



Tom Russell **"Wounded Heart Of America"** Hightone Recordings

Following in the wake of some of his recent releases, the front cover of **"Wounded Heart Of America: Tom Russell Songs"** bears another of Tom's 'naïve' paintings. The album title is taken from a quote by San Francisco based poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *"Tom Russell is Johnny Cash, Jim Harrison and Charles Bukowski rolled into one. I feel a great affinity with Tom Russell's songs, for he's writing out of the wounded heart of America."* Performing Tom Russell songs, Ferlinghetti's voice is also heard on this recording along with that of thirteen musicians, past and present. This eighteen-track album closes with a quartet of tunes, old and new, featuring the inimitable Tom Russell.

Considering that Ferlinghetti's quote mentioned the late Johnny Cash [d. 2003], it's rather appropriate that the *Man In Black* launches this compilation with "Veteran's Day." During the late 1980's having been cast aside by his long-time label, CBS, prior to Cash's career renaissance on Rick Rubin's American Recordings during the final decade of his life, Big John cut a handful of albums for Polygram including **"Boom Chicka Boom"** [1989]. The latter album included "Veteran's Day," Russell's tribute to Jimmy McGrew and the men who served in Nam and other foreign conflicts. Both sons of California, and at one time label mates with Oakland based Hightone Records, Dave Alvin and Tom Russell began collaborating as writers circa 1990 and went on to co-produce the Merle Haggard tribute **"Tulare Dust"** [1994]. Prominently supported by mandolins and fiddles Dave performs "Blue Wing," the sad tale of a once incarcerated drifter's demise, and the cut appeared on his album **"King Of California"** [1994] and on Tom's **"Poor Man's Dream"** [1989]. Moving on, Joe Ely delivers a 'live' rendition of the cock-fighting classic "Gallo del Cielo." Back around 1980 while working as New York City cab driver, the legend goes that Tom performed that song while Dead lyricist Robert Hunter sat in the backseat, a fare-paying customer. Hunter encouraged Russell to continue writing and by the mid-1980s Tom was performing and touring again. Fate.....

To date Russell has delivered two parts of his promised American Trilogy, and the first of those was **"The Man From God Knows Where"** [1999]. Iris DeMent **IS** the farmer's daughter, now grown, who touchingly reflects on her unfulfilled, but still cherished, dreams in "Acres Of Corn," while the lyrically outrageous "The Outcaste" becomes a masterpiece, as it only could, in the hands and unique voice of the late Dave Van Ronk [d. 2002]. Circa 1942 having entered WWII, irrespective of their stated allegiance, America interred all its mainland citizens of Asian birth or origin for the duration of the conflict. Taken from her Rounder Records release **"Seeing Things"** [1998], Laurie Lewis delivers a sensitive Eastern reading of "Manzanar," the place of their internment. *Does history actually repeat itself?*

The waltz paced "St. Olav's Gate" is as much a *stone* Russell classic as "Gallo del Cielo." A few years into the 1980's Russell began touring Scandinavia on a regular basis, and the bittersweet love song "St. Olav's Gate" was inspired by those times. The latter is one of two cuts on this collection that features the voice of the late Doug Sahm [d. 1999], and this version appeared on his Munich Records release **"Get A Life"** [2001]. No one said that justice was guaranteed in the music business, so it's pleasing to recall that early in her career, circa 1992, Nashville based, Illinois bred country/folk musician Suzy Bogguss earned Tom and his "Outbound Plane" co-writer Nanci Griffith some very welcome royalties. The song peaked at # 9 on the U.S. Country Singles Chart, and was taken from Suzy's # 19 hit album **"Aces"** which Capitol Records released. During the 1990's Griffith fashioned a pair of folk music tribute albums for the Elektra imprint, and from the second **"Other Voices, Too"** [1998] she duets with Alberta rancher/musician Ian Tyson [like Alvin, a sometime Russell writing collaborator] on "Canadian Whiskey" another one of Tom's early career gems.

Maybe it's me, but the tempo of Jerry Jeff Walker's reading of the Tyson/Russell collaboration "Navajo Rug" is a little fast. It appeared on Jerry Jeff's 1991 Rykodisc release of the same name, while four years

earlier the tune won its writers the Canadian CMA award for Single Of The Year, and the same year, on the strength of Tyson's eponymous western themed collection "**Cowboyography**," which featured "Navajo Rug," Ian scored the Juno [+] for Country Male Vocalist of the Year. Next up is another folk hero who has been around for decades, and from his Hightone release "**The Long Ride**" [1999] Ramblin' Jack Elliott performs [vocally supported by Tom] the 'justice in the old west' themed "The Sky Above And The Mud Below." "Haley's Comet" recalls the sad demise of rock 'n' roll pioneer Bill Haley, and was the first Russell/Alvin co-write that Tom recorded. The year 1991, the album "**Hurricane Season**." Here, as a member of The Texas Tornados, Doug Sahm takes the lead vocal on a rowdy 1996, 7" single rendition of the tune. Closing out the 'covers' segment of this collection are two previously unreleased tracks - Lawrence Ferlinghetti reads the "Stealing Electricity" lyric from last year's Russell collection "**Love And Fear**," while Eliza Gilkyson's take on the Tom Russell/Katy Moffatt co-write "Walking On The Moon" is stunning in its voice and acoustic guitar simplicity. Tom picks, Eliza sings.

As I noted at the outset, a quartet of Tom Russell tracks close this collection. "The Cuban Sandwich" is performed by Tom Russell and Barrence Whitfield and first appeared on the studio set "**Hillbilly Voodoo**" [1993], while the 'feisty alternate live' version featured here is a clear twenty seconds longer. "Who's Gonna Build Your Wall?" was the title of a five track EP that Russell released late last year, and was helmed by that song's inclusion in the three-song segment titled 'Immigration Suite.' When Congressman Duncan Hunter proposed building a barrier on the entire border with Mexico, Tom decided that it was time to send 'the administration' a musical greeting card. Next up is an updated version of "Home Before Dark" the opening track on "**Road To Bayamon**" [1987], while the late "King of Bluegrass" Jimmy Martin [d. May 2005] is memorialised and 'the Grand Ole Opry is told exactly how it is' in the lyric of the previously unrecorded "The Death Of Jimmy Martin."

The truth - I'm a Tom Russell fan and have been for over two decades! However, hearing Russell's songs performed by 'other voices' serves as a timely and pertinent reminder that while he has never enjoyed the prominent public profile of say Cash, or like his buddy Alvin scored a Grammy, Tom has always been an articulate writer and engaging performer who has never stinted from seeking new frameworks in which to place his roots tinged music. If only there was justice in this life...

Note.

[+] – The Juno, is the Canadian music industry equivalent to a Grammy.

The closing track apart, the original source of the songs on this compilation was.....

*Heart On A Sleeve* [1984] – "Gallo del Cielo," "St. Olav's Gate" & "Canadian Whiskey"

*Road To Bayamon* [1987] – "Home Before Dark"

*Poor Man's Dream* [1989] – "Blue Wing," "Veteran's Day," "Walkin' On The Moon," "Outbound Plane" & "Navajo Rug"

*Hurricane Season* [1991] – "Haley's Comet"

*Hillbilly Voodoo* [1993] – "The Cuban Sandwich"

*Box Of Visions* [1993] - "Manzanar"

*The Rose Of The San Joaquin* [1995] - "The Sky Above And The Mud Below"

*The Man From God Knows Where* [1999] – "Acres Of Corn" & "The Outcaste"

*Love And Fear* [2006] – "Stealing Electricity"

*Whose Gonna Build Your Wall?* EP [2006] - "Whose Gonna Build Your Wall?"

Folkwax Score 9 out of 10

**Arthur Wood.**

Kerrville Kronikles 07/07.