



ELVIS COSTELLO - SECRET, PROFANE & SUGARCANE

The first thing you see is a beautiful but mysterious illustration by the cartoonist and author, Tony Millionaire.

A large black crow has its beak around the stem of a sugarcane plant and within its curls and tangles are pictured a series of motifs:

Chained feet, the parted hands of lovers, an ornate mirror, a spirit emerging from an upturned bottle and an ominously named river.

“My friend and brother, T Bone Burnett, produced this record. He and I also wrote two of the songs together.

“Sulphur To Sugarcane” takes its title from two Louisiana towns and is written in the voice of a charming but disreputable political campaigner. He is the kind of reprehensible fellow who glad-hands the women and gooses all the men.

While playing my solo spot on “The Bob Dylan Show” in November 2007, I started adding a couplet a night to the lyric, putting the name of each town visited into the narrative until I had a song that resembled, “I’ve Been Everywhere”.

It was startling to find how much applause one can receive for impugning the moral reputation of the ladies of Ypsilanti, even in Ypsilanti...

The other song written with T Bone is a complete contrast.

“The Crooked Line” is a song longing for constancy. It’s the only song I’ve ever written about fidelity that is without any irony.”

It had been 20 years since their previous performance, when The Coward Brothers took the stage at the 2006 Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.

The years had been kinder to Henry, with a string of highly successful and acclaimed record and soundtrack productions to his name, even if, as Howard was quick to point out, “He had to bamboozle people into thinking that George Clooney was doing the

singing on that big hit, “Man Of Constant Sorrow”.

Any bitterness felt by Howard towards his older, taller brother fell away as they eased into the repertoire of songs that they always insisted had been stolen from them, even though accurate documentation of other authentic authorship had always been available.

However, there was something different this time. They were not alone on the stage but surrounded by some of the finest string band players in the land, Stuart Duncan, Mike Compton and Dennis Crouch.

Their estranged half-sister, Emmylou Coward even agreed to join them for a vocal trio and performance was cheered to the echo in the shaded summer grove...

I'm in the kitchen at Hendersonville. John Carter Cash has asked me to come to his father's old writing cabin, which now extends into a small recording studio, to sing harmony on Loretta Lynn's version of my song about an unfortunate follow, "Down Among The Wines Spirits".

A few months earlier, Ms. Loretta and I had been sitting across this same table, writing songs.

She comes in like a whirlwind pulling out sheets of legal pad and scraps of cardboard boxes, on which she has scribbled whole verses or even just proposed titles.

I take one title and scenario away with me and write the music for "Pardon Me, Madam, My Name Is Eve". Later that afternoon, we trade lines and chord changes, writing, "I Felt The Chill" in about an hour. Then we just talk about life.

Loretta's version of "Down Among The Wines And Spirits" is faster than mine. It sounds like a Ray Price record. I add harmony to this and another track that they have been working on between Loretta's tour dates.

John Carter and I walk over to the raw timber beam over the fireplace. His father had brought some of the Attractions and me up here to visit in 1981, the day after we completed our album, "Almost Blue".

The timber is now decorated with the signatures of visitors over the years. John Carter says my scrawl from '81 has been all but covered up. Eventually, we locate what looks like a very trembling hand. I sign again."

Johnny Cash never did sing the last song I sent him. It was called, "Complicated Shadows" but he did cut "The Big Light" from "King Of America" and another song that I wrote especially written for him called, "Hidden Shame".

I've recorded "Complicated Shadows" before, in 1996. I liked that version at the time but I've always been trying to get the song back to the way it felt when I first wrote it, without dreaming too much about how Johnny Cash might have done it.

The band is set up in a tight semi-circle at Sound Emporium. I've got my old Gibson J-50 for the rhythm. There are no drums in the room but we don't miss them. Mike Compton's mandolin is the backbeat and Dennis Crouch's bass, "the kick", on most songs.

T Bone has come out of the production booth to play his Kay 161 – the only amplified instrument on the record but Jerry Douglas takes the solo on dobro. Stuart Duncan hangs back only to enter a just the right moment after the bridge. We cut "Complicated Shadows" in two takes.

These are the first songs written largely with acoustic instrumentation in mind since the 1986 album "King of America", which was also produced by T Bone Burnett. He certainly knows were to put those microphones.

I've admired Jim Lauderdale's recordings for a good while. I especially like, "High Timberline", the record he wrote with Robert Hunter.

Jim is singing close vocal harmony on every song this record. He's mastered that art of singing the second line without ever pulling attention from the narrator of the tale.

It's a real skill and a talent you hear a lot in bluegrass and in Johnny Paycheck's harmonies with George Jones, when he was in the Jones Boys. It was also how Don Rich sang with Buck Owens. It's transparent and essential at the same time.

I know Jim has listened to all that music and has obviously learned his lessons well. As a fine a singer and songwriter as he is on his own recordings, I can't say enough about the tone and timbre that he adds to mine on every line he hits.

The call came from Copenhagen a long time ago. The Royal Danish Opera want me to write something about Hans Christian Andersen for the bicentennial celebrations of 2005.

Like many people, that biographical movie with Danny Kaye and bowdlerized versions of the fairytales had done much to distort my impression of Andersen.

I started reading. The tales are much darker and more tortured than I had recalled but it was the man's life that was most intriguing. I was looking for a different connection to Anglophone world.

This would arrive when I read an out-of-print book about Jenny Lind's 1850 All-American Tour promoted by P.T. Barnum.

Tales of duels and fisticuffs over unpaid bills and a star who was rather more the tenacious businesswoman than her pure reputation suggested, provided the background for, "She Was No Good".

Lind was the most famous singer of her day in Europe.

She came from relatively modest beginnings. In fact Lind was borne out of wedlock, a more shameful matter in the society into which she ascended.

Andersen came from absolutely abject poverty. He had an aunt who ran a brothel and a half-sister who was whore. He came from a place where fornication was the last, most desperate form of currency.

He idealized Lind. She dressed in white and became famous for her pious songs as well as her operatic singing.

Such an air is imagined in, "How Deep Is The Red?"

Andersen fell in love frequently. He was a Romantic fellow of the first water. Although he was besotted with Lind and they were even friends, the tale is told that when he asked why she could not return his love, Lind handed a mirror to the strange and repulsive looking author.

"She handed me a mirror" is song for any misfit in love with an unattainable woman.

It is hard not to read anger into Andersen's macabre and brutal tales written around the time of Lind departed for America, her fame to be ruthlessly exploited by the renowned showman.

P.T. Barnum was in business, rather than love, with Lind and she may have even got the better of him in the deal.

Thousands more than could have possibly heard her voice, gathered at the New York docks upon her arrival in America.

Songs were written celebrating her visit. A cave in Kentucky was named in her honour along with a locomotive and a type of cradle.

In my version of the story, with the 1850 tour long over, Barnum is still trying to profit by manufacturing souvenirs made from scraps of her performance dress.

By this time, Barnum had come over to the side of Abolition, more from expedience than conscience. After all this was a man who had once placed an illiterate African-American woman on display, claiming that she was George Washington's nursemaid at some improbable age.

"Red Cotton" imagines him reading an Abolitionist pamphlet while sewing red-dyed scraps of Lind's garment, even as he confronts the burden of guilt attached to its very

threads.

These four songs were first performed in Copenhagen in October 2005, as a series of scenes and arias without any linking music or dramatic interludes.

I wore a top hat and a fine pocket watch and there were a few props. Caption cards, like those you see in a silent movie, were placed on an easel to set each scene but you wouldn't exactly call it "a production".

Steve Nieve led the ensemble from the piano with Bent Clausen (musical director of Tom Waits' productions of "The Black Rider") on vibraphone and banjo, Amit Sen on cello and Bebe Risenfors on bass clarinet, trumpet, tenor saxophone and whatever else was needed. It was a pocket orchestra.

The accompaniments were semi-improvised and the group did a wonderful job of making the songs work, employing just my piano scores at a guide. I sang the "Andersen" and "Barnum" songs while the Swedish, classical soprano, Gisela Stille, portrayed Lind.

The songs always had as much ballad in them as music for the opera house, so they seemed ideal for instrumentation and players assembled at Music Emporium.

"The Sugarcanes", quickly made the songs their own, flowing effortlessly in "She Handed Me A Mirror", which actually passes through four key signatures, although the ear does not detect this as anything arduous.

More importantly, the players chose just the right notes to play and the set a mood that allowed me to sing these songs as I hear them now.

I've crossed the United States a number of times over the last thirty years. There are towns that I look forward to visiting again. I'm not going to say their names.

The third city that I played in America was New Orleans. I'd recorded in that city and in Nashville before I ever entered a recording studio in Hollywood or New York City.

So, it doesn't seem at all strange that I've made all or part of five of my albums in the Southern States.

"Almost Blue", came first in 1981. The Attractions and I cut thirty of my favourite country songs during nine days of sessions that alternated with sleepless, carousing nights.

Recording visits to New Orleans began in 1983 with my first collaboration with Allen Toussaint. T Bone Burnett and I returned in 1989, to have Allen to play grand piano on "Deep Dark Truthful Mirror" for the album, "Spike".

My most recent recording session in New Orleans was for the completion, "The River In Reverse" in 2005.

That was an album combining classic Allen Toussaint songs and our recent co-compositions. The sessions took place three months after Hurricane Katrina, when the city was still under curfew.

“The Delivery Man” was recorded on location in Oxford and Clarksdale, Mississippi in 2004.

“The Delivery Man” started out as a story about the impact on three woman’s lives of a man with a hidden past. The story took the song “Hidden Shame” as its unsung prelude.

Parts of the narrative ended up being displaced from the final album by more urgent songs taken from the news headlines. One of the songs moved aside was to find an ideal home on “Secret, Profane & Sugarcane“.

“I Dreamed Of My Old Lover” was to have been sung by the character, “Geraldine” but it is really a song for anyone waking from a disquieting night of sleep.

Mike Compton’s fleet mandolin lines are key to the opening this new rendition. He is joined, first by Dennis Crouch’s bass and then hands the leading line to Stuart Duncan’s fiddle.

Jeff Taylor’s accordion came in for Jerry Douglas’ dobro on the third day of recording and assumes a starring role on, “My All-Time Doll”, a song of lonely nights and desire.

Sometimes I think it actually steals a little from the listener to say exactly what a song contains.

There are undeniable threads and themes of rivers and oceans traveled, of bondage and guilt, of shame and retribution, of piety, profanity, lust and love, though only the last of these is absolute. There are always contradictions. The music offers the way out. It offers the way home.

So it was that the ideal song to close this album seemed to be, “Changing Partners”, a simple number that I learned from an old Bing Crosby recording. It is likely to be the last dance at all our upcoming appearances.

The songs on “Secret, Profane & Sugarcane” were recorded with a group of some of America’s finest string band players from the world of traditional country music, Bluegrass and beyond.

They are, Jerry Douglas (Dobro), Stuart Duncan (Fiddle & Banjo), Mike Compton (Mandolin), Dennis Crouch (Bass) and Jeff Taylor (Accordion).

Jim Lauderdale took the vocal harmony throughout and Emmylou Harris joined the ensemble for “The Crooked Line”

The album was recorded at Sound Emporium, Nashville and mixed by Mike Piersante.

“Secret, Profane & Sugarcane” was produced by T Bone Burnett

Costello and Burnett first met in 1984, when they toured together as solo performers. However, they soon entered the studio under the guise of “The Coward Brothers” and this led to T Bone producing Costello’s 1986 album, “King of America”.

They worked together again in 1989 on the epic motion picture, “Spike”. That album is also Costello’s high-selling record to date.

They have continued to write together occasionally, most notably, “The Scarlet Tide”, the Academy Award nominated song, performed by Alison Krauss in the movie, “Cold Mountain”.