



NOTES ON A SLEEVE

BY DAVID MORRISON

What a satisfying feeling it is to be able to pinpoint a massively significant moment in your life, one that seismically changed its course forever to shape every second that followed. In my case, I know now that had I not in early 2000 decided to purchase a particular music magazine, I would not have met the woman who would become my wife ... and you would not be reading this right now.

Parksville roots musician Gerry Barnum is one who can identify such an instance. He looked at the sleeve of a record as a child and, in a breath, everything shifted. The LP in question was a split release by blues legends Sonny Terry and T-Bone Walker, filed amongst the pop and easy listening

of the day. Barnum found himself transfixed by the facial expressions of its architects. "I think it was the character in their faces that held more depth, and it was much more intriguing to me than the pop records," he recalls. It became his first vinyl purchase and the catalyst for what today is an acclaimed career.

Inspired also by his dad's harmonica playing, Barnum starting dabbling with the art of songwriting at a very young age with a variation on the classic Elizabeth Cotten folk song *Freight Train*. "I just changed the words," he tells me. "I think I was eight or nine at the time... Work, work, that's all I do... A song about running away and roaming and playing all day!"

Much has occurred in Barnum's musical development since those innocent days. For starters, he has gone on in adult life to release three superb albums. In the wake of his accomplished 1998 debut *Pickin' Up the Pieces* and 2003's sublime *Harmony*, both largely acoustic affairs, he delivered the long-awaited *Stand By Me* in August last year. Backed by a full band of considerable prowess, it's a different beast altogether. Barnum's music has evolved, at least for this release, into a moodier, darker entity with a deeper groove than ever before. It's slinky, subtly crafted, insistently funky and lithe, drawing comparisons not only with Ry Cooder and John Hiatt – to whom Barnum is frequently likened – but the late blues experimentalist Chris Whitley, especially his career defining album, *Hotel Vast Horizon*.

And then Barnum has played thousands of shows as headliner and sideman, occasionally experiencing the pleasure of opening for or actually playing with some of his heroes. "I sat in with The Spencer Davis Group ... yeah, a nice experience," he reveals. Of John Hammond he says: "We swapped guitars backstage and chatted, and we played harmonica together onstage. That was cool. I listened to his albums as a kid, so that felt warm and good to be on a guy-to-guy and eye-to-eye level."

A personal breakthrough came opening for Texan blues genius Delbert McClinton at a show at The Town Pump in Vancouver. It's a set that Barnum considers pivotal in opening doors for him. "I pestered the promoter for weeks. I had his albums and was a fan and he had to know this was important. I felt like a kid yanking on his dad's coat 'cause he just had to go on that ride!" His persistence paid off, but Barnum's unarguably rich talents have also seen him open for English blues legend John Mayall, jam all night with Los Lobos' Cesar Rosas and record (an as yet unreleased song) with k.d. lang. He's also toured with the achingly cool country superstar Dwight Yoakam and performed before around 20,000 at the Big Valley Jamboree in Craven, Saskatchewan.

But despite all his adventures sharing good times with his friends and peers on the stages of Canada, Barnum's most poignant memory of performing live is from as low-key an event as could be imagined. "My favourite gig was playing at the old folks' home with my dad. I sat out a tune and danced with my sweetheart Sarah while he played with the rest of the old time fiddlers." Boy, what I'd give to have witnessed that...

In the sleeve notes of *Stand By Me* – on which, delightfully, the songs appear in alphabetical order – Barnum sweetly states: "This project expresses my longings, communings, desires, friendships and my most heartfelt wishes and feelings... I hope the songs will take you to some of those places." Rest assured that they certainly do, Gerry, so thank the heavens you spotted that record sleeve. ~