

The Golden West

Laurie Lewis & The Right Hands, HighTone Records HCD 8194

Laurie Lewis- fiddle; Tom Rozum- mandolin, mandola; Craig Smith- banjo;
Scott Huffman- guitar; Todd Phillips- string bass

Notes by Laurie Lewis

Your Eyes

(Laurie Lewis/Spruce and Maple Music, ASCAP)

A sort-of Roger Miller-inspired number. I'm always saying that music needs to make me either laugh or cry, and this one makes me laugh. Our friend, master mandolin builder Stephen Gilchrist, said it sounded like "Leonard Cohen Sings Bluegrass". I choose to take that as a compliment.

Hey! What're you trying to do?
Don't look at me when I'm talking to you
Turn away, close your eyes,
Don your shades- don't you realize
You can't look at me the way you do
And not expect me to fall for you

Chorus:

I was in the lead, but I stumbled at the rail
I was flying high, but I'm a kite with no tail
I'm gonna fall, and I was doing so well
Until I looked into your eyes

Hey! What're you trying to pull?
They say the eyes are the gateway to the soul
Posted signs mean nothing to you
You just push that gate and you walk on through
I guess you called this little girl's bluff,
You know I'm really not all that tough

(Chorus)

Nobody told me about your power
To transform this hole into a field of flowers
I'm a deer in the headlights, totally absorbed
By the brilliancy of your luminous orbs
Take it from me, there's no disputin'
You're some kind of Svengali, or somethin'

(Chorus)

Burley Coulter's Song For Kate Helen Branch

(Wendell Berry-lyrics [from **Given: New Poems**, published by Shoemaker and Hoard, © 2005 by Wendell Berry], Laurie Lewis-music/Spruce and Maple Music, ASCAP)

Wendell Berry sent this poem to me and asked me to put it to music. It sat around for awhile, until I read his beautiful collection of stories, **That Distant Land**, and got to know some of the history of Burley and Kate Helen. Burley wasn't the sort of person to do the conventional thing, if it wasn't in his heart. He would disappear for days on end into the woods, knew how to work and knew how not to, and was always singing little snippets of songs. Kate Helen was the love of his life. I won't tell you any more than that. You'll have to read the book. Scott seems typecast to play the part of Burley.

The rugs were rolled back to the walls
The band in place, the lamps all lit
We talked and laughed a little bit
And then obeyed the caller's call
- light-footed, happy, half-entranced -
To balance, swing and promenade
Do you remember how we danced,
And how the fiddler played

About midnight we left the crowd
And wandered out to take a stroll
We heard the tree frog and the owl-
Beside the creek was running loud
The good dark held us as we chanced
The joy we two together made
Remembering how we whirled and pranced
And how the fiddler played

That night is many years ago, and gone,
And still I see you clear-
Clear as the lamp light in your hair
The old time comes around me now
And I remember how you glanced at me
And how we stepped and swayed
I can't forget the way we danced
The way the fiddler played
Oh, how the fiddler played

99 Year Blues

(Jimmie Rodgers, R. Hall/Peer International Corp./ASCAP)

In the true spirit of Big Mon, Tom takes this old Jimmie Rodgers song and has his way with it. We never do find out what the protagonist is in for, but he doesn't deny the justice, just kvetches about the time. He must be a pretty bad guy.

These 99 years ain't no fancy dream
If you had two lives to live,
you'd know just what I mean

When the judge read the verdict,
it nearly knocked me down
He said, "Boy, you got two sixes,
but they're upside down

When they carried me to the jail house,
I fell down across my bed
I couldn't keep from crying,
I wish to the Lord I was dead
My good gal done told me
the day I hit this can
She said "you've made your bed in sorrow,
now sleep in it like a man."

It ain't the days I've been here,
it's the days I gotta stay
All the old friends I ever had
done shook hands and gone away
All these old bootleggers,
they come here and done their time
And left me here a-grindin'
on the same old 99

Well, 99 and 99 make 198
And that's more year's pretty mama,
than you can figure up on your slate
I don't know what else in the world to do
'Cause I lost everything except these 99 blues

Before The Sun Goes Down

(Jimmy Martin, Harold Donny/Songs of Universal, inc.)

This seems to be a song that every bluegrass enthusiast is familiar with, but almost no-one sings. Maybe it's too chauvinist for today's sensitive men of 'grass? I thank Craig for suggesting it for me. Here's to the King of Bluegrass! We miss him.

Well, pack up your clothes, go on and leave
Tell your folks that we are through
Honey, that ain't a-gonna make me grieve
'Cause I know just what you'll do
You'll pout and cry and swear that I
Am the meanest thing in town
But I'll bet money that you'll be back
Before the sun goes down

Chorus:
Before the sun goes down,
You'll be home ready for some lovin'
You'll run to your mama for some kissin' and
a-huggin'
And I'll be a-waitin' around
'Cause I know you'll be home
before the sun goes down

Honey, there ain't nothin' else in the book
That you ain't said to me
All kinds of names and low-down things,
I've heard 'em all from A to Z
And when you've had your say,
you'll up and run away
And swear you're leavin' town
But you'll come off it, come a-draggin' it back
Before the sun goes down

(Chorus)

Live Forever

(Billy Joe Shaver, E. Shaver/ Warner-Tamerlane Pub. Corp.; Eddy Shaver Publishing; Songs of Universal, inc./ BMI)

Scott's brother suggested this Americana classic as a good one for him to sing. He was right.

I'm gonna live forever
I'm gonna cross that river
I'm gonna catch tomorrow now
You're gonna want to hold me
Just like I always told you
You're gonna miss me when I'm gone

Nobody here will ever find me
'Though I will always be around
Just like the songs I leave behind me
I'm gonna live forever now

You fathers and you mothers
Be good to one another
Please try to raise your children right
Don't let the darkness take 'em
Don't make 'em feel forsaken
Just lead them safely to the light

If this old world is blown asunder
And all the stars fall from the sky
Remember someone really loves you
We'll live forever, you and I

I'm gonna live forever
I'm gonna cross that river
I'm gonna catch tomorrow now

Rank Stranger

(Albert Brumley/Bridge Building Music/BMI)

I first sang this song with the Bluebirds, a vocal trio including Maria Muldaur and Linda Ronstadt, at the Wintergrass Festival in Tacoma, WA, in 2005. Linda had suggested it, saying she had always wanted to have a go at singing Ralph Stanley's blistering tenor. It was an unbelievable thrill to hear Linda come in on the chorus, busting loose with that Voice From The Radio. I am grateful that she wanted to join us on record.

I wandered again to my home in the mountains
Where in youth's early dawn I was happy and free
I looked for my friends, but I never could find them
I found they were all rank strangers to me

Chorus:

Everybody I met seemed to be a rank stranger
No mother nor dad, not a friend could I see
They knew not my name,
and I knew not their faces
I found they were all rank strangers to me

"They've all moved away," said the voice of a stranger
To a beautiful home by the bright crystal sea
Some beautiful day, I'll meet them in Heaven
Where no-one will be a rank stranger to me

(Chorus)

Bury Me In Bluegrass

(Kate Campbell, Ira Campbell, Johnny Pierce/
CedarSong, Large River Music, Lehsem Songs, Music in
Two/BMI)

We send this song out to Stan Dickson of Louisville, who grew up on a farm outside of Lexington, Kentucky. On my guitar case, there's a bumper sticker he gave me that says "Growth Destroys Bluegrass Forever". It's a delicate balance, for sure.

Hughey was a captain with Andy Jackson
Settled in Kentucky on a soldier's pay
It was two hundred acres,
and for almost as many years
That land has borne my family's name

You can count the generations like circles in a tree

On tombstones you can barely read

Will you walk with me across the blue-green pastures?
I want to see the horses run one more time
You can lay me down beside the ones gone before me
Bury me in bluegrass when I die

Uncle Henry sells computers, he never learned to farm
He sold his half to Daddy when Grandpa died
Mom and Dad are old now,
they say they're gonna move
To where the weather is always warm and dry
The buyer signed the note today,
they're gonna build a mall
With plans to break ground before the Fall

Will you walk with me through the fields of burley?
I want to see leaves of gold one more time
You can lay me down beside the ones gone before me
Bury me in bluegrass when I die

They nailed the sign up yesterday
and I just don't understand
To me it's more than just a piece of land

Will you walk with me through the peaceful valley?
I want to see the harvest moon one more time
You can lay me down beside the ones gone before me
Bury me in bluegrass when I die

The Golden West (instrumental)

(Bill Monroe)

Craig and I met at the Golden West Bluegrass Festival in Norco, CA, in the early 1970's. I like to imagine that Bill wrote this tune to commemorate that historic event. Seriously, though, the Father of Bluegrass Music was always very proud of the fact that his Kentucky home-grown music had spread all over the world. He readily embraced players from California, Massachusetts, Iowa, North Carolina, Florida, etc., always introducing them as being from "The Great Bluegrass State of _____."

A Hand To Hold

(Laurie Lewis/Spruce and Maple Music, ASCAP)

For my dear pal, Charles Sawtelle.

The thrush in the forest, the lark in the field
Sing like their lives depend on the song
My mind has been full, but my voice has been still
In all this time since you've been gone

Chorus:

'Cause you and I, we shared a rocky road
You and I shouldered a heavy load
Ah, but you and I, we had something gold
You and I, we had a hand to hold

There's an empty room behind my heart's door
And I've tried to fill it by calling your name
But the echoes subside and I know what's in store:
Only the emptiness remains

(Chorus)

I went out walking, thinking of you
I was filled with self-pity that we had to part
So I picked up a pebble of a pale rosy hue
And I carried it next to my heart
And it's strange, though I know that stone isn't you
It's a talisman that I hold dear
I clasp it tightly, and I don't feel so blue
And somehow, it brings you near

(Chorus)

River Under The Road

(Ana Egge, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Sarah Brown/ Irving Music, inc.; Jade Eg Music; Two Bagger Music; Lew Bob Songs/BMI)

We've loved this song ever since we first heard Ana Egge sing it a decade ago.

I dreamed of water running under my wheels
The kind of dream you remember just how it feels
I wondered what it was meant to be
Until I saw what was sent to me

Chorus:

I found a river under the road
Been there forever but I'd never been told
It goes much farther, deeper and darker
Than the road above will ever go

The river whispered so softly, so sure and so deep
You'll travel farther cradled, covered, asleep
And when your dreams trade the day for night
The river's tears turn the darkness to light

(Chorus)

Moonlight shining on shades of green and black
I heard the water and the pavement began to crack
Dream river singing that highway sound

I watched the blacktop tumbling down

(Chorus)

Hard Luck In Heaven

(Scott Huffman/Spruce and Maple Music/ASCAP)

What if our "pie in the sky" is burnt?

While on this old Earth, Lord, I've suffered, I've cried
Things don't work out, Lord, as hard as I've tried
I'll have up in Glory a crown for my prize
But knowin' my luck, Lord, it'll be the wrong size

Chorus:

Hard luck in Heaven, please say it ain't so
'Cause down here on Earth Lord, it's all that I know
When I'm in my mansion, will the roof leak there too?
Hard luck in Heaven, please say it ain't true

I've always been hard luck, it's always been true
So I'm not expecting any different from you
When I get my wings, Lord, they won't fit me right
I'll be flappin' in circles o'er the City of Light

(Chorus)

Now, Lord, please forgive me for thinkin' this way
But hard times just haunt me each night and all day
When the angels start singin' and they pass out the harps
Knowin' my luck, Lord, mine'll be tuned too sharp

(Chorus)

The Mourning Cloak

(Karah Stokes/Spruce and Maple Music/ASCAP)

This is a song about love, betrayal, murder, and butterflies. Hearing it for the first time sent me to the dictionary to look up "mourning cloak," which is, indeed, a butterfly. Since then, I have seen them everywhere, especially in August on the banks of the Tuolumne River in California, with their dusty black wings "bound in gold and sapphires rare." Scott says, "there's nothin' like a good killin' song."

One fair morning late in June
The sun shone on the daisies white
When a messenger of sorrow deep
Came into my garden bright
Wings of deepest velvet black

Bound with gold and sapphires rare
A butterfly, a Mourning Cloak,
Like one a wealthy widow'd wear

He promised me a golden ring
But he gave it to a rich man's child
He craved the ease wealth would bring
Above a love both true and wild

So I called him to our trysting place
"Since there's no help, let's kiss and part"
He took me in a sweet embrace
And he felt a penknife in his heart

He looked at me with fading eyes
I left him there as he left me
The dawn next morning brought the news
That he'd been set upon by thieves

Oh, butterfly, why do you haunt?
Know you the secret in my breast?
I pierced his heart as he pierced mine
I slew the one I loved the best

One fair morning late in June
The sun shone on the daisies white
When a messenger of sorrow deep
Came into my garden bright

Goodbye Waltz

(John Hartford/ John Hartford Music/BMI)

Tom and I worked up this song when we were asked to take part in a memorial riverboat cruise for John on the Ohio Rivera few years back. It's a song that just got under our skin, and we have been singing it ever since.

See that boat go down the sky
Goodbye, goodbye
See that boat go down the sky
Goodbye, goodbye
See that boat go down the sky
Till it's just a speck at the edge of my eye
It is so hard to say goodbye
Goodbye

See that boat go down the sky
Goodbye, goodbye
See that boat go down the sky
Goodbye, goodbye

See that boat go down the sky
Till the shades of night are drawing nigh
And the wind dies out in the western sky
Goodbye

For three days in July of 2005, we five lived together in the guest house at Sage Arts Studio outside Arlington, WA and recorded these songs.

We had intended to be more prepared when we got there, but life in the twenty-first century being what it is, we just showed up with a general idea of what songs we could do and no arrangements to speak of.

Over the course of the three days, we played, recorded, cooked and ate together, walked in the woods, stared at the nearby Stillaguamish River, and played some more. Everything seemed so fresh and enticing to us, hearing and playing the majority of these tunes for the first time as a group.

When we left, we could barely remember what we'd done on that first day, and a very busy touring schedule for the remainder of the season made it so that we couldn't get back to really listening and putting the finishing touches on the tracks until the following spring. By then, it was like opening a bunch of presents. Everything was a treat to the ears.

When I played the roughs for Linda Ronstadt, she was so taken with "A Hand to Hold," that she asked if she could sing harmony on it. Of course, I said yes. She came over to Berkeley one day and laid down her harmony parts at my house.

Craig and Scott make their homes in North Carolina, and Tom, Todd and I live in California. For Craig, Todd and me, that's where we were born and raised. Tom originally hails from the great bluegrass state of Connecticut, but has now lived in the Golden West longer than he's lived anywhere else. Scott, on the other hand, is a Tarheel born and bred. I thank the combination of luck and circumstance that has brought us all together.

*~ Laurie Lewis
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PS The cover photos were taken at Mortar Rock Park, very close to where I grew up here in Berkeley.