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Peter Ostroushko

THE MANDO BOY

Arthur Wood sketches the career of Peter Ostroushko

At 21, fiddle and mandolin guru Peter Ostroushko undertook his first studio session, adding a mandolin break to a Bob Dylan album. Although there's never been a liner credit, that's precisely what took place in Minneapolis during the closing days of 1974 – the song *If You See Her Say Hello*, the album *Blood On The Tracks*. The latter piece of minutia barely scratches the surface of a three decade long, multi-faceted caree that this native of Minnesota has carved for himself.

Born Peter Vasilyovitch Ostroushko, to Ukrainian born parents, music was an essential element of family and community gatherings. His father, Vasyl Petrovich [Bill], a shoemaker, was also a mandolin player and staunch preserver of the Ukrainian culture. "My dad was captured at the Battle of Stalingrad. After the war, my parents met in a detention camp in Austria. They were given the choice if going back to the Ukraine or moving on. At that time Stalin decreed that if you had been captured you were an enemy of the state."

Aged five, Peter developed an interest in playing his father's instrument. He played bass in a succession of blues influenced, garage bands during his mid-teens. A few years later, Ostroushko became involved with a youth theatre group. Then, discovering the recordings of Norman Blake in the early seventies, Peter subsequently befriended the musician and later toured and recorded with Blake and his wife, Nancy. "Their music had a profound influence on me. I learned a lot from being in their presence. That helped, particularly later on, when I began composing."

By the mid-'70s, Peter was working on Garrison Keillor's radio variety show *Prairie Home Companion*, and served as its musical director through the first half of the '80s. "I had played many styles of music by that time. Part of my job was to research the recordings of guests and come up with music that they could play together. Writing with Garrison was very easy and inspirational. It was an incredible learning curve for me."

Peter's solo recording debut, *Sluz Duz Music*, appeared on Rounder in 1985. "Sluz Duz is something that my mother used to say, meaning one sandwich short of a full picnic basket." *Down The Streets In My Old Neighbourhood* appeared the following year, and yearning once more for the life of a touring musician, Ostroushko left Keillor's show and took The Mando Boys, a quartet regaled in fezzes and sunglasses, on the road. The name had been invented for a *Prairie Home Companion* musical skit. Their only, self-titled release appeared on the Red House label. "Bob Feldman had been after me for some time to do a record." Two solo albums followed. Eight years ago, Peter formed a still active, performing partnership with guitarist Dean Magraw, and in due course a collection titled *Duo* appeared.

Diversity has been the cornerstone of Peter's career. In 1987 he began performing with the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra and during the ensuing decade he also worked with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Commissions to compose music, for theatre and television productions, became a regular feature of his annual workload during the late '80s.

In 1995 Ostroushko produced a ten-track instrumental disc entitled *Heart Of The Heartland*. Bemused ambivalence best describes Peter's reaction to the "Acoustic Album Of The Year" NAIRD award the album gained. "I don't usually follow those things. It's not like winning the Nobel Peace Prize, although I know it's a big deal and wonderful to be recognised by your peers in the recording industry." Apart from *Nicaragua: Prelude And Dance*, the track titles place the recording firmly within the landmass of North America. "A good many of the pieces on *Heart Of The Heartland* were written for theatre productions. And television. I never thought I would bother recording them in another setting or even want to play them on stage. Once I thought about that for a little bit, it struck me that it was music I really liked. The common thread that ran through the pieces was one of place. The heartland is a mythical place. You can't find it on a map. The way I interpreted it is that, basically, the heartland is also a spiritual place inside each one of us. Even though the titles were not what people would think of as the geographical heartland of North America – *Nicaragua* was the exception – they came from the same spiritual well." Consciously or unconsciously, as well as place, the melodies evoke the elements of memory and reconciliation that we each carry through life. "I discovered that I had come upon something that obviously was touching people in ways that I had never thought of."

"With the first recording finished, I was excited by the direction the music was going. I immediately started thinking about the next album." It was at this stage, Peter decided there would be a trio of albums that shared the theme of people and the land. *Pilgrims On The Heart Road* contained ten Ostroushko songs. "I didn't want

another record with similar style and content. I had written songs before and that makes me a songwriter. I don't think of myself as a songwriter, I think of myself more as a composer. A composition can have words or not." His lyrics certainly broadened the heartland panorama. *Mandela* and *Down On The Plain Of Reeds* being prime examples. While the inspiration for the former is obvious, the latter touchingly assuages the wounds inflicted upon the American psyche by the Vietnam conflict. At concerts, Ostroushko has lost count of the occasions veterans have asked which unit he served in. He didn't.

The third and final part of the cycle, *Sacred Heart*, purely instrumental in content, was released in early 2000. *Sacred Heart* is the name of a small town that lies one hundred miles west of Minneapolis. "I've driven through it many times. I don't have any connection to it other than I love that prairie part of Minnesota."

Peter's father died in 1991. His recollections of Vasyl Petrovich's life and spirit are captured in *Even The Ravens Mourn Over You*, *Three Crows* and *Sloboda*. Of the latter cut, Ostroushko comments in the sleeve note, "One of my great joys is knowing my father lived long enough to see an independent Ukraine." He told me, "My father hated communism. His family owned a farm and the communists came and said, 'This isn't yours anymore.' What kept him going was that they had done this great injustice." That said, Ostroushko performed in Moscow last year. "That was an incredible experience. I was afraid to go. I was absolutely terrified. When I was growing up the Russians were my enemies. I felt like I was flying into the camp of the enemy. Basically what I found out was, these are just my people. It was like a homecoming for me."

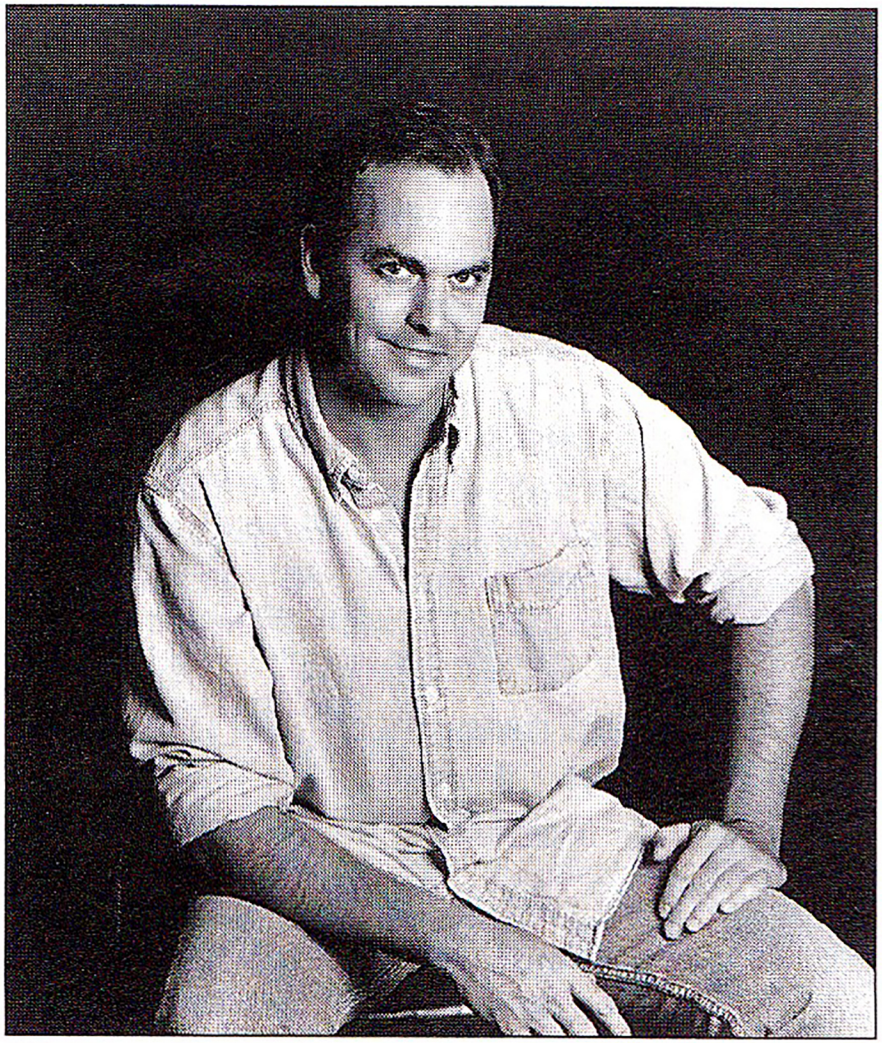
☛ **Claudia Russell *Song Food*** (Radio Rhythm Records RRR10004) A spirited voice, one dozen songs – eight covers and four originals, some slow and smoky late night blues, a little soul and some country and western swing set in an acoustic framework. PO Box 661899, Los Angeles, California 90066, USA

Anne Dodson *Against The Moon* (Beech Hill Music BH105d) Sing-a-long-everyone-join-in-floor-spot-folk singer. Forgettable, though the diction was great. Beech Hill Music, PO Box 14, Camden, ME 04843, USA

Karen Westerhout *Out The Other Side* (own label) A voice, an acoustic guitar and fourteen songs of depressing melancholy, which according to the press release constitute "the debut album from an absolute beginner." And that's the truth. 10 Gottfried Mews, London NW5 2HN.

Clay Greenberg *Tumbleweed* (Home Grown Music HGMCG1001) Someone once wrote "there are thirteen hundred and fifty two guitar pickers in Nashville." Greenberg is just another run of the mill member of that brigade. tumbleweeds@midspring.com

Clay Greenberg: No. 1353



☛ **Patrick McGuigan *Angina*** (Elefantsongs ES2000) Instrumentally stripped to the bone, apart from the occasional use of viola, this world traveller delivers some interesting and introspective, slightly bluesy, songs. 1085 Ocean Avenue, New London, CT 06320, USA.

ARTHUR WOOD: *fRoots* contribter, *Kerrville Kronikle*