

Jeffrey Foucault talks about “Miles From The Lightning.”

*The interview with Jeffrey Foucault took place by telephone on Monday 1st April 2002. Jeffrey was at his home in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin and I was in Birmingham, England. Thanks to Kerry Bernard at Young/Hunter for setting up the interview. I reviewed Jeffrey's debut solo album “Miles From The Lightning” in Issue # 49 of **Folkwax** [7th March 2002] and what follows is the segment of our interview where we discussed his album.*

Once you began thinking about making a record, did you think about independent labels, or was it always going to be a self-produced recording.

I asked around and I tried to figure out what would be the best, not only the most practical and economical way to do it, but also what would best suit what I had in mind. What I had in mind was something real basic that sounded like what I was doing. Not too many bells and whistles. Not too many studio effects so I didn't think I needed to seek out and court labels or anything like that. I figured out what it would cost me. Here's an example of my parents supporting me - I was able to get the money from my family and then pay them back within a few months of having released the record.

The guy who helped you record the album, Joel Lorberblatt, where did you find him.

I wanted somebody who I knew I could trust and who I thought I would be able to work with. You don't hire somebody for their talent and then say “OK, here's exactly what I want you to do.” That doesn't make any sense. I wanted somebody that would have a voice in the production values. I asked a guy here in town who has a studio and he said “I really don't use the studio much anymore, but the guy who built my studio lives over in Madison and he works with the people at Audio For The Arts.” I called him up and he was a really great guy. A real straight shooter, and a good kind person. We met and talked, and it made real good sense. I definitely agreed about what he thought was right on, and he seemed to think he could make a very faithful recording.

Where did you actually record the album, as it's not too clear in the liner.

I recorded it in Madison. He gave me the option of going into the studio, or using a mobile deck that he had with real nice Neumann microphones that he set up in his house. Knowing nothing about recording when I started, and knowing that I was going to have to learn a lot, we recorded in his house.

You've called your label Rock River Records. I presume that has some local connotations.

Yes. It's about a block from the window that I'm standing at right now. The Rock River runs East to West through the middle of Fort Atkinson, and that's the one that I walk over, every time I walk across the Main Street bridge to get down to the Café Carpe where I play. I guess I wanted something that was local and familiar.

Your song publishing is credited to Marrowbone Music. Why Marrowbone.

I took American Indian studies as my minor in College. I liked the word, frankly. Marrowbone is a family name in the Lakota nation. The marrowbone was also one of the prized thing to have when they would slaughter buffalo, and it just had this wonderful American flavour to it. There was something about the existence of a bone with nutrients inside it, that whole idea of the marrow being at the core of things.

The chorus of “Ballad Of Copper Junction [A Journeyman's Lament],” the opening song, obviously refers to the Vietnam War without naming it, yet you were born the year after that war ended.

I used to work maintenance and rough carpentry jobs, and for a few summers I worked at a Y camp that I had grown up with. The main guy that I worked with was quiet and tough, had a heavy beard, owned a motorcycle, was a chain smoker, and had done some jail time. There were a couple of times, out on the property after we had hauled something heavy or whatever, where we sat in the truck bed and had a cigarette. I managed to get a few biographical details out of him – he served in Vietnam, a marriage, a boy somewhere, and that he grew up way in the north. Terry got fired, for alcoholism and a short temper, and when they cleaned out his office he left behind a box of things that included a wedding picture, a

Marine Corps jacket and some random things. A few years passed and I found the beginning of the song sitting around in my notes.

“Dove And The Waterline” focuses on those periods of desperation that we all have. Is that a reasonable assessment.

It is. It was the Christmas vacation and I was home living with my parents and I was stuck indoors. Wintertime in Wisconsin is pretty cold. There was a blizzard and I went out walking - I smoke a tobacco pipe occasionally, and I wasn't going to be able to do that in my mom's house. Across from my parent's house there's a great wide-open cornfield, and after that another one and then another one. You can get out there and be lost in a kind of bowl where you see the city lights reflected, but you can't actually see them. A lot of time farmers will leave a few big oak trees standing in the middle of their fields as forage to attract deer so that they can hunt them in the season. In the winter time you have these big solitary trees standing out there and, being there, it was one of those moments that you are talking about where you really get down and you feel like there is a certain darkness on you. It was that feeling and that moment that is sort of the context for the song.

One of the lessons that we never learn from history is to stop fighting wars. Is “Thistedown Tears” your armageddon song.

Yes, and I'll tell you how that happened [laughs]. It was about two days before the New Year, at the turn of the millennium, the big Y2K. Looking around, everybody seemed to be losing their mind and buying generators and stocking up on ammunition. What made me begin to write the song was, I was listening to Woody Guthrie being interviewed by Alan Lomax on an old Folkways recording. Woody had been picked up by these young musicologists who were trying to figure out how American music fitted together. He was talking about the Dust Bowl rolling down into the Texas Panhandle and Oklahoma, and what it looked like. He described this mile high wall of black earth roiling across the landscape at these farmers in their small towns. They go out and they look at it, and these are pretty fundamentalist Christian people, salt of the earth, with a relatively simple idea of what their relationship to God was. They looked at it and they didn't really seem to think twice about it. The way he described it, they just believed that that was it. They went down in their basements and sang hymns and waited for the world to end. When the Y2K foolishness was rampant in the media – I went to Wal-Mart and saw people stocking up on Lord knows what. What stuck with me, what intrigued me, was the idea that everybody thought there was a good chance that we were going to get it, and that if we did get it, I think in the back of everybody's mind they knew we had it coming. What it is about being human that makes us willing to believe that, that's what made me write that song.

“Secretariat” is a very structured song. Was it deliberately written that way.

I think by the time I'd gotten one verse down, the structure was real deliberate. I started out fooling around and I'd always wanted to use an old Daoist fable about the superlative horse, the horse that raises no dust and leaves no tracks. The fable is about a man who is hired by the king to choose horses, and he's supposed to choose a successor. That idea is what I wanted in there, but then I came up with every little piece of Americana that I could find, and what it meant, and why. Then it became this sort of essay on love.

But there's a deliberate element of humour in the song.

Yeah. I don't know how, exactly to frame this. I had a conversation with a friend of mine the other day, and I was saying that it was funny but when you love somebody and you start out, you feel like Superman and you can do no wrong. You spend your whole life trying to hide from people the most common facts about yourself. You don't want anybody to know what a jackass you are and then you take this one person and after you get past that initial part where you can do no wrong, you let them in and you trust them with the secret that you are a jackass. That interplay, it has to be comic, I don't know what else it could be if it wasn't comic.

There's also that element that if you get married, it's one song that you might have to -

Take it out of the catalogue [laughs].

Yes, I think you follow me [laughs].

I don't know. That would be the consummate irony wouldn't it, if I found the *superlative horse* and she made me quit playing the song.

The song "Buckshot Moon" strikes me as being a very Wisconsin song.

Absolutely. If you go to my web site and at the end of www.jeffreyfoucault.com you put a backslash and you put buckshot.html and hit return, there's the whole explanation of that song. I wrote the song when I had to spend a month living at my folk's house because I'd run out of money. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, or how I was going to go about doing it and I was just having a rough time and it was that dark November/December time of year. It's a song about what I was feeling, and then I put it in the immediate natural context of the landscape around me.

The penultimate song "I'm Alright" is the first time you mention Townes Van Zandt by name. Was the inclusion of his name deliberate.

That song came almost faster than anything I've ever written. Sometimes when you're hard up for a song, just looking around and writing down exactly what you see and making it rhyme, is a pretty simple thing to do. There's a framed show poster of Townes Van Zandt above my desk – there's a picture of Abraham Lincoln and there's a picture of Geronimo, the Chiricahua Indian chief. In that verse when I say I'm sitting there drinking Rhinelander beer and toasting things, really that's exactly what I had been doing. It just happened that Townes was sitting there and available for toasting. I had gone down to the bar at the end of my street to buy packaged beer. I'd probably been there twice and the guy behind the counter saw me coming through the window and had what I wanted on the counter, rung up and in a bag by the time I walked in the door. He said, "You're Jeff right? Do you still live up on the corner? How are things going?" At the time I thought if this is the direction my life is going at this moment, I think everything is just fine with me.

The song "Miles From The Lightning [A Song For Townes Van Zandt]" you wrote fifteen months after he passed away. Was it a hard song to write.

Initially it was. The first one I wrote was a hard song to write, because the week that it happened, I was driving in the car somewhere and listening to, maybe it was "**Acoustic Café.**" I think it was a Sunday, and they said "*In other news, legendary songwriter Townes Van Zandt died on New Years day of a heart attack in his home etc. etc.*" Sometimes you don't know where to go with that sort of thing. Maybe I didn't even realise how important his writing had been to me, at that point. That made me start to think about it, and I tried to write a song and it wasn't a good song. I threw it out and then I didn't work on it for a long, long time. Then, I don't know if you remember, there was an Austin City Limits where they sat in a semi-circle.

You've kind of pre-empted the next question. So you saw Steve Earle perform "Fort Worth Blues."

Right. I saw that show and I saw Steve Earle play that song and that's a wonderful sort of heartbreaking song. I remember that it was just a feeling that it gave me that I really could stick with. About a month later, it was springtime and there was a big – Wisconsin has these tremendous, heavy thunderstorms all through spring and summer. We had one that knocked out the power and I was sitting in the house that I lived in, in college, just kind of watching the rain come down and that's when I wrote that song.

Am I correct in thinking that in the lyric you employed images that Townes would have used.

You are, so far, the first person who caught on that I was trying to use his – I actually used his language, a couple of times. I think *highway rolling* is one, let's see – and some of those *Carolina* references that he throws in are there.

Arthur Wood
Kerrville Kronikles 04/02
[1700 words]