



Jonathan Byrd “**The Sea And The Sky**” Waterbug Records

If a moment in time could be isolated that marked the genesis of this conceptual song collection, then that moment occurred during 2002 when Jonathan played a solo gig in a bookstore in Asheville, North Carolina, while, concurrently, the Athens, Georgia based duo, Dromedary, performed in Zambra's, a local Tapas restaurant. Geographically speaking, the restaurant was located immediately downstairs from the bookstore, and as the exotic [and mostly] acoustic sounds that the duo made drifted upwards the creative cogs and wheels in Jonathan's brain engaged as he began considering the possibilities that working with Andrew Reissiger and Rob McMaken offered. Over time, and thoroughly inspired, a sonic tapestry formed on paper before Byrd's eyes. It's probably worth adding at this juncture, in relation to the album's overall theme/title, that commencing in his late teens Byrd spent four years serving in the American Navy.

This twelve-track disc – nine songs and three instrumentals - is housed inside the rear cover of a 32 page, glossy hardback book. Interspersed among the lyrics to the nine songs are reproductions of paper cut illustrations, by Jan Burger, that compliment the sea borne and sky bound theme of the recording. As for the instruments that can be heard, from previous Byrd recordings, there's Jason Cade and Rex McGhee on fiddle, plus Robbie Link's sonorous bass and cello. Added to this mix, on this occasion, is the accordion of Chris Frank, while Reissiger plays flamenco guitar, charango and electric guitar, and McMaken who also sings harmony plays mandolin, Appalachian lap dulcimer and cumbus [choom-bush].

Creating a conceptual collection of songs can place immense limitations upon the writer, yet Byrd has successfully transcended that hurdle throughout this recording by imbuing many of the songs with non-specific, universal lyrics. As a result, Jonathan's words can be interpreted on a number of levels. Far from instilling monolithic vagueness, multiplicity invigorates Byrd's entire concept. The third track, “I've Been Stolen” is a fine example, since the lyric furnishes the possibility that we could be listening to the voice of *the young slaver* decrying the evil trade in which he has become enmeshed, or, alternatively, the desperate cries of a once free man now condemned to becoming a slave in a strange land.

Over five minutes in duration, and two verses in length – one repeated four times, and the other three - “**The Sea And The Sky**” opens with “True Companion” in which the sea and sky, in their eternal constancy, address one another. Towards the end of the cut, for a matter of a few seconds McMaken's mandolin picks a snippet of the subsequent instrumental “Gold Coast” [and, to complete *this unique marriage*, the riff is repeated late in the closing track]. “The Young Slaver” which immediately follows, is a duet featuring two voices – that of the slaver and his sweetheart, who find themselves parted by the sea, time and, by the closing pair of verses, his passing. The evening after the 2004 Kerrville Folk Festival ended I witnessed Byrd and fellow 2003 Kerrville New Folk winner, Anais Mitchell, perform the latter tune as a duet at Austin's Cactus Café. The song seemed to possess even greater potency when performed in duo form, while on the album version Jonathan furnishes *both voices*. That said, none of the foregoing substantially detracts from the spellbinding story that unfolds in Byrd's lyric [and *solo* version].

“**The Sea And The Sky**” is Byrd's third CD release, and in summation the commonalities that those recordings share are, obviously, his voice and compositions, and the fact that as an accomplished singer/songwriter Jonathan has a penchant for including instrumental compositions, whether covers or originals, on his releases. “Gold Coast” is one three such *lyrical interludes* in this collection. The other instrumental titles are “Verdigris Intro” and “The New World,” and all the cuts allow Dromedary the

freedom to explore world music styled sounds. Following *the protocol* I hinted at earlier, reference the latter title, at numerous times in the evolution of mankind, a number of continents and lands have been addressed as *the new world*.

As with "I've Been Stolen," the voice in "I'm So Lost" could be interpreted as that of the deceased young slaver, or, as that of the slave. During his time at sea, Byrd became well familiar with ships fittings encrusted in green verdigris. The track of the same name is a reflection upon the onset of old age and the passage of time. According to the liner booklet, Chapter Two of Byrd's musical journey opens with "Little Bird." Sighting of birds by mariners were often taken as a sign that the ship was approaching land [and in olden times a safe haven], and in Jonathan's lyric the narrator's despondency "*I had lost my bearings, I had lost my way*" gives way to the joy filled mantra "*I will love you tomorrow as I love you today.*"

The duality in "The River Girl" lyric lies in the word *bridge*, which could be interpreted as one of the integral parts of a sailing ship, as well as the man made structure that spans rivers linking two pieces of land. As for the melody, it possesses a Middle Eastern feel. The hinging couplet in the album title cut arrives in the penultimate verse and refer to *the journeys end* with "*Where the ship meets the shore, where the sky meets the sea, The two of them joined are finally free.*" "For You," the closing number, a love song, presents the listener with the collection's most accessible lyric, as the narrator enumerates a handful of European destinations he has visited. When he finally turns for home, he intends to fetch, for his sweetheart, exotic gifts only available in those destinations.

While listening to "**The Sea And The Sky**" consider a boundless canvas and you will begin to understand as well as enjoy the magnificent universe Byrd has created in word and melody.

Folkwax Rating 10 out of 10

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 05/04 and 06/04