



Dennis Woodske photo

GERRY BARNUM WALKIN' IN A STRAIGHT LINE

By David Morrison

2010 has seen me rather preoccupied with time. While some folks have (quite rightly) dismissed this obsession as ridiculous – telling me it's just a number – others of a certain age have offered empathy when I say this is because I am about to hit 50. Fifty! Wow, how'd that happen? It's obviously not like this has crept up on me but, well, sheesh...

My vain concern at reaching this age comes into sharp focus when realizing that it has been almost three years since I first wrote for *The Beacon* about local roots/blues hero, Gerry Barnum. In my head it seems like we last chatted (at least in the course of promoting his music) only a few months back. But it was indeed at the tail end of 2007, in the wake of his last studio album, *Stand By Me*.

With the milestones of a musician's life most conveniently marked by the release

of their recorded offerings to the world, my catching up with Barnum this time concerned the imminent arrival of his latest collection of work. As we nattered about it, he too mull'd on how time zooms on by and how we can do not the slightest thing about it. In fact, he's written a song about this very thought. This life goes by / Blink twice / Time flies, sings Barnum on *This Life*, which will appear on the hotly anticipated forthcoming disc, *Step On In*.

Recorded in the last week of October, the new collection sees the respected singer-songwriter backed by a veritable all-star band. "I've got Doug Elliott and Pat Steward from Colin James and Odds fame," boasts Barnum, clearly delighted by the company his reputation can attract. "There's also a guy by the name of Darcy Phillips, a keyboard player from Nanaimo. His bio reads pretty nice, too. He was Jann

Arden's keyboardist for, oh, I don't know how many years." (It was around 12 if I'm not mistaken). "Yeah, there's some heavy hitters, even though the hitting isn't so hard!" he laughs in respect of the laidback sound they have collectively crafted.

In the three-plus years since *Stand By Me*, much has happened in Barnum's life, not least of which were his marriage and the death of his father. Needless to say, these big events and the effect they have had on his general outlook on life have contributed to the lyrical content of *Step On In*.

"It's always been life and experience, the journey of life, that's shaped my songs more than anything else," he says. "My dad passed away a couple of years back and I was there as a witness. It's a life-changing

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thing, and I got married a couple of years ago, so the album is more reflective of where I'm at maturity-wise, you know? It's all about growth and change, renewal and understanding, and appreciating this life."

Indeed, concerning the appreciation of life, it seems Barnum has taken a few steps back to take stock, pondering mortality in the wake of losing his father, and emerging with a new philosophy, a new approach.

"I made a conscious decision last fall after I'd had my busiest summer professionally," he explains. "It was time for a new tack on things. Rather than take it all as it comes and fly by the seat of my pants – as I don't have that kind of energy anymore! – I thought I'd plot the course a little bit more, take my time at what really counts and what's really important, you know?" This appears to be reflected in the lyrics to the new CD's title track: Too many steps in the wrong direction / Too much time spent on once upon a time / Tired and dizzy goin' round and round / Feel like walkin' in a straight line.

With this new *modus operandi* in place, Barnum has decided to forge ahead in his efforts to grapple with an area of the music industry he readily admits to finding overwhelming and intimidating: the digital revolution. With the release of *Step On In* he will be making his back catalogue available as MP3 downloads for the first time.

"I've had a lot of people ask me if I'm on iTunes, and I haven't been," he says. "So I'm going to do everything at once, with all my CDs, including the new one, which of course is the one I want to focus on. I've got a couple of people on board now, not management as such, but people that are going to help me administer some of these things, because I do get bogged down in it! Jumping through the hoops online, you miss one little step and there's no mercy, right?"

As I discovered when asking the eminently likeable Barnum if his tried-and-true bluesy sonic approach has experienced a shift since the last CD, other changes are also afoot. "Absolutely! Definitely, yeah!" he announces with unabashed enthusiasm. "Without sounding 'cocktail loungey' at all, there's definitely a jazzier influence on a few of the tunes. This is something I've been wanting to explore for a while. I've always admired jazz guitar, so I've tried to emulate a little bit of that kind of flavour into it. Some of the tunes are ones I wrote a few years ago that never made it onto other CDs, and there are new ones I've just written this year. There's one song I've been playing for a while but hadn't recorded, called *Get Back Home* – it was the last song I wrote as a single guy! And there are a couple of instrumentals I'm really proud of – one is a tribute to my dear mother, and the other is inspired by my wife, Sarah."

Another new venture for Barnum was the Kids Music Summer Camp he


hosted in Qualicum Beach in August alongside 12-year-old violin prodigy, Serena Jack. "It went phenomenally well," he says, then starts laughing. "Haha! I called it a 'musical M.A.S.H. unit,' as the range of ages was 4 to 12, so it was like, 'I dropped my pick in my guitar again!' 'Where's the bathroom?' 'When's snack time?'" It was definitely a success but I was a little bit overwhelmed because so many kids turned up and the age range was wider than we originally anticipated! I hope we can do it every year. The template is set now so I think it's going to be easier next year, or at least that's what I keep telling myself!"

At the time of going to press there was no fixed release date for *Step On In*, but rest assured it will be with you very soon. It has been and remains a labour of love for the assiduous Barnum, so once he is happy with every detail, the world will receive the fruits of his labours. "I've taken my time with this whole project and I don't want to rush it right at the end," he says.

As a fellow perfectionist I totally understand, but I am hoping it's not another three years before the next Gerry Barnum CD arrives. By then I'll be, oh my, 53. Fifty-three! Sheesh... ~

Gerry Barnum will be playing a Bluebird North event at The Roundhouse in Vancouver on Tuesday November 16. Please visit www.gerrybarnum.com for more news about upcoming local shows and the release of Step On In.

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