often that the word *syllogism* turns up in a song lyric, but Ralston's portrait of the practically unattainable "Grace" proves an exception to that rule. Fond boyhood memories of excitement and wonder are explored in "One More Holiday" as a youngster rides the L in Chicago, his pockets stuffed full of mints - *"To stay my mischief bent when patience came untied."* Although the "you" in the line *"One more holiday, with you"* isn't defined, I'd surmise that it was his beloved parents. The album closes with "Draper," a song that features a number of religious references.

Meantime this album is available on the web from Ralston's web site at <http://www.ralstonbowles.com/music/>

Folkwax Rating 7 out of 10

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