

NOTES AND COMMENTS FROM CHRISTOPHER HEDGE

# THE ATROCIOUS SAINT

When Carl Byker began to discuss the Andrew Jackson project with me, he described what I thought was a very important idea. We see history through a very small keyhole, usually one that is defined "by the victors" as they say. We are becoming less and less able to simplify our world view so conveniently. I remember a PBS program by James Burke where he made it clear that because of the invention of printing, a new version of truth and reality appeared, not guided by what "was" but sometimes by what was "published". It was with this in mind that I wanted to approach the music. I didn't really want to recreate versions of music that had been preserved from Jackson's time, except of course the absolutely essential "Eighth of January". Instead, I wanted to try to reach into those times to find out what influenced the creation of the music in the first place. I was trying to reach back in a tangible way; my great grandfather's pocket watch, a small nugget of gold that he, or his father had panned in Montana, a pair of opera glasses from my mother, from her mother, from an unnamed series of mothers and aunts.

A good friend, David Olney, a neighbor and banjo player (that I do my best to keep up with when we play Old Timey) introduced me to a book by John Lomax and his son, Alan Lomax. They had collected a treasure of American stories, folklore and music from the roots up, including some of folk music's earliest recordings. Recordings are very important to me in a way that reaches beyond music on paper. When I hear those ghostly voices, rising out of the scratches and haze of time, I can really feel how different their music actually is from simply the notes they are playing. It can be an expression of despair, deep faith or a simple, drunken comedy like the following old tune:

*"Third night when I come home, so drunk I could not see, found a head laying on the pillow where my head ought a be. Come here my little wifey, explain this thing to me. How come a head a-laying on the pillow where my head oughta be? You blind fool, you crazy fool, can't you never see? It's only a cabbage head your granny sent to me. I've traveled this world over, ten thousand miles or more, but a mustache on a cabbage head I never did see before..." Three Nights Drunk - Our Goodman*

These were not from Jackson's time, but the elders on these recordings may have learned the songs by hearing their grandparents sing them, perhaps "winking" right when they did or speaking in a manner unchanged from decades before. My friend Ben gave me a hundred or so recordings from southern preachers from the 1930's, only so that we could hear their voices, their passion. These are only a road map for reaching back to an entirely foreign world. It's a way of understanding that chords and melody are not always what makes a song. It was a way for me to begin to understand a music that I am many generations removed from.

I decided, when I asked David Grisman and his group to play my songs, that they think of these kind of things, instead of the notes. These are simple songs, what I like to call C, F and G songs. There was nothing much to learn really, and I didn't want anyone to be so familiar with a melody that they would really get it perfect. They understood when I commented after one particular take, "That was good but probably too good. Let's try it once more but like you been drinkin' for a few hours". They have spent their lives rooted in this music and have a direct link from their families and their culture. I couldn't think of anyone else who had as much right to play "Old Timey" with my new songs.

The same can be said for David Brewer and Joe Weed when it came to playing the Irish music, which are traditional jigs that I would not presume to re-create. David and Ginger Hildebrand from the Colonial Music Institute advised me on the "actual" music in Jackson's time. Their attention to detail in performing on period instruments and even recording in period environments, gave me greater understanding of the the music of Washington, the elite and polite society. In "Rachel's Adagio", written for Jackson's beloved wife, Julian Smedley and Joseph Hebert took a simple two part piece I wrote and improvised it in the way that a violinist and cellist might, had they become inventive with my short melody. Julian's solo improvisations and his accompanying violin with David and I on "Timeless - The Riverboat" is evidence of why every record I've done in the last two decades is graced with his playing.

David and Ginger also introduced me to Susan Cifaldi who is one of the foremost authorities on fife and drum. Susan provided all of the original drum cadences that Ed McClary played on period field drums with sticks as big as a rolled up newspaper.

As often as possible, I wanted the raw materials that made up our recordings to connect backwards in time as well. Each drum cadence is a pattern that was probably heard in Jackson's career in the military, a quickstep, a parley, and finally, a presidential funeral march. Jim Nunally played a guitar on "Frontier 2" that was built more than a century ago. The stomping and clapping from "Andrew Jackson" was recorded in a two hundred year old court house in Westville Georgia, a historical landmark where Carl was filming. Three young brothers who were re-enactors in the cast performed a folk dance that resulted in this wonderful percussion. To my thinking, the empty halls and dust are part of the music.

My parents had a collection of orchestral recordings that had pages and pages of stories included in the record, about the great composers and their music. I used to love going through them as a kid and I think the most memorable was Dvorak's "New World Symphony". It has influenced me throughout my career, my first performing group as an adult was named after it with my life-long colleague, Titos Sompa. I was always impressed that a European, trained in a completely different tradition, could interpret the music of Native Americans, frontiersmen and American Slaves.

Many years ago, Titos and I recorded a song that we called "Trail of Tears". When it came time to try to interpret the actual history of the Cherokee's tragic journey, I was honored to work with R. Carlos Nakai. Although his flute playing has its roots in his Navajo ancestry, he has become an outstanding representative of Native American music and an improviser who could approach the concept of this record in a pure and honest way. I had no music for him, and there was very little I could presume to say. Rather, we spent time simply talking, expressing the difficulty of speaking to the past, the complex pattern of our heritage as modern Americans and the nature of how history is explained to a world that is often too embroiled in the passions of our present time to be understanding of how we got here. To this end, I merely lit a couple of candles in the record room, turned out the lights and pressed record. What you hear is only what happened next.

Except, of course in the "Trail of Tears" itself. I couldn't really control this. There was a deeply beautiful passage that R.C. played for the Cherokee, but I was somehow compelled to only leave a remnant of his notes hanging in midair, each suspended, disembodied. Like a vigil for something that is truly lost and will not return.

I wrote this music to try to get a more realistic understanding of my own country. I wanted to try to see Andrew Jackson from the contrasts and contradictions that defined his life. I got the overwhelming sense that our times are not much different. We are just able to see them with a broader, panoramic spectrum, if we choose to.

Christopher Hedge  
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WITH DAVID GRISMAN AND R. CARLOS NAKAI