

Lisa Mednick talks about the art of “Semaphore”

“Semaphore” is Lisa’s sophomore solo effort. Her debut disc appeared on the now defunct San Marcos, Texas label Dejadisc during 1994. Like a shooting star, through the opening half of the nineteen nineties, Dejadisc released stellar albums such as **“Loco Gringo’s Lament”** [Ray Wylie Hubbard], the compilations **“Across The Great Divide”** and **“Pastures Of Plenty,”** and Lisa’s debut **“Artifacts Of Love.”** Lisa appeared on both compilations. I believe that even Lisa would admit to being a reluctant front person – heaven knows she’s earned her colours as a support player with acts such as The Chills [New Zealand], Alejandro Escovedo, Michelle Shocked, Juliana Hatfield, Hubbard, James McMurtry and Radney Foster. She has also been a member of bands such as Pop Decay, Ship Of Fools, Friendly Fire, Song Dogs and when we last spoke in late 1996, Clovis. In my opinion Lisa is a treasure whose music is an amalgam of intelligent rock and roots rhythms.....oh yes, and lyrics that definitely challenge the listener. The following interview was conducted over the internet....

What have you been up to musically since we last spoke. Is Clovis still a viable band.

In 1997 I toured with Juliana Hatfield for one last time. Then I worked with Clovis. We keep talking about putting it back together, but of course with my album coming out I need to focus on that. Still, a couple of the songs on the new record were written or incubated with Clovis and may eventually be recorded with that line-up.

Tell us about the various stages of recording this album, and sequentially the studios in Austin where you recorded it. When was the first session and when was the last session.

It has been a long winding road. It is also the usual story. Lack of funds, lack of time because I had to work a full-time day job just to make it in the new Austin. We started the album in December of 1999. In April of 2001 I took it out to Oceanview to be mastered. I am very pleased with the end result and it could not have come out this way without all that effort. We started at Cribworks and then migrated to other studios in town. Whatever I could afford.

What musicians played on the album.

I had a core band of Kevin Carroll, George Reiff, and Ian Bailey. Then a whole bunch of other great players. There are really too many to list here, and if I list some then I am omitting some, and I can't do that!

Did you produce “Semaphore,” or was some other person involved.

After having produced my first album I felt like I knew the sound I wanted and how to get it. I had help both times, but I am definitely the producer.

Did you approach a number of labels with the recording.

Only a few.

How did you finally get your record deal.

I sent a copy of the album to Heinz Geissler at Antone's. He liked it and is in the process of signing me to the Texas Music Group label.

Will the record label help you when you tour.

I think it always helps to be affiliated with a record label, though I am not sure if that was the case with Dejadisc !

Describe in outline how you came to write to each song. I'm assuming that you wrote all of them, as I only have a white label copy of the album.

Every song has its own inspiration. I can't really explain it. If I could explain it, I think that would then mean

that anyone could have written these songs. I would rather have the listener make up his or her own story behind each song.

I'd like to talk about the songs next. The album opens with "Wrecker," and lyrically mentions the "black flag pirate" and a ship that founders because of a "false" beacon - or so it seems. Is there a second meaning intended for the term "wrecker."

Let's just say, "Love hath no fury..."

"Stranger" appears to describe the end of a love affair. For instance the line, "I'm lost in a wilderness." What inspired this song.

A trip to the circus when I was a kid.....(ha ha)

Where did you get the idea for the song "Chicamauga." The part that mentions the naming of the grandson after the dead comrade is a neat twist. [ED. NOTE. In the Civil War, General George H. Thomas gained the nickname "The Rock of Chickamauga" when he stood his ground at the battle. In September 1863, 34,000 troops died during two days of fighting].

I got the idea from a story by Ambrose Bierce [ED. NOTE. The following comes from an internet posting by Elizabeth Sherwin "Bierce was a writer and newspaper columnist. He wrote the well-known "Devil's Dictionary" and many short stories, ghost stories, and stories about the Civil War. Mark Twain was a contemporary. Bierce was born on a farm in Indiana and did not have a happy childhood. He fought in the Civil War, married a rich woman and lived in London for a time before moving to San Francisco."]. The story tells of a man whose comrade dies and he goes home to marry the comrade's sweetheart. The rest I made up. It was a terrible battle, and one that the South actually won. The idea is that these two were Confederate soldiers, and this surviving man is not happy about war in general. My view, incidentally, is that the Civil War was pretty much about slavery, and though I am sympathetic to some of the soldiers and other humans, I would say that the South lost for good reason! I used to think the confederate flag was romantic and full of pathos, but it is now clear to me that it is a symbol of archaic values.

On "Widow Of This World" some children are singing "The Home Of The Free" or some such song. The lyric appears to focus on world-wide injustice, encompassing all facets of daily life. I presume your song is stating that America isn't "the home of the brave and the free."

My sister and her family, along with my Mother, were visiting and I decided to take them into the studio to record some extra vocals. The kids spontaneously burst out into patriotic singing and I just left it exactly how it was on the tape. They did a great job, don't you think?

The guitar sound on "She Loved You" is what I'd describe as "textured." Is this Kevin Carroll playing and how did he achieve the guitar sound.

That is Kevin playing. He did a great job throughout the album, adding a new element to each song. It is a layered effect involving about four tracks.

Is this a road song, about a couple. Is the line "In the mirror behind us, is all we've been through," meant to be a reflection on their past.

It's just a song about driving to a gig, getting to the gig, and playing the gig. Various things go through a person's mind at times like that – the lyrics are just a guess at what might be going through someone's head as they travel and play.

The lyric mentions New Orleans and seeing the "Northern lights in Saskatoon." So I'd guess that "Falling Of A Wheel" is this another road song. The chorus on this cut has the feel of a late career, Beatles tune.

The Beatles? I'll take that as a compliment! I am really-sad about George passing. He was my favourite Beatle by the way.

Did you write the song "No More Rain" while there was flooding affecting the South.

Kevin wrote the music to this one. I wrote the lyrics to his music, I should say. I was thinking about Jeff Buckley who I'd had a chance to play with at one time. This was right after he drowned.

"Sad Louisiana Waltz" is a cajun song set in New Orleans, or about New Orleans. Do you love cajun music.

What's not to love? The best part of this one is that Champ Hood played on it! [ED. NOTE. DesChamps "Champ" Hood (1952 - 2001) was a much-loved musician and songwriter from Spartanburg, South Carolina who had made his home in Austin, Texas for the past thirty years. He passed away last year after a battle with cancer. On fiddle, guitar and vocals he was the essential sideman. He arrived in Austin with the late Walter Hyatt and David Ball, and they performed and recorded for a number of years as Uncle Walt's Band. The list of Austin headliners that Hood went on to play with is nigh endless. For many years, Champ led the famous Threadgill Troubadours at the Wednesday night *sittin' and singin'* sessions at Threadgill's Restaurant in North Austin].

Is "Feed The Beast" about the wanton wasting of the planet's resources. For instance the line, "Throw out the scraps after the feast."

It's a song about the worst problem in the world, the vast divide between rich and poor.

There's a line in "Dancing In My Cell" about "The guilty hang at dawn." In "Widow Of The World" there's a reference to "dead man walking." Are these songs connected in some way.

The two songs are connected by being on the same record and having been written by the same person. Other than that there's no connection.

There's a sound like a old 78rpm record spinning around in the background of this song. It's a neat effect.

And that sound is a trade secret I'll not give away!

What more can you say about "Dancing In My Cell."

The woman is in prison after having killed her husband who was beating her. At that point she is free of him, so whether she hangs or languishes in a cell, it's better than what she had to live with at his hands. If a woman does not get away from a violent man, or does not do away with him, he will eventually kill her, in most cases.

The closing song "Open The Window" appears to be set at night..

This is the oldest song on the record. I wrote it just after John Lennon was murdered. I was living around the corner from the Dakota and was thinking about Yoko, and how rare a person she must be. And how rare it is that you can find true love. So I guess I wrote it for both of them, and in honour of that kind of love. Most people never find it. Some cactus flowers bloom at night and are wilted by the morning. So that is another rare thing. Usually they live and die unnoticed by any sentient being. To me that sort of beauty is more potent than a cultivated garden flower.

When I said closing song, I knew there was a hidden track. A child says "I don't know how to sing," while an adult replies "Well, you did a good job of it."

That was my niece and her Dad, my brother-in-law, and I just added it as a nod to some of my favourite journalists. The ones who pecked at my singing on the last album! [ED. NOTE. Lisa closed her E-Mail with a :), which I'll pass on to all of you].

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 02/02

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