



John Stewart **"The Day The River Sang"** Appleseed Recording Company

John Stewart has been a recording artist for well over four and a half decades, initially with The Cumberland Three, he went on to spend seven fruitful years with The Kingston Trio, followed by almost three decades as a solo artist. The headcount of his official solo releases during the latter period is now well over two dozen, while, with the arrival of CDR's [and DVD] his catalogue of unofficial releases simply exploded in terms of output [\$], having begun with cassette-only release **"Secret Tapes 1"** [+] during his 1986 U.K. tour. The thirteen-song collection **"The Day The River Sang"** is his fourth consecutive release on Appleseed Recordings, and label owner Jim Musselman, an avid Stewart fan, has penned the liner notes.

With an agile hop and a skip and supported by John Hoke's solid drum beat, Stewart kicks off **"The Day The River Sang"** with "Baby, It's You," a sixties style folk/pop sounding number that recalls how a young man once fell in love at the Nightingale Dance – *"When I'm still in the spell, Of the night I first fell."* Composers have long found inspiration in the endless ribbon of blacktop below and the sky blue curtain above, and "Jasmine" is Big John's latest report from the road, *"Oh here comes I'll find you, my friend, In roses and canyons, And night blooming jasmine still grow."* "East Of Denver" replete with a female chorus brings to mind such early solo career Stewart highlights as "Chilly Winds" and "Josie."

The album title cut opens with allusion *"They were travellers in the night, The ones who hold the light"* [the lyric booklet states *"There are travellers....."*] and to my mind the foregoing hints at those leaders who held out *"the Promise"* and whom we lost in the handful of years post the appearance of the Stewart era Kingston's collection **"The New Frontier"** [1962]. Throughout the song there's repeated reference to *"the Promise,"* as well as mention of events [ancient and contemporary?] such as *"The day the cripple stood, By the man who said he would,"* while man's exploration of other world's could be inferred from *"We can almost touch the stars, Like the moon in our back yard."* Stewart's "Run The Ridges" first surfaced during March 1963 on the Kingston Trio's Capitol Records release **"# 16."** This "back to basics" interpretation of what is basically a wild western themed number, simply features John's voice and guitar, while, appropriately, four decades on the lyric includes the lines *"And we will run the ridges, Of our green land Tennessee, And we will hide for **forty** years, If that's what's meant to be."* Co-written with his wife Buffy Ford, in the gentle and atmospheric "New Orleans" the narrator expresses regret at not having wandered the streets and alleys of the Crescent City, soaking up its history, architecture, music and atmosphere, prior to the recent Hurricane Katrina induced floods. By way of introducing "Golden Gate Fields," a waltz tempo recollection of a simpler time, its worth furnishing the insight that John's father was a racehorse trainer, and while still a youngster he was thoroughly familiar with locations such as this Albany, California racetrack and the "junkies and jockeys" who inhabited that world. Ace lens man Henry Diltz [Modern Folk Quartet], a long time buddy of Stewart's, blows some harp on this track.

When I first heard the female support vocal on "Amanda Won't Dance," rhythmically speaking it's "the twin" of "Baby, It's You," I thought that the female backing vocalist was Buffy, but it turned out to be solo recording artist Kate Wallace. Stewart's voice and guitar are supported by John Hoke's melancholic sounding keyboard cello on "Sister Mercy," wherein the song's narrator calls upon Sister Mercy for aid – *"It seems I lost directions, And I've always had them down"* - in these troubled times. "Broken Roses," a road song about love and loss, also possesses a melancholic undercurrent and closes with the summation *"Broken roses, withered dreams,"* while "Naked Angel On A Star-Crossed Train" is a tribute to Big John's creative muse. In the lyric to "Midnight Train" Stewart takes a side-swipe at "guess who" with *"El Presidente doesn't care,"* reaffirms his target in the line *"El Presidente has two daughters"* – the

twins Barbara and Jenna, and closes out with a reference to “Speedo” the late 1955 hit single for The Cadillac’s, a NYC R&B group led by Earl Carroll. “Speedo” opened with *“They often call me Speedo but my real name is Mister Earl,”* while John paraphrases *“They used to call me Speedo, But my real name is Mr. Earl, When I see my baby, She says “Who the hell is Mister Earl?”* Curiously, the lyrically obtuse album closer “Slider” is neither credited on the rear tray insert or the liner booklet as track 13, or even as a Bonus Cut.

Once upon a time, circa the nineteen-seventies and into his hit scoring era of the early eighties, I used to hang on every word that Stewart wrote and sang. I’ll even acknowledge that during that period there was a preponderance of lyrics that thematically hung on the subjects of *“horses”* – as I said, his father was a trainer of thoroughbreds, *“fire,” “wind”* and *“stars”* – the heavenly sort, since John is a space exploration enthusiast, but they nevertheless possessed a magic that time will never dim. These days Stewart’s once crisp tenor is a pale shadow of its former glory, although there are occasions here where his words paint real life pictures that resonate with familiarity.

Note.

[\$] – Easily over a dozen cassettes and CD’s.

[+] - **“Secret Tapes 1”** and **“Secret Tapes 2”** [1987] are now available on CDR from <http://shop.californiabloodlines.com/shop.html>

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

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