

“Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts”, Norman Walker (c) 2011 <http://www.normwalker.com/>

A while past, I had the opportunity to live with my grandparents a year. Every other week, I would spend a couple of hours sitting with my grandmother perusing one of her photo albums and listening to the stories she told with each picture. No matter how many times she showed me these snapshots from her past, I loved to hear her remembrances; it always gave me a sense of being grounded.

That is how I felt listening to Norman Walker’s latest CD. Each song was like a snapshot in a photo album, and his thoughtful singing interpreted the stories behind the pictures. The analogy is apt, I think, given what I know of Norman. For the last several years, Norman has been on the Storysave Project committee; a branch of the organization Storytellers of Canada / Conteurs du Canada. Storysave’s mandate is to archive material from storytellers across the country.

Norman’s own view is that anyone can and should archive their own stories or those of loved ones, and ought not to wait for someone else to do it. Being endowed with a talent for song writing has provided Norman a unique method of archiving the stories of the place where he lives (Saskatchewan) and of the people he knows or has heard about from others. Admittedly, the word ‘archive’ calls to mind something very academic and dry. *“Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts”* is anything but.

Norman Walker is arguably better known for his humorous rewrites of popular urban legends (refer to the review of his previous CD *“T’ Time – Time Tested Tales”* published in the Winter 2004-05 issue of this magazine). However, I believe pigeon-holing Norman as a comedic songwriter underrates the value of his other material. He is one of those rare and gifted song-smiths who can write equally well on serious topics as on not-so-serious ones.

His song “Magic” is a case in point. Without giving too much away, it is a provocative and critical examination of the entire 9/11 episode and reminds me very much of the writing style of Leon Rosselson, one of England’s best political activist songwriters. Whether or not one agrees with Norman’s point of view (which he only really explains in the liner notes, leaving the song itself more open to the listener’s interpretation), it is a beautifully and intelligently scripted song chalk full of folktale, literary and biblical references, powerful imagery and held together with a hauntingly simple sounding mandolin accompaniment.

Of course, not all is serious on this album. In one epic 7 ¾ minute track, “Guardian Angel”, Norman’s recounts 4 of the more well known Urban Legends. It is joined by other light-hearted urban myth songs and several quirky original numbers. “The Apostrophe Squad”, for example, is written in the style of political activist protest songs, giving one visions of boisterous mobs of grammarians marching down a main street somewhere chanting its chorus: “We will fight, fight, fight for the apostrophe....”

The music on this album stays with one for days after listening; the melodies are often quite catchy and have a tendency to stick in the mind. A few of the light-hearted numbers on his CD are clearly tunes first, with lyrics tacked on for added fun. The playful “Chicken Strumstick Reel”, which opens the recording, features the “Strumstick” – an instrument Norman calls his “anorexic dulcimer”. Another reel, “The Reel Gardener”, takes the listener through the very detailed cycle of a garden. The tune I am humming as I write – it simply won’t leave my head – is the one Norm composed for a beverage of which he clearly has much personal knowledge: the “Single Malt”.

In keeping with the archive theme, the album includes several songs honouring real people with valuable stories to tell. The “Ballad of Alex Ronyk” takes an entertaining look at one of Saskatchewan’s colourful characters who started as a coal miner in the ‘20s. The title track of the album, “Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts,” is a warm, contemplative song honouring Stephen

Foster, one of America's greatest song writers. My favourite is a musical tribute with a relaxed jazzy swing about a US jazz musician who at 100 years old was still performing in a band. Sadly, she died May 4, 2011, but Norman's captures her lifelong sense of joy and playfulness in "Sweet Velzoe Brown".

Norman has recorded a very well-rounded CD and is tastefully joined on a number of the tracks both vocally and instrumentally by many other excellent musicians: Paddy Tutty, Kathy Cook, Natasha Platt, Barry Luft, Countess 'Tess' Bassie, David Wilkie, Cedric Blary, and Ken Hamm (who also produced the recording). I say 'tastefully' because Norman knows when to back off the accompaniment and let the story speak for itself.

The relaxed intimate feel of this album makes the listener imagine Norman is right there in the living room performing a live house concert. A criticism made in the review (cited above) of his first album was that the 'change in tone' from the reflective to the ridiculous was 'jarring'. I would wholeheartedly disagree. As he states in the liner notes: "this CD is intended to be a multi-dimensional slice of life..." This is important for a performer who strives to entertain and provide his listeners with variety. In this endeavour, Norman Walker has succeeded.

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