

The Long Road From Mingo Junction To Austin.....

Allowing forty years of your life to elapse before releasing your first, full-blown, solo recording, smacks of priorities cast adrift to chart their own course. That you have written some rather special songs since your mid-teens, at least brings the perspective of perseverance to the fore. In traversing the road he chose, Michael Fracasso, a first generation son of immigrant parents, served his musical apprenticeship on three coasts of the North American landmass. *"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. Mingo Junction's main claim to celebrity fame is that Michael Cimino filmed **"The Deer Hunter"** locally in 1977. 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. In the early sixties, I saw people like Kitty Wells and numerous really cool, country acts. I wasn't a huge fan of country music, but I loved really sad country singers like Kitty and George Jones. My only other access to music was AM radio. The Beatles. I loved the Everly Brothers. Anything that featured an acoustic guitar always got my attention. As a child I always gravitated toward that sound."*

By the mid-sixties Michael had begun listening to *pop-folk* acts like Peter, Paul & Mary and The New Christy Minstrels. *"My sister brought a Bob Dylan record home. She was dating this guy who was in college. He came over to our house and left **"Blonde On Blonde."** It 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."* By the mid-sixties, as far as America's adult population was concerned, the blame undoubtedly lay with *that quartet from Liverpool* for instilling in the nation's youth the [passionate] desire to own [and play] a guitar. 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 exciting thing in my life at that time."* The thing was, there was no history of musicians in either branch of Michael's family tree.

Michael uncovered a few more pieces of his musical jig-saw puzzle when his sister subsequently took him to a folk concert, at a local college. During the show, 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. It was a travelling blues show and I don't even know who the musicians were, but 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 his sisters.

While still attending High School, Fracasso made a couple of solo public appearances. *"In my sophomore year I sang *"The House Of The Rising Sun"* at a school concert. The response was really good and it was exciting. Two years later – we had this thing called French Day and I had learned The Beatles song *"Michelle."* When it came to the actual performance, the programme finished way too early and the French teacher asked me to go out and sing for the audience. I took my guitar – this was in front of the whole school - and played *"Coming Into Los Angeles,"* the Arlo Guthrie song. I got this standing ovation and the whole school went crazy. When I went to my High School reunion a couple of years ago, everyone wanted me to play it."*

After graduating from High School, Michael spent two years studying Environmental Science at Ohio State University in Columbus. During this period, accompanied by a friend, Fracasso started performing cover songs in local bars. *"It was miserable,"* seemed like a summation that I should not pursue further. Michael continued 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."*

"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."

When Fracasso had relocated 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 that prevailed during the gathering was that the song performed [by each musician] had been written during the previous seven days. *"You got to present one song. I'm sure a lot of people came and played their old stuff. No one knew me from Adam, so I could have played an old song. I remember that it was a really good starting off point for me to think about songwriting as a serious thing. Like – "I have to get my assignment done this week. I have to write a song." 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. I remember working my ass off trying to write songs – one hot Labour Day weekend my friends wanted to go camping. I said "No, I'm going to stay here and write a song." "*

In 1980, Robin Hirsch, one of the Cornelia Street Café owners, approached Bernard Brightman, the owner of Stash Records, a local imprint mainly noted for releasing 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 vinyl album. A decade later, when the recording 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.

One of the principal contributors, and the driving force behind the Cornelia Street Café sessions, was Jack Hardy. In 1982 Hardy established the Folk Co-oP, an organisation that went on to record and release a series of vinyl and CD albums featuring the work of New York's, then, burgeoning crop of folk musicians - the already established, as well as the up-and-coming. Bearing the alphabetic index SE [sic. Songwriters Exchange], Fracasso's only contribution to the series was the song "Gayle" on release #SE103. After releasing eighteen Folk Co-oP recordings, the organisation changed its name to Fast Folk Musical Magazine. Fast Folk went on to produce around ninety, album length compilation recordings, between the years 1984 and 1997. The master tapes for the entire Fast Folk and Folk Co-oP catalogue, were presented to the Smithsonian Institute in the summer 1999. Via their web site, The Smithsonian Institute currently custom burns copies of the Fast Folk recordings to order.

Fracasso spent the eighties working in New York rock clubs, performing around 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 had 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. Mann later worked with The Waterboys on their "**This Is The Sea**" album. *"He was a big influence on my direction as a musician. 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. Then he went off to Amsterdam. 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. They were way huge sounding and one of the songs we cut was "Big Sister." Later, I teamed up with a rockabilly band called Hoy Boy & The Doys, and really enjoyed playing with them."* Through the latter half of the eighties, Michael formed a number of other bands, and scored a couple of production deals that initially appeared promising, but ultimately led nowhere. At the close of the decade Prince's manager was feting him. During those year's the prospects explored and the promises made were legion, but Michael was well aware that father time was marching inexorably on. 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 Michael's 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. As with his previous sojourns in Washington State and New York City, at the outset, he had no friends or acquaintances among the local population. *"I'll tell you what made me move here. One time I was down here I took the road from Austin out to Kerrville, through Fredericksburg. I thought this is the most beautiful place in the world, what am I doing in New York. I had never played in Austin, but I knew it had a music scene."* The sacrifices and struggles that formed part of the apprenticeship Michael had served in the Pacific North-West and New York soon began to pay dividends.

"I don't think I made it to an open-mike locally until around Labour Day. I didn't feel like playing. I sat where I was living at the time 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 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 matter of only four months he had made a significant impact.

One year on, Fracasso hired Mike Harwick [guitar], followed soon afterward by bassist Lorne Roll. Adopting the name Spaghetti Western, the trio were soon performing on a regular basis, and 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 sessions 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*. By the way, Michael's beloved canine companion, Fuji, was immortalised for eternity, with the cassette version being assigned to Little Fuji Productions. In 1993, a CD version of the recording appeared on the [now defunct] 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 recording project that took two more years to reach fruition. By the way, the trio took its name from a popular local swimming hole.

Michael appeared on number of local compilation albums through the nineties. 1993 saw the release on the Dejadisc label of "**Pastures of Plenty - An Austin Celebration of Woody Guthrie.**" Fracasso performs "1913 Massacre" featuring Lisa Mednick on accordion, and "Dead Or Alive" with his band. *"I'd done that Woody show, which Greg Johnson organised, for three years in a row."* Two years on, the 2CD annual "**Broadcasts**" charity release by the Austin radio station **KGSR** featured his "Wise Blood," while the station's 1998 collection included Michael's "Chain Link Fence."

By early 1993, the **Austin Chronicle** was marking Fracasso out as *"Austin's greatest undiscovered treasure,"* with a singing voice that journalists thought was 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 they were right."* The 1994 **Music City Texas** poll saw Michael pick up another title, on this occasion, *Male Vocalist/Acoustic*. That year Michael undertook a Texas Songwriters On The Road nation-wide tour with David Halley, Jo Carol Pierce and Jammy LaFave.

Hamilton Pool's "**Return to Zero**" was the first of two 1995 releases 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 been a feature of "**Love & Trust.**" Later that year, "**When I Lived In The Wild,**" his sophomore

solo effort was released by the Bohemia Beat label. Jimmy LaFave, who also records for the Colorado based imprint, was instrumental in getting Michael signed. 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 is that it is an always melodic, fusion of folk, country, blues and pop. And darned intelligent lyrically too.

In 1996 Fracasso announced that he was leaving Hamilton Pool to concentrate on his solo career, then some time later retracted that decision. Fracasso's replacement was David Halley. Although a breaking-up of the band was never officially announced, they pretty much drifted apart later that year. The Spring of 1998 saw the release of Michael's third solo album, the enigmatically titled **"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 [and these days, Bob Dylan], 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. Charlie's really a genial person to work with. He doesn't have this rock star ego. It was really refreshing. He's just a sweet guy and is here just to play music."* Following its release the disc became a fixture on The Gavin Report's Roots Top 10 and in early 1999, the album was heavily featured in the **Austin Chronicle** and **Austin American-Statesman's** End of Year, Best of... Polls.

In 1999 Michael and Charlie entered the studio once more and the sessions produced a, as yet unreleased, collection titled **"Blue Heaven."** *"We needed money to finish it. We couldn't find anybody who wanted to get behind the project. We cut ten songs and like **"World In A Drop Of Water"** it has that ambitious edge to it. People have to pay attention to it. I'm torn as to whether we should re-record it a little differently, or someday finish it in its present form."* Two of the songs from **"Blue Heaven"** were used in a local independent movie, **"Natural Selection."** According to the International Movie Database, the plot of this 1999 film is based on the strange reaction of the residents of an East Texas town to a serial killer who invades their small world. According to Michael, *"There are actually two serial killers in the movie, and eventually they meet. That parts OK, it's when the vampires appear that the story stopped making sense."* Although the days of Hamilton Pool are long gone, when Iain Matthews' latest solo offering **"A Tiniest Wham"** was released last year, the track list included the song, "Like Mercury" and is credited to Matthews/Fracasso. *"He wrote the lyrics and had some music for it. He played his version for me, and I put different music to it."*

Fracasso's first CD of the new century, **"Back To Oklahoma,"** was recorded in front of a standing room only audience at Greg Johnson's Oklahoma City club, The Blue Door, on Saturday 9th December last year. It was released in mid-September by the Austin based label www.indiarecords.com, an artists managed co-operative established last year by local musicians. Featuring a cover drawing by Woody Guthrie's sister, Mary Jo Guthrie Edgman, and supported on electric and acoustic guitar by Charlie Sexton, the nineteen-cut/fifteen song disc features three cover songs, including Ewan MacColl's "Dirty Old Town." The latter trio of folk and blues inspired songs are interspersed among Michael's originals, half a dozen of which appear on disc for the first time.

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 thoughtfully serious. Sadly they did not bring him the national or international recognition that is truly his due. The full circle, *back to basics* approach of **"Back To Oklahoma,"** a *way above average live recording*, may just be the spark that finally ignites flame of fame. His music certainly deserves it.....

Arthur Wood.
Kerrville Kronikles 10/01.
[3600 words]