



## Tom Russell

The story behind the singer-songwriter's new concept album, *The Man From God Knows Where*

You know, that's a question mark. That's why he became "The Man From God Knows Where". He fell out the photo album when my sister was giving me some of those photos that we used on the liner and in the booklet. I said, "Jeez, who is this?" All it said on the back was Council Bluffs, Iowa, obviously taken around 1870 or 1880. It could be Patrick Russell or Ambrose Larsen. I liked the fact that it's a bit of a mystery, but that he is a relative. And this album, in a sense, is a quest to find out who I am. And who he is.

### How long did it take to record the tracks?

The sessions took about ten days, and I was able to use a Norwegian rhythm section that I was familiar with who are top level musicians. The initial recordings were done live. After the first two or three days of cutting rhythm tracks and live vocals, Dolores Keane showed up with Iris, and the fiddler and the piper were added to the mix.

Dave Von Ronk's vocals were cut in New York because he couldn't get out of the country at that time. We mixed the tracks about a month later in a hotel room outside of Oslo. Hillestad likes to do these things outside the studio. Finally, we put it together in Rainbow Studios in Oslo and, magically, it came together, one second less than you could have on a CD (laughs).

### Tell me about the singers Sondre Bratland and Kari Bremnes.

They have seldom sung in English, which I thought was great because I wanted them to sing with a primitive accent. Sondre performs some of "Eg Er Framand" in Norwegian. I don't think a lot of people outside Scandinavia have heard the Norwegian language sung.

And the Irish language as well, which Dolores sings a little bit at the start of "Mary Clare Malloy". I thought this would be special and that it would blend in. Underneath the text and the lyrics, I was searching for the origin of some of America's folk melodies. I think that "Wayfarin' Stranger", which Iris sings, can sound very similar to "Eg Er Framand". There's almost a double story going on.

### How did Dolores Keane become involved?

A couple of years ago we opened for Nanci Griffith in Dublin. Then I met her and Erik one time in Oslo. I worked with her again last year on Nanci's Other Voices, Too tour.

### I presume you got to know Van Ronk during your New York days?

No, I never really knew him. I was up at his apartment once, fifteen years ago, with Nanci, Frank Christian and Suzanne Vega. I really got to know him on a tour that I did with Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Dave Alvin and Chris Smither. He was in San Francisco and he came up after the show and he was raving about "Gallo De Cielo". We became friends. I was thinking of Tom Waits, if we

**T**OM RUSSELL'S material does not engage the listener's intellect by pandering to commercial considerations. His words reflect on a panoply of subjects and events derived from the history of his homeland. His latest recording, *The Man From God Knows Where*, takes that storytelling exploration of the ages one step further by focusing on the Irish and Norwegian branches of his family which arrived in North America many generations ago.

We caught up with Tom, who had just embarked on a 25 city tour across the United States, during late April at a hotel in Arlington, Virginia.

### When did you start work on the project?

Seven or eight years ago. I was working on a piece that was called "American Primitive". It was, in my head, a long musical poem about American history. Gradually, over the years, I began discovering things about my family and they began to take over the piece. Then I met the old man in the bar in Downpatrick, Ireland who told me there was a Thomas Russell hung in 1798 during the United Irish Rebellion. There was a poem written about him called "The Man From God Knows Where". I loved the title so much and it fitted what I was doing that I created the overture song with that title. He's the sort of everyman troubadour who rides across America digging up information about my ancestors.

### Why did you record the album in Scandinavia?

Erik Hillestad (the producer) likes on-location recording. He mentioned this farmhouse on the West Coast of Norway. It was near where Ambrose Larsen, one of my ancestors, may have been born. It appealed to me. It was isolated enough so that none of us could really go into town. We were focused on the project for two weeks.

### Who is the ancestor on the front of the album liner?



could get him, for the voice of "The Outcast". I mentioned the song to Dave when I heard his voice and he agreed to do it.

**Was the 1994 Merle Haggard tribute album, "Tulare Dust", the first occasion on which you worked with Iris DeMent?**

I met her years ago when she first signed to Philo. She opened for me in Kansas City about six or seven years ago, when I had the band. Then I heard that she was a Merle Haggard fan and called her up to do a song on the tribute album.

**We haven't mentioned Andy Hardin and Hank Bones. Do you want to say anything about them?**

- Well, of course, Andy has been playing with me for years and he had to take a little bit of a back seat to the other guitar player, Knut Riersrud. Andy was needed in the rhythm guitar spectrum this time, to sort of keep the band together. He does some acoustic leads on the record. Of course, now that we're out on tour, he has to cover all that since onstage it's just the two of us.

Hank, the way that happened was we did "The Outcast" vocal with Van Ronk. Of course, Hank learns how to play a new instrument every week. He has been dicking around recently with a trombone and trumpet. Just as an aside, I said, "Hey, I'll give you a cassette of this dub we did with Van Ronk. If you hear anything ... I'm hearing some circus and carnival horns, you know."

I think he went into the studio and three hours later had concocted that horn part that comes in near the end. It was brilliant. A little bit out of tune, but just what we needed.

**Was it always your intention to use material by other writers, including traditional material?**

Yeah, there were the old melodies that I loved. Once I knew Dolores and Iris were going to be involved, I wanted to hear these things that always gave me chills. I wanted "Wayfarin' Stranger" and "The Old Rugged Cross". I thought, "What a great contrast", after we talk about massacring the Indians and this huge theme of taking their land.

Immediately after the song, "Sitting Bull In Venice", we have this stark ancient spiritual, "The Old Rugged Cross", a white spiritual, sung by Iris. She sang it with Kari while playing the 800 year old Barony piano. It was a moving experience.

**I presume that you drew upon family archives for the project. Did you do much research?**

No, there wasn't much there. There had to be a lot of imagination and slatching characters and putting them together from what I had heard. Some characters like "Patrick Russell" were verbatim of what they had said. His account was transcribed by his wife. Other characters like "Mary Clare Malloy", "Ambrose Larsen" and "Anna Olsen", I sketched from aural history.

**Did you make any interesting discoveries along the way?**

Oh yeah, lots of them. One of the things that amazed me was that when people came to New York between 1890 and 1920 and they sailed into the harbour, the doctor would go on board ship and really just cursorily look over the first and second class passengers. They landed directly into New York.

Then the boat went over to Ellis Island and the third class passengers were processed. The difference between a first class and third class ticket may have been five or eight dollars. There was certainly a class distinction.

**I thought it was chilling where the lyric describes how the passengers were marked with a chalk X if they were mentally ill, or an E which meant they were sent back to Ireland.**

Yeah, I got all that stuff at Ellis Island and made notes about it. I wanted a character telling that part of the immigrants' story and created "Mary Clare Malloy", which is my mother's family name.

**In the opening song, "The Man From God Knows Where", can you explain the line, "I've come to hear you now, so maybe I'll be saved"?**

Well, as the next line says, "Cursed are we who forget the past." It's a Gnostic principle. Everything you learn about yourself or bring forth from the ground or from your roots will save you. Everything you do not learn about yourself, or turn your back on, will destroy you.

I'm going off under the guise of "The Man From God Knows Where". I'm riding off and listening to all these people's voices, and trying to understand their lives. To find out who they are, to find out who I am. What part of me is from part of them.

**Are "Patrick Russell", "Mary Clare Malloy", "Ambrose Larsen" and "Anna Olsen" all known ancestors?**

"Patrick Russell" is my great grandfather on my father's side.

"Ambrose Larsen" is, or at least his real name was, Ludwig, we think now, and he was another one of my father's great grandfathers on his mother's side.

"Anna Olsen" is more of a fictional Norwegian character. I created that and wanted her to tell that story, about her neighbours who hanged themselves. I wanted these themes of suicide and madness, the fact that everything wasn't hunky dory out there.

"Mary Clare Malloy", my sister's name is Mary Clare and my mother's maiden name is Malloy. She's a collage of people. I wanted somebody coming through Ellis Island and created her so I could tell different historical parts of the story. The same way that "The Outcast" was created to tell that story - and, really, he is the opposite of "The

Man From God Knows Where".

**Do you foresee protests about "The Outcast", particularly from minority groups?**

People have to see it in the right light. I do it onstage every night but I do a little preamble about how this guy rises up out of the gutter and that he's a swindler and he's the anti-Christ. I love characters like this because I saw this thing as a stage play. I always liked that kind of negative character, the Iago character. I see this guy as kind of like that, the evil guy in the wings.

**Where did you get the idea for "Sitting Bull In Venice"?**

I saw the photo of Sitting Bull on a gondola in Venice in a book and was amazed. An Irish journalist asked me, when he knew I was working on this piece, whether I was going to include any references to Native Americans. I thought about it a long time because I really started my career in Native American bars in Vancouver. I preface it by saying that, "The irony is that my people were coming over here on boats. They may have passed Sitting Bull going the other way."

**Do you think that "Love Abides" is the best song you've written?**

(Laughs) I don't know but I'm glad you like it if it is in that territory. It's a very moving song for me. I wanted this piece to end very strongly, and to tell the listeners, "Look, if you can make it through this entire record and listen to these people's sometimes very dark story, we're all rewarded with a positive piece." ■

