

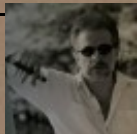
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Craig Bickhardt - The More I Wonder (Album Review)

Posted by John Apice on July 17, 2014 at 12:30pm

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Don't know who this artist is....?

He's an artist who was formerly signed with Bob Dylan's manager Albert Grossman, had development deals with Atlantic records' Ahmet Ertegun, had songs recorded by Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, BB King, Poco, Art Garfunkel, Janis Ian, Martina McBride, The Judds, Alison Krauss & Kathy Mattea. Placed two songs in the Robert Duvall Academy Award winning film "Tender Mercies," and shared a stage with Bruce Springsteen, Stephen Stills & Harry Chapin

and now.... This singer/songwriter, Craig Bickhardt, steps out from the musical shadows to sing his own songs.

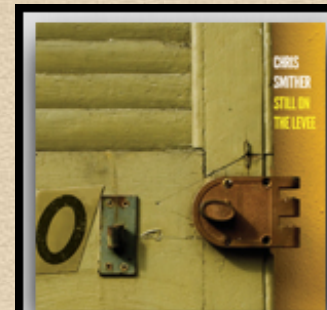
Fortunately, with an artist like Frank Sinatra or an Elvis Presley the majority of listeners knew they didn't write their own material so we understood that someone behind those incredible songs trusted these artists to bring their material to life. In the case of Sinatra and Presley, they often hit the bulls-eye for those songwriters – songwriters I may add who did not sing or perform themselves. Their artistry was in their pen, guitar, or piano. But there are also artists -- like Craig -- who did labor at

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writing songs alone or with someone and they do perform and record their own songs. Yet, their careers despite many opportunities never seem to bridge the quality of their work with – let's not say fame – let's say a recognizable name.

Examples of this type of songwriter are Robert Ellis Orrall (who's written songs for Taylor Swift and had several solo albums himself), the late Robert Hazard ("Girls Just Want To Have Fun"), in the early days even Carole King, and to a lesser degree now -- Randy Newman and the late Harry Nilsson ("Without You," "Everybody's Talkin'" -- written by folk singer Fred Neill. So, we have a singer-songwriter who "covers" other singer-songwriters and has a hit with their material).

People knew their songs, artists knew their work, but few listeners knew their names until decades later. In the case of Randy Newman – many, many albums with lots of patience on behalf of Warner Brothers who didn't drop him for lack of sales all those years ago. Then there were the real mavericks of songwriting and recording artists who had great versions of their own songs recorded but they would have eaten TV dinners for the rest of their lives had someone more famous not listened and decided to cover their material.

I am already researching an article on the subject of songs being covered and I know it's going to be controversial. Seems many misinformed people believe that artists who cover other people's material are not truly artists at all. Really? What makes one believe someone who can write a song can also effectively perform it? What makes one think a songwriter can



even sing? We've all heard Burt Bacharach and Paul Williams sing – good thing they didn't give up their day jobs as tune-smiths. That's why we have artists who do sing, perform and bring lackluster or average work to life. But that's another article and I will make a point.

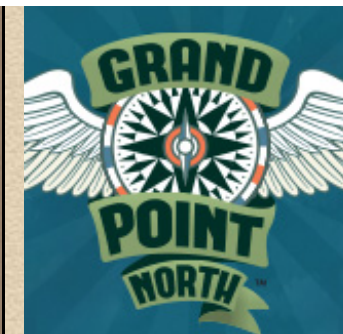
So who am I talking about? There's singer-songwriter Ray Kennedy (no, not the country singer. Years before him there was another Ray Kennedy who recorded for a subsidiary of Columbia called Arc Records.) This Ray Kennedy recorded a great album and from that came the big hit "Sail on Sailor" for who? Oh, The Beach Boys. I wonder how many people who love The Beach Boys think that song was written by them?

Then there are songs like -- "Everytime I Think of You," and "Isn't It Time," by The Babys (John Waite). But still, no one knows Ray Kennedy and even fewer ever heard the original songs and they were fiery.

There's a nice New York-New Jersey Jewish boy Larry Weiss. He too, had a great solo album called Black and Blue Suite. From this came a song Glen Campbell heard and took to the top – "Rhinestone Cowboy." Then, someone named Barry Manilow must have heard Larry's version of "Lay Me Down" because Mr. Manilow covered that one. Larry was also responsible for Jeff Beck's "Hi-Ho Silver Lining," and The American Breed's hit "Bend Me-Shape Me." To keep the bread on the table and rent paid -- there were several R&B hits for the likes of the Shirelles, Nat King Cole, Jerry Butler and Chuck Jackson. Nice track record. But, Larry who? His album promptly was available in Woolworth's for 99 cents along with Mantovani's Greatest Hits and the soundtrack to Otto Preminger's disastrous film Skiddo. Thankfully, Larry's hit records by other artists did keep him in steak and potatoes because Mr. Weiss continues to write and record today.

Which brings me finally to my subject. I was curious about Bickhardt because I was familiar with his songs other people recorded and Craig wrote -- some solo and some with a co-writer. Many great, successful artists throughout the years continue to record Craig's tunes. His career has been quite the adventure. The only excuse I can fathom is that Craig has not been more widely known and familiar for a simple reason: that the musical arena is so vast, so varied, so crowded and unforgiving that some wonderful talent simply never rise to the top – they remain milk while younger artists become cream because -- the focus is always on what's new, fresh and outrageous. Just being extremely talented and capable seems to be secondary. However, Craig has been around the barn several times and those younger writers and singers? They still have to prove that ability or become simply sour cream.

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Hopefully, with this new album "The More I Wonder," Craig will gain some new fans, admirers and some reconsideration's by those who didn't pay attention the first time. The opening song immediately showcases the excellent musicianship of Craig and his co-players. Bickhardt has always been a great guitar player and he is supported by his own young daughter Aislinn on vocal harmonies throughout. "Giant Steps," is the introduction to an album touted as 12 scenes from life, love and family. Poignant in the way that Cindy Bullens' album "Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth" was conceived. This may even be a companion album to that beautiful, yet heart-wrenching effort by Cindy.

"Crazy Nightingale," follows and according to the press release it was inspired by the tragic death of poet Dylan Thomas and despite being a modern-day song it rings true with a traditional oriented melody. I can hear a Fairport Convention, Steely-Eye Span, Christy Moore, Clive Gregson, The Pentangle or Tir na Nog cover this tune. It is sublime, meticulous and fragile – but, for some reason the power is in the words, the tale and the gentle tin whistle that haunts it. Song power comes in many guises. The video is a live version recorded prior to the album version. In the video, many artists who have since passed make little appearances – and while many deserving artists – singers or writers – weren't included and should have been – the "idea" is successfully conveyed. A testament to the ideal that is Craig Bickhardt in writing about what he knows, who he knows and what he has experienced. Virtually all songs on this album are about real places, actual events and authentic people. This is Craig's domain and he knows where the skeletons are buried.

With the essence of Aislinn's backing vocal and the deep tones of a cello running through "The Restless Kind," Craig frames

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a shimmering melody over lyrics that sound as if they were co-written by the 19th Century English romantic poet -- Percy Bysshe Shelley, maybe? "You might say I'll settle down, when I'm six feet in the ground." And was that the word "shit" I heard? Whew..."my boots were caked with shit and soil..." but that's exactly what it is...so where's the problem? Even Mr. Shelley could appreciate the accuracy.

The best melodic tune on this collection so far is "It Opens," and is the most commercially viable melody. Instantly likeable, memorable, and sung in a sincere Richard Thompson style. What is peculiar about these songs is that Craig lived in Nashville, came from Pennsylvania and yet, many of his melodies and musical approaches on this album seem rooted in olde England, Ireland, Scotland -- and though music from those countries are the roots of Americana / Appalachian music Craig seems to be tapping into those sources subconsciously and creating "classic" sounding folk songs.

"Stan," co-written with Nathan Bell is about a Vietnam Vet who "got a job as a hot metal man, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania..." It mentions the town several times in what could be a proud voice or a sad voice. It's a great place, where great music flourishes but those are the new reasons to enjoy it -- the historic reasons is indeed today a sad one and this place should never be forgotten for the labors of its people. This town was at one time the very heartbeat of America. Bethlehem Steel was like Exxon, General Motors and names like that. I spend lots of my own time there myself. It's like a little Greenwich Village now. The song talks about how the manufacturing has gone from this once legendary steel town. Billy Joel's "Allentown," sung about a town not far from Bethlehem was sung a little more forcefully and angry. Craig chose to squeeze out of his tune with the emotion of its geography. The words carefully chosen, the notes where they would do their best to an unfamiliar ear.

Having been a baby-boomer, I remember the attitude we grew up with. Not unlike the Greatest Generation that had The Bowery Boys, the East Side Kids and the juvenile delinquents of The Dead End Kids (actually, all of these are the same -- just filmed by different studios). My generation had its West Side Story kids, different faces, same anger, same rebelliousness and mischievousness and anxieties. The old generations had Leo Gorcey, John Garfield and we had Brando and James Dean. Generations forget that they were these "people." Craig's heavy ode to the parents who forgot they were once rebellious until they recognize that very trait in their own children. This is "Young Hearts, Wild Horses Or The Wind" and it will probably be true again to the next generation.

"Woman of the Mist," continues to ring true that traditional melodic tone -- familiar to bands like the Oyster Band, Spirit of the West, Horslips, Lindisfarne and Great Big Sea. Here, Craig Bickhardt is in good company. He could easily write songs for any one of these incredible bands. This is filled with lovely lyrics, and is the kind of melody that sticks in the memory. I think it's marvelous that a songwriter can write something that "sounds" like it's been with us for hundreds of years. It's a testament to the quality of the talent that embraces a melodic history thoroughly and succeeds at it.

Craig paces himself well by journeying into a darker realm with "Gourd Vine." Excellent guitar picking, wonderfully

NOTES

FAQ

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captured on the recording – the instruments seem to touch each other like a feather. Aislinn’s gentle shimmering vocal is ghostly and effective. Craig’s dobro resonator guitar, Tom Hampton’s baritone guitar and lap steel just paint the music with broad brush strokes of notes that ache with the story of a woman who ain’t coming back...and the result is a typical Richard Thompson tragedy – the man commits suicide. Tragedy, compliance to the circumstance or true love? That’s for the listener to decide.

The survival of the family is explored in this faithful reading as Craig duets with his daughter Aislinn who once again sings in a soft sympathetic style as if she knows it’s her father’s song and she is just there to echo his voice as if it were his conscience. “Momentary World” is very moving and powerful.



The relationship between father and daughter is the subject of “I’ll Know When You Need Me,” and preserves the essence of the love between souls. “I will reach you in a heartbeat though you’re miles and miles away....” Sometimes I just believe that the greatest songs, the best lyrics are hidden in jewels like this while the rest of the world limps along listening to “hits” that recycle the same ideas, the same repetitious beat, the same clichés decade after decade. Average songwriters are not going to tackle a subject like this. Frank Sinatra could have had a hit with a song like this – but so could Michael Buble. It could remain bare bones and it could be orchestrated – but arranged by someone who isn’t bombastic. This is a song that should – in a perfect world – become a standard.

Beautiful acoustic guitar picking starts “Go Round,” and while others have compared it to several other guitarists – I will stick with the tone and say it reminds me again of the quality that Richard Thompson conveys. Craig Bickhardt is the American counterpart of a Richard Thompson, a Clive Gregson, and I almost said the late Nick Drake, but while Drake was another wonderful guitarist who did have some charming melodic songs – Drake is still just a little too dark compared to Craig. But song quality and guitar? Craig is in there with all these men as well as, the late John Martyn, John Renbourn (The Pentangle) and Bert Jansch. Accomplished musicians all, stylistic, original, creative and daring.

This music has an importance -- though for some listeners it will be brief as smoke or an exploding beautiful firework on a holiday. There it is and then it will be gone. Next?

But these tunes are not those kinds of songs. These should be digested, listened to more than once and in some ways -- maybe they won't become smoke, or an exploding firework. They will be little stars that will be there every night if you just look. It takes patience to appreciate a truly wonderful work.

“The More I Wonder,” is an album that will fit comfortably beside any of the artists mentioned above. Craig plays a 1990 Taylor 912 guitar, a 1923 Martin 0-18 guitar and a Dobro Resonator guitar. The album was recorded in Nashville and Pennsylvania and produced by Craig Bickhardt and John Mock with some tracks produced by Glenn Barratt and Craig Bickhardt. The album -- released by Stone Barn Records has a colorful tri-fold CD packaging designed by Snakes Will Eat You. There is also an informative 20pp stitched lyric booklet. A lot of care went into this project. Seems independent artists are packaging their material better than many majors do.

For reference to a two-part interview in 2012 with Craig posted on No Depression go to Holley Dey's blog @

<http://www.nodepression.com/profiles/blogs/craig-bickhardt-on-songw...>

For more recent information visit Craig's website where there are some song samples:

<http://www.craigbickhardt.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/CraigBickhardt>

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