

The LefsetzLetter

April 29, 2007

Tom Rush At McCabe's

So we're in the dressing room and Tom and Joni Mitchell are discussing open tunings.

Tom had just finished up the first set with "Panama Limited", a compilation of Bukka White numbers. And Tom and Joni were reminiscing about the days back in Detroit, when they met, when the old blues men were still revered, when Tom first heard "Urge For Going".

Actually, Tom was past deadline on his new album. He needed material. He got Joni to send him a tape. And, at the end, Joni added a number she'd just written, a song she wasn't sure was any good. And Tom liked it so much, he named the album after it, "The Circle Game".

Truth be told, Tom Rush was a little before my time. He grew out of the folkie era. Hell, if you want to know more about this period, buy Joe Boyd's "White Bicycles". Although at dinner Tom laughingly told me that Joe had stolen all the good stories from him, for they were roommates at Harvard.

Tom took piano lessons. He hated them. But, when a relative showed him how to play the ukulele, he took to it, he embraced it. And from Groton to Harvard, somehow he switched to the guitar. Not that he was a musician at first, he was a deejay, running a live music show on Harvard's 5 watt station. He used this as an entre to meet all the legendary blues and folk pickers, to get them on his show. And he could! This was before the days of superstardom, when access was easily had at the club.

Eventually, Tom was goaded into taking the stage at an open mic night. And through a combination of moxie and luck, he got a residency at Club 47. And ultimately made a record. With someone lost to time who said he had a tape recorder. Then, after all his jealous contemporaries got deals, Paul Rothchild signed Tom up to Prestige, and then Jac Holzman's Elektra.

Tom was the singer/songwriter star before James Taylor. He was the college campus favorite. Whenever I hit the dorm rooms of upperclassmen, they all had "The Circle Game", and his debut on Columbia.

Actually, his deal with Columbia lapsed, they failed to pick up their option. But Tom's manager and attorney told him to re-up anyway, not to go to Warner, to play nice with Big Red.

A total mistake. The deal was worse and the record didn't sell. Tom found himself dropped. And then he decided to drop out of music and become a farmer in his beloved New Hampshire.

But it didn't take. In six months Tom started playing gigs again. He felt contrary to Columbia's protestations, baby boomers were still interested in music. They might not want to go to clubs, but going upscale, Tom booked Boston's Symphony Hall and sold out! And he's been cottage industry ever since.

Funny how these musicians are humble, how they're evasive. It's so hard to make it that after they've crossed the threshold, they don't like to talk about the desire, the effort. Sitting with Tom in Valentino it all seemed like luck. But I know better.

But as low key as Tom was at dinner, he positively came alive at the gig. You see he gave a performance. Not like you see on TV, not like you experience at the arena. It was just him and three guitars. And a lot of tales.

You see Tom's smart, and educated. So what comes out between the songs is just as fascinating as the music itself! It's the story of a life. Told with the humor of an observer who's still here to reveal the details. Of time in New Hampshire, Wyoming and now California. Yup, Tom's moved across the country. But his most rabid fan base is still on the east coast. Did I know that from one corner of Wyoming to the other was the same distance from Toronto to D.C? The traveling was hell, that Tom was doing to his supposedly fifty but really more like sixty five gigs a year. But he didn't tire of getting up on stage. It was a rush, to play music for a living. He had no regrets.

Before Joni arrived he did "Urge For Going".

But the highlight of the first set was the aforementioned "Panama Limited". When he made his guitar duplicate the sound of a train north of Memphis, and the Panama Limited coming in from the south. This wasn't hit of the minute, this was part of a long folk tradition. This wasn't gloss, this was America.

But it was "Merrimack County" that touched me the most. This transcended conversation, transcended McCabe's music room. We're all from somewhere. And for those of us who have developed in the wide open spaces, our dreams are as vast as the landscape. And all that hope and reflection was embodied in Tom's performance.

And there was a killer version of "Drift Away", prefaced by a story of meeting its writer, Mentor Williams, in the Nashville airport.

And, in his discussion of cover versions of "No Regrets", Tom told of humoring Bono, who had taken to performing the song on his band's tour. Turned out Bono didn't have a sense of humor about the music of his homeland.

Then again, was this detail apocryphal?

You never knew with Tom. So many of the stories started believable, but when you got to the end, you wondered if you'd been had. There was a punch line. Was all that preceded it also false?

And following "No Regrets", Tom segued into "Rockport Sunday".

Tomorrow's the first day of the week. According to Christians, it's the lord's day. We don't work, we're supposed to reflect. And hearing this instrumental about a morning in Maine, I felt at peace, that all my choices had been if not right, at least arguable, that the mistakes I'd made were minor, that my life might not be perfect, but it had turned out all right.

I followed the sound, just like Tom. Funny how we'd never met previously, but we were alike.

There are stars and then there are musicians. Sometimes they're one and the same, but not so much anymore. As the stars become more plastic, we're driven to the musicians, they point the way, just by following their muse. They're not about accumulating a pile of money so much as joy, both on stage and off. Telling their stories, about life.

I'm only pissed I missed the show Friday night. When spotting Jackson Browne in the audience Tom launched into "Jamaica Say You Will". You see Jackson was signed to Elektra's publishing company. Tom had access to his tunes. That's how he ended up recording "These Days". They were all in it together. And although Tom's Festival Express buddy Janis Joplin and so many are gone, many have survived. They're still out there, accessible. Make the effort, partake of their wisdom and joy, you'll be richer for it, not monetarily, but where it truly counts, in your heart.

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