

BOOK REVIEW

John Hartford: Pilot of a Steam Powered Aereo-Plain **ANDREW VAUGHAN**

(Stuffworks Press)



It's been 12 years since the untimely passing of the much-beloved John Hartford—an entertainer's entertainer who charmed his way into fan's hearts through his uncanny ability to marry traditional bluegrass to an eclectic take on modern folk music—always delivered within a context reflective of his acute sense of humour. Yet, British-born, Nashville-based author Andrew Vaughan, probes beneath the immediate surface of the Hartford persona to reveal his motivation and the underpinnings of his distinctive muse. From the onset, Vaughan lays his cards clearly on the table, establishing the focus of his book—the background story to the making of AEREO-PLAIN. Nothing more. Nothing less. Yet it's a fascinating topic as we follow Hartford's path to becoming who he was and how, based on the income received from his blockbuster hit, *Gentle On My Mind*, he was afforded the creative freedom he craved to follow his heart first. On the importance of AEREO-PLAIN to the world of music, Sam Bush is quoted as saying: 'It was the first time where people truly used acoustic bluegrass instruments to create original contemporary music.' And because this legendary, progressive release inspired a new generation of acoustic players to—thanks to Hartford—blend the traditional with originality, driven by equal parts reverence and abandon, Vaughan lusts for its origins. We follow Hartford's early fascination with the music and the profound effect his very first bluegrass concert had on him. Fortunate enough to see Flatt & Scruggs perform from his front row perch at a show in St. Louis, Hartford witnessed—first-hand—the evolution of the banjo as it progressed from its support position to front-and-centre in the hands of Earl Scruggs. This had a profound effect on John who was forced to admit: 'I've never been the same since.' And he wasn't.

At only 112 pages, this hardcover is nonetheless packed with over 100 images and fascinating contributions from friends, family and fellow musicians. As an added bonus, first edition copies include a live,

never-before-released Hartford reunion show from the Ryman in 1994 as he is joined by Tut Taylor, Vassar Clements and Tony Rice for what John refers to as 'geezer-grass'—worth the book price alone. From Chet Atkins adding the more marquis-friendly 't' to "Harford" back in the 1960s to daughter Katie's observations on her Dad's basement office, dubbed

'the vortex,' causing her to realise the degree of mental energy that fueled her Dad's musical passion, this book is but a teaser towards understanding the true motivations of this great talent. Alas, it no sooner starts than it's over as Vaughan is forced to squeeze too much post-1971 information into too few pages, causing the book's ending to be somewhat abrupt. It's a good beginning—yet it leaves the reader wanting so much more. From Hartford's comedy-writing days of the Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour and the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour to his substantial role in the backdrop to the Down From The Mountain revival, we never really come to understand the man who dreamed to live in the 1880s to pilot his own steamship down the Mississippi. AEREO-PLAIN is but one of 30 albums in this musical pioneer's Grammy award-winning catalogue. Yet, as the first book on Hartford out of the gates, here's hoping the floodgates will open soon.

Eric Thom

Tom Russell 120 SONGS

326 pages, Bangtail Press,
Bozeman, Montana ISBN-13:
978-0-9828601-7-5

Before delving into the essence of this tome, here's an outline of the contents. Each lyric is accompanied by its guitar chords, plus a short narrative that offers an insight regarding the song. In total, those narratives constitute a cornucopia of Russell minutia. Pictures of Tom's woodcuts are liberally distributed throughout, and considering the songwriting bias, the first is, appropriately titled, *Woody Guthrie*. Charting Russell's evolving skill with word and melody, the book is chronologically divided into eight chapters—for example Chapter Two—The New York/Oslo Years

and Chapter Six—The Man From God Knows Where. Gallo del Cielo enjoys a chapter all to itself.

Fronting the book are three pages of quotes that reference Russell's musical canon, from luminaries such as beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, author Annie Proulx, and fellow musicians Van Dyke Parks, Dave Alvin, Ramblin' Jack Elliott and more. The back pages to 120 SONGS deliver a trio of appendices. In A Tom lists his male and female co-writer's, B delivers a discography of his recordings—curiously there's no mention of the cassette-only band recordings 1984's *AS THE CROW FLIES* and 1986's *JOSHUA TREE*, the former featured one of my all-time favourite songs *The Dance* co-written with the late Carl Brouse. There's also no mention of 2007's live set *LOST ANGELS OF LYON*, or the quartet of EPs released in tandem with Tom's early 21st century albums. It's all history... Tom Russell history! Finally, C presents an alphabetic index of the 120 titles.

120 SONGS is a treasure trove of delights. Devour it from cover to cover or simply dip into it for a few moments, both approaches furnish pleasurable experiences. In the 18 page, five-chapter Introduction, Russell offers sage advice concerning songs. Their history, how and why the best ones survive, how Tom's mother instilled in him a love for words—blood memory, how he became a Dylan (Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg) acolyte during the early 1960s and even handed the Bobster a telegram, how he sneaked into

shows by Zimmerman and The Beatles, and a decade later served a musical apprenticeship in Vancouver's skid row bars. His initial brush with 'the business' constituted the foundation. Authenticity and structure followed as, across four decades, the road led him to Austin, New York, and more recently El Paso. The constant since 1963 remained Russell's

fanatic heart (for music).

Presenting the work of America's most consistently literate scribe 120 SONGS is a reference work, an informative read, and may even inspire you to 'don his shoes' and compose your own. 120 SONGS and Russell's book of artwork *BLUE HORSE RED DESERT* are available by mail-order only from http://www.villagerecords.com/advanced_search_result.php?keywords=tom+russell

Arthur Wood

