

Mark Erelli – The “Hillbilly Pilgrim” Interview

Part 1 – Mark talks about the concept and making the “Hillbilly Pilgrim” album

The Where And The When

The Mark Erelli interview took place by phone on Thursday January 8th 2004. Mark was at home in Boston, Mass. and I was in Birmingham, England. My thanks go to Flora Reed at Signature Sounds Recordings for setting up the interview.

Folkwax : History will judge “Hillbilly Pilgrim” as your western swing album. Have you secretly been a fan of western swing for some time.

Mark Erelli : I’ve had somewhat limited exposure to it, but everything I’ve heard I’ve always really liked. I like the musicianship first and foremost. I think western swing, very early on, had some of the best musicians in popular music. Over time I came to appreciate the tongue-in-cheek lyrics. Most people don’t think of western-swing when they think of good lyrics. If you don’t judge them on the same yardstick as say Bob Dylan, then they are fun. Sometimes there’s nothing wrong with having a little bit of fun. So that’s the kind of stuff that’s drawn me to western swing over the years.

FW : And having penned the songs, you already knew they material explored that genre.

ME : Oh yeah, I had a bunch of songs written, probably about two records worth. One record was very serious, sign of the times and socio-politically minded. In between writing all these *heavier* songs, I wrote western swings songs just to clear my brain. If I was travelling on an airplane, and wanted to pass the time, I’d try and write these little, funny country songs to amuse myself. I was going to go with the political album, but I didn’t really know what I wanted to do musically.

FW : You mean in terms of the sound.

ME : Yeah, and because I’d done three records with a lot of the same musicians. I love playing with those guys. I didn’t know if I should use some combination of those guys again, or what. I wasn’t really sure of whether it should rock, or whether it should be kind of folkier. I went to Jim Olson at Signature and said, *“I’ve got this serious record I want to do, with all my own songs, as opposed to “Memorial Hall” which was a lot of covers. Then, after that, if you’ll let me, I’d like to this kind of really fun western swing, kind of hillbilly record.”* I knew exactly whom I wanted to use for the second record. *“But that will be after this serious record,”* I said. Jim said, *“Well, it sounds like you really know what you want to do for the western swing record, but not for the other record.”* I said *“Yeah, that’s true,”* so he said *“Why don’t you do the western-swing record first.”* I said, *“Well I thought you’d want a serious record, that’s why I thought I’d have to like, convince you to let me do it.”* He said *“You just did a serious record”* [Laughs]. He felt that “Memorial Hall” was a more serious record. I guess a lot of people did. Being involved in the recording of it, having it be so much fun, I didn’t really get that impression. Once I looked at it that way, I said *“OK, I’ve earned the right to have a little bit of fun.”* So I just went ahead and made the western swing record. It turned out to be much easier I think, than had I gone the other way.

FW : In my album review of “Hillbilly Pilgrim” your take on western swing lyrics is an issue I highlight, certainly in relation to particular songs. That said, what has certainly underpinned every album you’ve recorded, is good writing.

ME : Well thank you. That’s the goal. To me, good writing can be so many different things. It can rear its head in so many genres. You’d never say there’s only good songwriting in folk, or there’s good songwriting in rock’n’roll, I think there’s good songwriting in every genre. In that respect, as long as the songs are good, it doesn’t really matter what musical context you’re working in, as long as it serves the song. I have plenty of songs that I could have tried to jam into this country format that would not have worked, including “The Only Way” that I wrote about September 11th - there was talk of putting it on this record, but it did not fit musically or lyrically. It would have weakened the record, even though I think it’s a strong song.

FW : Pursuing the western swing writing issue further, I think you've honoured the style and tradition, and I think you have also placed your own individual stamp on the genre. In other words, you've created western swing songs with intelligent lyrics.

ME : Thank you very much. That's a huge compliment. I guess looking back, in hindsight that might have been what I was trying to do. Halfway through the process of preparing to make the record, I was very resistant to calling it a western swing record. I was telling people *"It's the next Mark Erelli record. It's just the next record by me. It's not anything this, or anything that."* Then I got over that. They'd say, "OK, well how would you explain it?" and for a time I'd go *"Well it's kind of singer/songwriter meets western swing."* Eventually I got tired, and said *"You know what, it's a western swing record."* [Laughs].

FW : Sounds like there was a short period of self-denial.

ME : Well, there's always is. I'm always trying to find ways to talk about what I do. I never really feel like I accurately convey it. Other people will tell me things about my music after they listen to it, and I'll go *"God, that's exactly what I wish I could say about it."*

FW : You need some distance from the creative process. That's something that you will never have, because you are way too close to each song you wrote. In addition, what each song means to you in terms of its birth, development and growth, as opposed to somebody that hears the end product – most times folks will get *"it"* [ie. what the song is about], but they'll never get 100% of what the writer knows. In some instances, the listener will even have his own take on a song.

ME : That's preferred, you know. I think that in most cases the core of what I'm trying to get across comes across. Maybe how that fits into the context of other people's lives, leaves them to interpret it with slightly different shades of grey, if you will. That's what making music is all about. I don't want to make a song that just means one thing to everybody, it would be nice if people could come and take them into their lives and personalise them.

FW : One thing that fascinated me about **"Hillbilly Pilgrim,"** is that for three straight albums Lorne Entress has been your producer. On this occasion you've co-produced the recording with Lorne. Was that a conscious decision from the outset, or did it just pan out that way.

ME : It was. This time I took charge of certain tasks, preparing to record, that Lorne normally did. When we got together to rehearse with the band I recorded the rehearsals, and I would go home and listen to all the key moments on the rehearsal tapes. I would burn CD's of the relevant parts of the rehearsals for the band and stuff, and sent them out to the guys. I helped do the scheduling and other stuff. I had a lot more arrangement ideas this time, than in the past. I think that's why I wanted to have my name on there as co-producer. It should be said that any kind of production ethic that I brought would have been in addition to Lorne's normal, full commitment to the project. He's always been amazing, and amazes me still. He has endless amounts of ideas, and endless patience for making sure things are as good as they can be and that the magic is there. Any kind of co-producing credit – it's not like half and half. It's more like Lorne's full percent and then I brought whatever I could to the table in addition to that.

FW : Why did you record this album at Wellspring Studios, because apart from **"Memorial Hall"** [#] you've previously recorded at Signature's studios.

ME : We recorded at Wellspring because of an engineer that we used to mix **"Memorial Hall."** His name is Huck Bennert and he mostly records at Wellspring Sound in Acton, Mass. We wanted to work with him because we loved mixing the **"Memorial Hall"** record with him. He's really quick and really musical. Signature, the way it is set up, it would be very hard to accommodate a large group of players playing at the same time. It's nearly impossible. For my first two Signature records, we only ever had four guys playing at the same time. That was pretty do-able there. But, when you have six people playing at the same time and you want to make sure that certain people are isolated sonically, but you can still see each other and everything, you really need a bigger space. Wellspring has a nice big live room with some isolation booths off to the side of it. The architecture of the studio just made more sense for this band.

FW : Presumably your whole idea with cutting a western swing album, was to cut it live.

ME : Oh yeah. Sure. Western swing is all about instrumental interplay and I wanted everybody to have a chance to cut the basic track live playing with each other, so that we could get some of that magic down on tape.

FW : Can we talk about the band for a minute. Obviously Lorne did all the drumming. As for the Spurs, where did you stumble across them.

ME : They are an underground band around here. If you talk to any roots musician in Boston and ask them, *"Who are some of the best country musicians around town?"* I think they would tell you The Spurs. They don't play out very much. There are six of them and they all have day jobs and kids, but we didn't need two of the guys. They have this very musically specific band ethic, such that The Spurs is like a very straight up, kind of western swing band and then various sub-sets of the group form these other groups that are devoted entirely to different genres [Laughs]. There's a blues group, a surf band and a bluegrass band. There's an absolutely incredible rockabilly trio. Between the six of them, I think they have something like twenty something different working bands. .

FW : How many years have they been together.

ME : The Spurs have been together for six years. They've each been in the Boston roots scene for twenty years. They've all come to music in different ways. The steel player [Frankie Blandino] is the main, kind of, genre mastering guy. He'll go and master blues and become a really good blues player. The fiddle player [Rich Dubois] has been playing ever since he was a kid. He has backed up some of the country greats like, Hank Thompson when he was touring in his later years and using pick-up bands. The bass player [Johnny Sciascia] grew up just outside of Boston, actually in the same town I did. I don't know how he found rockabilly, but he's kind of the rockabilly guy. The guitar player [Jerry Miller] is a genius. He can play any instrument and grew up in Nashville hanging out around the studios on Music Row. As an eight year old he sat in on sessions and watched Chet Atkins produce. As he grew older, the engineers would say *"Hey kid, pick up that guitar I want hear it through that microphone."* Apparently in those days Nashville was a very open place and you could wander into a studio. So these guys have really grown up playing this music to a certain extent – especially Jerry, and I think it really shows. Their default musical genre is that classic country swing style. I think in the end it comes out sounding much more natural. In their live shows The Spurs do a lot of songs about drinking, while I've gone and cut a whole western swing record with hardly any references to drinking [Laughs].

FW : Well drinking, cheating and driving trucks. That's the formula.

ME : I know, I look at the subject matter and beyond love there's hardly none of the country clichéd subject matter in there. No dogs are dying or anything, it's kind of amazing to me.

FW : From what I hear about the time you spent in the studio recording **"Hillbilly Pilgrim,"** you even beat the three and a half days it took to record **"Memorial Hall."**

ME : I did. We spent a little more time mixing this one. In the studio, times are tough and it's hard to spend a lot of money making a record, when there's no guarantee you are going to make it back. The way I've made the last two records is that I've paid for them and then I've licensed them to Signature Sounds. If it were Signature's dime I probably would have spent a little more time making the record. We did it in three days. I would have liked maybe, four or five, so that things were a little more leisurely. I don't think I'm going to try and beat it and go for two days next time. That's for sure [We both laugh].

FW : Presumably you're thoroughly happy with what you managed in three days.

ME : Oh yeah. I mean I'm amazed at what we got done. They were three long days. Lorne has already said to me *"Don't come to me and ask me to try and do a record in less than three days"* [Laughs].

FW : Once this new album is in the stores, are you doing any gigs with The Spurs.

ME : Oh yeah. At the end of January there's some album release shows. In Northampton and Boston, and something in New York. Hartford, Connecticut as well. I'm also doing a few shows with Johnny on upright bass and Jerry on electric guitar, to see how that works.

To be continued

Footnotes.

[#] – The “**Memorial Hall**” album was recorded [and the sessions were filmed] in the Memorial Hall in the town of Monson, Mass.

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