



Terry Clarke with Wes McGhee “Night Ride To Birmingham” Terrapin Records

On this twelve-song collection, Clarke’s eighth solo release [*], there’s the same number of Clarke originals, a trio of co-writes and one “thematically appropriate” cover tune. All in all the contents equate to a historical portrait of Clarke’s, principally American, twentieth century musical heroes – well, “Degas In New Orleans” apart – although there is particular emphasis on performers who were active during the nineteen-fifties and sixties. In that regard the songs attest how Terry Clarke has evolved into the accomplished roots musician that he is today. A professional picker/songwriter for close to four decades, assisted here by musician/album producer Wes McGhee, Clarke’s lyrics recall the debauched and deceased, as well as the virtuous and obscure.

In his hometown of Reading, England, circa 1961/2, a teenaged Clarke witnessed a performance by the late Johnny Burnette [b. 1934 d. 1964] and his four-piece English tour band The Rebounds. With Wes picking out urgent rockabilly styled chords on electric guitar, “Me & Johnny Burnette” recalls that long ago Monday evening gig at the Majestic Ballroom, and imagines a conversation had they chanced to meet. As the lyric unfolds, there’s mention of Burnette’s musician brother Dorsey, and of Johnny’s 1962 single “Clown Shoes,” a number penned by Texan, James Marcus Smith. That song reached # 35 on the UK Pop Chart, and later that decade Smith found fame in Britain as the performer P. J. Proby. At the outset of the ballad paced “Margaret & The Wayward Wind” Clarke name-checks “The Wayward Wind” a 1956 Pop chart success for the singing cowboy, Tex Ritter, and goes on to reprise a line from the song’s chorus. It appears that, circa 1959, Isle of Skye born Dr. Margaret McKinnon was a big fan of the song. Leaving her island home and moving to London, these days Dr. McKinnon is a renowned teacher of Gaelic Language and Music, and occasional musical performer.

Apart from her undoubted skill with word and melody, Rosanne Cash has been known to write the odd narrative. Clarke’s “John Lennon & Johnny Cash” was inspired by her essay “John Lennon In The American South” which appeared in the collection “**Blue Lightning**” [1998, Slow Dancer Press, London, ISBN: 1-871033-43-8]. While Wes does, at one juncture, pick out the riff to The Beatles “I Feel Fine,” Clarke’s melody mainly explores a bass style Cash backbeat. As for the lyric, it portrays the pair stood outside the Sun Recording Studio on Union Avenue, Memphis, smoking cigarettes. Later, there’s mention of a pickin’ session “*At Luther’s house on a big Sunday, Catchin’ the heat of the last sunray, When it got dark I bet they played a minor*” – Luther being, guitar player Luther Monroe Perkins [+]. If there’s one musician featured in this collection who is virtually unknown, it’s Thomas Wiggins [b. 1849, Columbus, Georgia, d. 1908, Hoboken, New Jersey] the inspiration for “Blind Tom In Hoboken.” Only one example of Wiggins’ music exists in the public domain, and Clarke penned the song after spending time travelling in New Jersey where Blind Tom lived and performed for many years.

Country singer Bonnie Owens [nee Campbell, b. 1932] was married for a time to the Bakersfield, California based musician Buck Owens, and later to that other major Bakersfield recording legend, Merle Haggard. Employing a western-swing paced tune, in “Sweet Bonnie Owens” Terry recalls how she sang the country blues, alludes figuratively to the 1957 Buddy Knox penned # 1 hit single “Party Doll,” and mentions toward the close that he [and the late Jesse Taylor] once opened for Merle and his band, including Bonnie, at Gruene Hall in Gruene, Texas. It has been said that “*A picture is worth a thousand words*” and “Degas In New Orleans” the first of two Terry Clarke/Ronny Elliott co-writes, certainly gives substance to that contention. During the autumn of 1872 French born painter Edgar Degas visited the

States, and in particular Louisiana where many of his relatives were involved in the cotton trade, Degas' mother having been born in New Orleans.

"Gene Vincent Sings" focuses on another nineteen-fifties musician [b. 1935 d. 1971], while the musically dramatic "Maria [Callas]" references the, born to Greek parents, New Yorker [b. 1923 d. 1977] who became one of the world's greatest, if not the greatest, opera singer. The extent of Callas' fame arose from her career choice to perform a wide variety of operatic roles. "Night Ride To Birmingham [Zephyr Xanadu]" features a Clarke melody set to a lyric by Kathryn Lay, and her words, once more, reference the Man In Black. Circa 1968/69 Clarke saw Cash perform in Birmingham, England and Kathryn's lyric recalls that teenage adventure. It's hardly unexpected that "Song For Laura Nyro" is underpinned by a dreamy sounding guitar and keyboard backdrop, while the lyric includes mention of "*doo wop*," "*mimosa*" and "*butterfly*," all musical styles/terms that Nyro [b. 1947 d. 1997] doted upon. The penultimate cut and only cover song is Gillian Welch's haunting and even-handed "Elvis Presley Blues." I say even-handed considering that the so-called "King of Rock 'n Roll" was the architect of his own downfall. Welch included the song on her 2003 album "**Time [The Revelator]**," and the same year Joan Baez covered it on "**Dark Chords On A Big Guitar**" [2003]. Underpinned by a Caribbean steel drum and set to a quasi-reggae rhythm, "Last Days Of Tampa Red," the closing cut, is the second Terry Clarke/Ronny Elliott co-write. Therein, the writers recall the Georgia born blues musician Hudson Woodbridge aka "Tampa Red" Whittaker [b. 1904 d. 1981] [#] who spent many years living, performing and recording in Chicago, eventually dying there, destitute, in a local nursing home.

Note.

[*] – The head count does not include the "**Rhythm Oil**" album. Recorded by a trio that featured Clarke, guitarists Michael Messer and the late Jesse Taylor, most of the songs were penned by Clarke.

[+] – As The Tennessee Two, Perkins and bass player Marshall Grant, supported Cash when he launched his recording career at Sun Records.

[#] – Hudson was raised in Tampa, Florida by his grandparents, the Whittakers.

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

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