

SHORT VERSION

Allowing forty years of your life to elapse before releasing your first solo recording, smacks of priorities cast adrift to chart their own path. Balance that with the fact that you have written, some rather special songs since your mid-teens, at the least, brings the perspective of perseverance to the fore. In traversing the foregoing road, Michael Fracasso, a first generation son of immigrant parents, served his musical apprenticeship on three coasts of the North American landmass. *"Basically my grandfather came here first from Italy, and then my dad came later and brought my mother and my two sisters, Lisa and Marcia. I was born here."* In the early fifties, the Fracasso family settled in the Ohio town of Mingo Junction, where Michael's father found employment in the local steel mill.

As for the local music scene, Fracasso recalled *"Wheeling, West Virginia is only about twenty miles away from my home and we used to drive down there for the Wheeling Jamboree. They had every major country star play there on the weekends. I wasn't a huge fan of country music, but I loved really sad country singers like Kitty Wells. My only other access to music was AM radio. Anything that featured an acoustic guitar always got my attention. As a child I always gravitated toward that sound."*

Although there wasn't a history of musicians in either branch of his family tree, by the mid-sixties Michael was the proud owner of an acoustic guitar, and had begun listening to *pop folk* artists like Peter, Paul & Mary and The New Christy Minstrels. *"My sister brought a Bob Dylan record home. 'Blonde On Blonde' freaked me out. It was the best thing I'd heard in my entire life. I'd heard 'Rainy Day Woman # 12 & 35' on the radio. I didn't even know Dylan played an acoustic guitar, judging from that song, but I remember liking it."* Fracasso recalled the elation he felt when his godfather gave him his first guitar. *"I didn't care that I couldn't play it. The smell, the feel and the sound of it, was the most exiting thing in my life at that time."*

Michael found a few more pieces of his musical jig-saw puzzle when his sister took him to a folk concert, at a local college, where he heard "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues." *"I didn't know that it was a Dylan song, but it made me realise that being a musician was what I really wanted to do. I thought it was the most amazing song in the world. That was a real turning point for me."* After persevering on his own with his Gibson acoustic, Michael took a series of guitar lessons from a college friend of one of his sisters.

While still attending High School, Fracasso only made a couple of solo public appearances. *"In my sophomore year I sang 'The House Of The Rising Sun' at a school concert. Two years later – we had this thing called French Day and I had learned The Beatles song 'Michelle.' The programme finished way too early and the French teacher asked me to sing for the audience. I played 'Coming Into Los Angeles,' the Arlo Guthrie song. I got a standing ovation. When I went to my High School reunion recently, everyone wanted me to play it."*

After graduating from High School, Michael spent two years attending Ohio State University in Columbus. During this period, accompanied by a friend, Fracasso started playing cover songs in local bars. *"It was miserable,"* seemed like a summation that I should not pursue further. Michael went on to complete his studies at Washington State University in Pullman, and by the mid 1970's he was working for the Department of Natural Resources in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State. *"I was undertaking a study on Ponderosa pines. We would cut down a tree and carry out all these test on the timber."*

"I played in the college coffee-house whenever I could. The first gig I played in that area was in a bar just outside of Moscow, Idaho. The seats were tree stumps, and I'd heard that they had an open-mike each Sunday. I was the one who got the gig. I had been writing songs right through my High School years. At that stage, I decided that I wanted to become a songwriter for real, and moved to New York."

When Fracasso moved to Washington State he knew no one. The same situation prevailed in 1978 when he arrived in the Big Apple. *"I had always dreamed about living there. It was my fantasy. I read an article in the New York Times about the Cornelia Street Café and made up my mind that I was moving. That article really sewed it up for me. I knew I was making the right decision."*

Located in Greenwich Village, the Songwriters Exchange, a constantly changing aggregation of mainly, folk music based writers, would congregate at the Café each Monday evening. The only rule during the gathering was that the songs performed had been written during the previous week. *"You got to present one song. I remember that it was a really good starting off point for me to think about songwriting as a serious thing. A lot of my songs up till then had emulated the work of other writers. I wrote 'Girl In New Mexico' and I suddenly felt that song was for me. I didn't try to write it like anyone else. It has elements of everything that I do musically in it. It's a bit country-ish. It has this folk-ish kind of feel here and there. I felt it was a big turning point. It was a song that defined me as a songwriter."*

In 1980, Robin Hirsch, one of the Cornelia Street Café owners, approached Bernard Brightman, the owner of Stash Records, a local imprint that normally released jazz recordings, with the idea of documenting the work of the artists who regularly performed at the Exchange. Recorded in a single fifteen-hour session, ten performers were featured on the resulting twelve-track album. A decade later, when the album was upgraded to CD, three performers and three [of the original] tracks were dropped, and nine new selections were added. The [seven] artists contributing to the 1990 version were Rod MacDonald, Cliff Eberhardt, David Massengill, [Elliot] Simon & [Lucy] Kaplanski, Martha Hogan and Michael Fracasso. While Fracasso's original contribution to **"The Songwriters Exchange"** was the aforementioned "Girl In New Mexico," the reissue featured his "All Eyes On Me" and "Slow Down, Driver," the latter track being a duet with Hogan.

Fracasso spent the eighties working in New York clubs, playing about three or four gigs a month. *"I think my singing took a long time to catch up to my songwriting. My stage presence took even longer. I was terrified of appearing in public back then. By 1983, the folk scene was pretty well burned out. I formed my first band around 1981, and tried to get away from playing just in folk clubs. I started working rock clubs and bars, places like CBGB's, Tracks and the Mud Club, since the folk scene really did not embrace me at all, even though I was on that record. I had to go full circle to find myself musically. I needed to explore things. It took me a long time to gain those skills."*

For a period of two years in the early eighties, Michael worked onstage and in the studio with a musician/producer named Terry Mann. *"I learned a lot from him and he kind of loved and respected what I did. He had played with Johnny Thunders and was part of the whole CBGB's scene. Later, I put up some money and hired this producer named Dan Daley who wrote "Still In Saigon," the Charlie Daniels hit. Dan produced this demo and hired an incredible band. One of the songs we cut was "Big Sister."* Through the latter half of the eighties, Michael formed a number of other bands, and scored a couple of production deals that eventually led nowhere. Well aware that father time was marching inexorably on, Michael concluded that there had been way too many *cul-de-sacs* during his New York years. It was time for a change.

Of course there had been one, short, bright period during the decade. In 1986 the Canadian band Headlines reached No. 11 in the Canadian pop charts with his song "Big Sister." According to Michael, the production of the latter cut literally mirror imaged the Dan Daley produced version.

On May 1st 1990, Michael Fracasso arrived in Austin, Texas. Once again, as far as the local population was concerned, he knew no one. *"I don't think I made it to an open-mike until around Labour Day [ED. NOTE. The first weekend of September]. I didn't feel like playing. I sat and wrote songs. I was working a day job as well. The feeling of trying too hard to make it, is very destructive. In those three months, one of the songs I wrote was "Wake Up, George." I also wrote a tune called "Talking Texas" which kind of made me a celebrity locally when I began played it."* Fracasso has never recorded the latter tune. *"Those songs were written from the aspect of observing Texas."* The now defunct Chicago House became the launching pad for Michael Fracasso as a solo act. When the 1990 **Music City Texas** musicians poll appeared early the following year, Fracasso was voted Best New Artist. In a mere four months he had made a significant impact.

One year on, Fracasso hired Mike Harwick [guitar], followed soon afterward by bassist Lorne Roll. With the trio, Spaghetti Western, gigging on a regular basis, Michael's thoughts turned toward making a record. *"I saw that's what people did. I thought "Gee, all these years I've been struggling to make a record and here, they just do it." I brought in a number of other musicians who I thought would be good for the project."* The resulting recording **"Love & Trust"** appeared as an eleven track, independently released cassette in 1992. Co-produced by Fracasso and Mike Hardwick most of the recording took place at Mark Hallman's Congress House studio. The album featured new material, as well as songs drawn from his New York sojourn. Lucinda Williams' backing vocal is featured on "Door #1." Michael scored once more on the annual **Music City Texas** polls with **"Love & Trust"** being voted the *Best Independent Tape*. In 1993, a CD version of the recording appeared on the San Marcos based imprint, Dejadisc, augmented by two new cuts, "One That Got Away" and "Brazos River Blues."

"I opened a show for Iain [Matthews], who really didn't know who I was. Afterwards he said "Hey listen, you're the missing piece." I've been looking for a third vocalist. He and Mark [Hallman] had just played. I told him "No." I said "No way can I sing with you guys. You guys sing so tight, I could never sing with you. I don't know how to sing harmonies." And I did not. That was not a lie. He called me again and I said "No. I don't want to do it." He persisted and in the end I agreed to try it." In 1992, the trio, Hamilton Pool, began a two year long recording project. The trio took its name from a famous local swimming hole.

By early 1993, the **Austin Chronicle** was marking Fracasso out as *"Austin's greatest undiscovered treasure,"* with a singing voice that was at times reminiscent of Buddy Holly, Gene Pitney and Roy Orbison. *"I don't pay attention to those things, except when I get a bad review – then I study it. Usually I find, maybe they were right."* The 1994 **Music City Texas** poll saw Michael pick up the title, *Male Vocalist/Acoustic*.

Hamilton Pool's **"Return to Zero"** was the first 1995 release to feature Fracasso. Produced by Mark Hallman and recorded at Congress House, it included Michael's "Apple Pie" and "One That Got Away." Both songs had appeared on Michael's **"Love & Trust."** Later that year, **"When I Lived In The Wild,"** his sophomore solo effort was released by the Bohemia Beat label. The fourteen tracks included "Big Sister," while his band at that time, Horse Opera, featured Mike Hardwick [guitar and lap steel], Rafael Gayol [drums] and George Reiff [bass]. Produced by Dave McNair, Fracasso and Hardwick it was recorded at Austin's, The Hit Shack. *"I was due to tour with the band but had to scrap the whole idea when Mike's wife fell ill. In the end I did the tour as a solo act. Many people did not get it, but basically that record is my version of the New Testament. Plain and simple. My religious background was coming out in the songs I was writing. George called them existential dustbowl ballads. None of this was deliberate, but when I put the whole record together, it was startling to me. It shocked me to see what I had done."* Austin's Anglo transplant John Conquest, commented in his publication **Music City Texas** that Fracasso was an *"Acoustic singer-songwriter doing something completely original with an electric band."* Without totally pinning down Fracasso's music, the best description, I feel, is that it is an always melodic, fusion of folk, country, blues and pop.

In 1996 Fracasso announced that he was leaving Hamilton Pool to concentrate on his solo career, then some time later retracted his decision. Fracasso's replacement was David Halley. Strange to relate, exactly a decade ago, Halley was the inaugural artist in the **CURRENTS** series. There have been no further Hamilton Pool releases to date. The Spring of 1998 saw the release of Michael's third solo album, the enigmatically tilted **"World In A Drop Of Water,"** once more on the Bohemia Beat label. Produced by local legend, Charlie Sexton, one time teenage guitarist for Joe Ely, it was the first album to feature material that Michael had written entirely in Texas. George Reiff, also a member of one of Sexton's bands, was the catalyst for Michael and Charlie getting together. *"I love strings and have been dying to put them on my records for ages. It's more pop than before, but still with the old influences."* Following its release the disc became a fixture on The Gavin Report's Top 10 and in early 1999, the album was heavily featured in The Austin Chronicle and Austin American-Statesman's end of year polls.

Michael Fracasso stamped his hallmark on the closing decade of the twentieth century with a trio of twenty-four carat quality albums, populated by memorable hook laden songs, humorous as well as serious. Sadly they did not bring him the national or international recognition that is truly his due. With the advent of a new century, his next roll of the dice may well right that wrong.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles.

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