

the arts

live music view

Johnny Cuomo Arm Wrestles The World, And Wins

Lon S. Cohen

"Bob Dylan singing a David Gray song." That's how Johnny Cuomo describes his sound. "American Idle," is the 2007 CD release from Johnny Cuomo which features Johnny on guitar, mandolin, and vocals. Never having heard anything by Johnny before, the folks at Paradiddle Records sent me this little disk from the local folk singer, I have nothing else to compare it to, but it seems more like the best of Bob Dylan's and David Gray's vocals in a nice little eclectic stew.

Johnny's no slouch. Once the lead singer and guitarist for the rock band Voice of the Turtle, he has since opened for The Ramones, The Bogmen, Black 47, The Prodigals, and Solas as a solo artist. He spent two summers as a volunteer teacher on the Barona and Viejas Indian Reservations in California, which according to him "has given him a special connection with the Native American culture, as well as enriched his abilities as a storyteller of Indian tales." He also lived in Ireland for a while where he learned about Irish culture and music.

His musical journey has taken him from playing pubs and other venues in Dublin, including Whelans, Vicar Street, and The Cobblestone, to many of his hometown Long Island venues. Johnny is a storyteller, a wordsmith. He crafts his tales in song, books, and monologues about his travels and interests during his shows.

The new CD takes a critical look at the throw away, pop-culture that surrounds us. On the first track "Try, Try, Try," he sings about a man who meets a variety of characters in his local town, all of whom remind him that as much as he tries to do something good and different in the world, he is not always successful and the message doesn't always get through.

"American Idle," is a very sharp commentary on the affect of television entertainment, especially the Reality T.V. phenomenon, which he calls, "vulgarity extreme." The fact that "we know" the effect of this trashy and empty form of entertainment we may already be doomed because as he asks: "How can I expect a change/When folks won't even act their age?"

A full minute of musical introduction on "Progress" shows off the musicianship of the performers on the album. The tone of this song extends his world-view extolling that progress is slowing him down. All



through the album we are treated to superior music and songwriting, expected of this well traveled, pessimistic folk artist.

He ends with two very much more fully produced compositions with "Field 2" and "Songs From Paul." Both have some of the strongest arrangements of the entire CD. They have the feel of radio songs in the making. This does not make them in any way better than the rest of the tracks; they just have a much more upbeat, radio friendly sound.



I was able to capture Johnny for a few questions about his latest CD recently:

Lon Cohen: "Try, Try, Try" talks about making a difference. Was there a particular message in that song?

Johnny Cuomo: It is a simple narrative in which the central character tries to do his part in the face of the joys, pains, trials and temptations our modern society puts forth.

LC: "American Idle" seems like a dig at the whole American Idol phenomenon and television in general. What was the motivation behind writing this tune?

JC: The title "American Idle" is a convenient and recognizable phenomenon, which I've used to elicit an immediate knee-jerk response from the listener. It is not intended to knock the American Idol TV show as an

individual target of distaste. Moreover it takes aim at pop culture as a whole. For Example: Passing off obscenity, mediocrity, and exhibitionism as enviable, quality traits in an entertainer, to be eventually emulated to some degree by the audience.

LC: Can you describe some of you major musical influences? Especially on this album?

JC: I come from a land of musical disaccord, in which anything from metal to Morrissey will do as long as it's convincingly sincere. Of course an obvious influence would be Bob Dylan, but in making this particular recording, artists like Dan Bern, Gillian Welch, and Paul Brady would have been major inspirations in the forefront of my mind.

LC: What instruments have you played on this album?

JC: I was responsible for the guitar, the dobro, the mandolin, the harmonica, and the vocals. The rest of the music was provided by a wealth of talented friends and family.

(The official listing at Paradiddle Records puts the credits at: Johnny Cuomo: vocals, guitar, dobro, mandolin, harmonica. Dan Lowery: guitar, vocals. Guest Performers: Lisa Cuomo: bass, Mike Meehan: fiddle, Laura Feddersen: fiddle, Benny Stowe: banjo, Kevin Meehan: button accordion, Jerry Arias: drums, percussion, Lyrics: Johnny Cuomo, Music: Johnny Cuomo & Dan Lowery.)

LC: What has living and working on Long Island done to influence your music and song writing?

JC: People oft times mistake Long Island for an overpriced, unaffordable, traffic infested



strip mall, full of well to do elitists. I believe it as a unique stronghold teeming with culture, history, and nature. Growing up here has unquestionably inspired a good deal of my songs.

LC: *What is next for you?*

JC: I am usually simultaneously involved in a variety of projects. The next one is due to be released before Christmas of 2007. This musical storytelling album made up entirely of original music and folktales will consist of a selection of stories I have been creating over the last few years.

American Idle, the new CD from Johnny Cuomo” can be found at www.paradiddlerecords.com, cdbaby.com/cd/cuomojohnny or www.myspace.com/johnnycuomo.

Johnny will be playing his original music at the 11th Street Bar in NYC on Tuesday, November 13th at 9 p.m. and he will be performing at Acoustic Long Island in St. James on Wednesday, November 14th at 8 p.m. He will also be doing a special performance at the Long Island Museum in Stony Brook on Sunday, November 18th at 2 p.m. of traditional folk music.

Photos by Paradiddle Records

Lon S. Cohen has been a short order cook, a Generation X slacker (aka artist), a fence installer, a marketing designer and once he was the only Jewish kid working on a Christmas Tree lot. There is no order to the aforesaid list. He currently works full time but only to pay the bills for a McMansion, beautiful wife and three lovely children. What he really wants to do is write, podcast, blog and drink a really good IPA. Again, not in any order of importance. Visit him at www.lonscohen.com and contact him by email at lon@lonscohen.com.

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