

DANNY SCHMIDT

The MAN OF MANY MOONS



Photos © RODNEY BURSIEL

I interviewed Austin-based Danny Schmidt a few days before the February 8 release of his sophomore album for the Minneapolis based imprint Red House Records. In the opening sentence of my five star (April 2011 MAVERICK) review of the album I wrote: 'To all intents MAN OF MANY MOONS could be a Danny Schmidt solo live recording, such is the intentional stripped-bare sonic presentation.' While the latter is true, what shines through on Schmidt's ten original compositions, some old and some brand spanking new, is the adept manner in which this Texan has created diverse scenarios while remaining true to the album's central theme—personal commitment in all its forms. Completing the album is a rendition of the popular, three and a half decade old, Bob Dylan tune *Buckets Of Rain*.

MAN OF MANY MOONS was recorded at Blue Rock Artist Ranch & Studio in Wimberley. If you were to imagine a little piece of acoustic music heaven had fallen to earth, Blue Rock would certainly qualify. An old garrison site located on a bluff overlooking the Blanco River, Blue Rock lies some forty miles south-west of Austin. Musician Billy Crockett and his wife Dodee completed this recording/performance facility and home a handful of years ago. Here's how Danny stumbled across this exquisite piece of paradise. 'I'd heard it was a very nice place. I went out there during SXSW two years ago and I was blown away. It way exceeded my expectations. The anniversary of Blue Rock opening falls during SXSW week in Austin. With so many music industry people from around the country in town that weekend, as the Blue Rock legend grows, a lot of people who have heard about it are interested to see it—Blue Rock use their birthday weekend as an opportunity to have an open house and a concert.'

Focusing specifically on the recording studio Danny reflected: 'It has the highest end technical specs. I'd ever seen.' He added: 'It's

so obvious how much attention they paid to the spiritual feel of the place, the way that every rock and stone is placed in the walls. The whole thing is done with great intention. It felt much more spiritual than I imagined it would.'

I wondered why the Austinite had decided to record at Blue Rock. 'The genesis of the whole thing was that after looking over the material I had, it was apparent to me that they were simpler songs and more folkie. Pretty quickly, in my head, I began thinking about early Townes records—a very simple production that allowed the songs to speak for themselves. They were very warm and appealing, because there wasn't orchestration present to hook people's ears. Then I started thinking about Blue Rock, because I knew—or at least I suspected—that studio would have the best chance of the album sounding really impeccable.'

Something like ten times a year the main room at Blue Rock becomes a concert venue. Danny Schmidt performed there last January. 'That was my first experience working with their chief engineer, who ended up being extremely involved in the album project. For most of the time it was only me and Keith [Gary]. He is an extremely pleasant guy to work with—very professional. Besides all the concrete stuff about what gear is available in the studio, the next most important thing is the relationship you have with the people you are working with—and if it's comfortable. Meeting Gary when I played that concert reinforced the notion that I'd be very comfortable out there.'

Danny, 2007 winner of Kerrville Folk Festival's annual Song Contest, met Will Sexton a couple of years ago when he played a handful of shows in Austin with 2004 winner Idgy Vaughan. 'Will was her guitarist. I was blown away every time by his tasteful playing. He is definitely a less is more accompanist. While he's very skilful, he places every note with great intention. Having settled



on the stripped-down sound, I wanted the voicing of one other instrument. I thought he'd be the perfect person to fit things in as transparently as possible. In hindsight I was thrilled with that decision. He was great to work with."

Over a week-long period during July last year Schmidt and Sexton laid down their parts. "The main element on the record is my voice and guitar, and the acoustic bass. Will also played guitar on a couple of songs. I knew that I wanted Carrie [Elkin] and Raina [Rose] on the record for their harmonies, but they weren't in town until the last weekend in September so we did the rest of it then."

Given Danny's 'less is more' approach, I put it to him that capturing 'less is more' is difficult. "It is. This is, by far, the most nerve racking record I've released. There's a certain security in putting together a beautiful musical backdrop. With this one, hopefully, the songs and my performance of them will stand up, such that people will enjoy listening to them. As well as early Townes' albums, one favourite is a totally solo effort by Mississippi John Hurt—when it works those are really appealing records. You can also make a boring record that way. Artists rarely enjoy that perspective, you just cross your fingers and go in with faith and hope for the best."

I put it to Danny that the female backing vocalists probably contributed the most to MAN OF MANY MOONS. "The acoustic bass is more present than people will realise. The bass is really hot in the mix, it's just that we tried to make it as transparent as possible. If we pulled out the bass, there would be a huge absence. The fact that you haven't noticed its prominence is a good sign." Regarding

Carrie and Raina's contributions, Danny offered: "Carrie knew most of the songs pretty well from us touring together. We had one day to rehearse with Raina. By that point I'd had a good month and more to listen to what I already had, and make notes about exactly where I wanted the backing vocals to come in, where I wanted them to fade out, and where I wanted them to be singing the lyrics with me. We practised for one day to see if my notes were right, and went out to Blue Rock the following day and recorded the vocal harmonies."

Recorded and mixed in just eight days, the album contains eleven songs. Twelve songs were recorded. "Originally *Shades Of Gray* was going to be on there. *I've Mostly Watched* was an older song that I didn't suspect I was going to want on there. We had an extra hour of time on my very last day in the studio during July. We'd finished what we had set out to do, so I did two takes of *I've Mostly Watched*. I liked the vibe of it, so we dropped *Shades Of Gray* and kept *I've Mostly Watched*."

The production credit on the MAN OF MANY MOONS liner reads, Produced by Keith Gary & Danny Schmidt. "Since it was mainly the two of us in the studio, there weren't a lot of production decisions as far as instrumentation was concerned. A producer normally decides if a song is going to have some violin on it, hires the violinist and picks the take to use. Those roles didn't apply in this instance. As far as the production was concerned the essential decisions were sonic, and those were largely Keith's. Halfway through we were outside and I said: "Do you want to be co-producer on this? You sort of are, as we're making these decision together on a sonic basis. Your input is 50% of all that." He was delighted to have the co-producer title."

The photographs that grace the liner of Carrie Elkin's 2011 album CALL IT MY GARDEN were taken by Rodney Bursiel. The photographer fulfilled the same role on Danny's MAN OF MANY MOONS. "I met him that first time at Blue Rock. He's one of the greatest portrait photographers I've seen. We became friends and started hanging out socially." Cover photographs on albums by Elkin and Grace Pettis found Bursiel employing dark shades and tones, so it was somewhat surprising to see Danny's liner photos bathed in light. "Those shots weren't really a photo shoot. We had a dinner planned at Sam Baker's house and when things were baking in the oven, Rodney and I wandered around the property and he took those photographs."

Danny developed an aptitude for graphic design while living on a commune during the 1990s. "It expanded with time, as I learned how to build my web site once I needed one of those. Then make my own tour posters and CD covers."

Was it the chicken, or was it the egg? Did Danny have the album title before going into the studio. "I had the album title pretty early on. There are various themes going on throughout the record, but the major theme seemed to be encapsulated by that song. I liked how it rang as a title." On the album liner Schmidt employs clock hands and the numerous phases of the moon to symbolise the passage of time. "The moon is this thing that is of itself always the same. As time passes our perspective on it alters, we see it in very

different ways. That fitted the notion in the album title."

Album opener *Houses Sing* is an intricately woven tapestry that focuses on one of life's truly stressful activities. "It's funny I wrote that song before Carrie and I bought a house last summer. Since I moved back to Austin seven years ago I've kept my eyes on the housing market with an interest in buying a place and starting a community. I looked for a bigger house that could maybe take seven or eight musicians. The song is really about commitment, in terms of admitting that I wanted to be here in Austin and stay here in Austin—be in a place and set down roots. Part of that process involves going from a passing interest in houses, to making the leap: 'I'm going to get one.' Partly in response to being on the road so much in the last few years, I was definitely feeling the urge to settle down. The song is as much about reaching completion on: 'I want to settle down' as it is about finding a house."

Inherent in Schmidt's lyric is the assertion that, over time, a house becomes a home. "Yeah. And instilling your mind to the notion that that place is yours, and you will continue to be there. Committing to a place, was also committing to Carrie. That song is about coming to terms with self-doubt in a lot of ways. If I am clear in my mind that this is what I want, then I can make it happen." The ensuing *Little White Angels* explores the scenario that the cure can sometimes become the cause.

Laying down foundations, and accepting that those foundations could become permanent is the focus of *Man Of Many Moons*. "How do you commit to something when things are constantly changing and there's flux? We don't know what the future holds. Everyday we deal with relationships from a slightly different perspective as we spin around and go through cycles. How do we make promises to ourselves or anybody else about the future when everything is changing?"

In verse two having referenced the permanency of 'words,' Schmidt adds the Biblical sounding 'They're like statues in a storm.' That said, *Man Of Many Moons* is another love song. "Yeah, that one even more directly. It's funny I've said before that everything is a love song. If you care enough to write about something, then love of it is in there. Most of those that are characterised as love songs, I think of as relationship songs. I would characterise that one more as a relationship song than a love song per se. However, that relationship would not exist if there wasn't love."

The album's sole cover is Bob Dylan's *Buckets Of Rain*. "It seemed to fit with everything else musically. This album is more relational, I think, than most of mine. It's a sweet little relationship song that I've played for a long time, and meant a lot to me. It was the first Dylan song that hooked me. I was about sixteen when I fell in love with it." Canadian-bred Ray Bonneville, now an Austin resident and 1999 Kerrville winner, contributes harmonica to *Ragtime Ragtime Blues*. "That song is transitional on the record. It goes from kind of contemplative and mellow to humorous. I loved what he played and I felt it helped the album take that bend."

Humour aside, the *Ragtime* lyric is also wickedly allegorical and metaphor rich, and is followed by *Guilty By Association Blues*. "I wrote it right after we finished recording *INSTEAD THE FOREST ROSE TO SING*



and just before the last American election." Schmidt's social and political commentary was misinterpreted in a concert review by a Dutch journalist, resulting in a smouldering internet driven furore. *Almost Round The World*, which follows, drips with caustic wit and parodies the aforementioned furore. "Most of the narrative isn't true—it's a fictional story that I thought illustrated a point."

The closing trio of songs, respectively, *On Abundance*, *I Mostly Watched* and *Know Thy Place* are, for me, the most personal expression of opinions or feelings that Schmidt has placed in the public domain. "*I Mostly Watched* was written when I was having health problems after I moved back to Austin. It's a lament and popped into my head while I was walking home from the doctor's office after that first visit. It's like an epitaph, lamenting the fact that I spent so much of my life making observations rather than being proactive. *I Mostly Watched* encapsulated my feelings at that particular moment."

Know Thy Place gently tenders the maxim live life and live it fully. "And don't listen to other people's notion of your limits. Too many people have some idea or dream shot down before they start it, by people saying: 'That'll never work, or you're not capable of pulling that off.' That may end up proving to be true. The lyric came off as advice to a person who needed to have their sails filled a little bit in that moment."

Commencing late June, Danny Schmidt is due in the UK for a three-week long tour. The production approach of *MAN OF MANY MOONS* is courageous, the eleven songs, irrespective of their age, are stunning creations. Miss this talented singer-songwriter at your peril. **Arthur Wood**