



JEB LOY NICHOLS - NOW THEN

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Part One: SWEET, TOUGH, AND TERRIBLE

Talking to Jeb Loy Nichols about his life is like watching a road movie. The restless pursuit of an unnamed goal, the constant search for something just out of reach. "It's true", he says, walking through the fields of his Welsh farm, "I've done some moving". It's all there in his music. The country, bluegrass and pop of his early years, the rebel music of punk and reggae, the deep grooves of the south. "It's all a road", Nichols says, "one connecting to the other, all of them intersecting and crossing over".

Born in Wyoming and raised in Missouri, Nichols absorbed the sounds of both rural America and the records played around his house. "We got it all", he says, "my mom played jazz records, Don Shirley and Ella Fitzgerald, while my dad played bluegrass and Hank Williams." But it was from the radio that Jeb received his most lasting education. Through the day and late into the night Jeb would listen and take to heart the disparate sounds of the airwaves. "The main station I listened to was out of Kansas City and played country music all day, then at nine o'clock at night they'd switch and become a soul station. It was magic, all this great music; Bobby Womack, Al Green, Curtis Mayfield, The Staples Singers, all of right there, in my bedroom, for free."

When Jeb was fourteen the family moved to Austin, Texas. "The best thing I learned in Austin", Jeb says, "was how great live music could be. I saw everything from Funkadelic to Bob Marley to George Jones to The Ramones." It was in Austin that he first heard, and was knocked out by, The Sex Pistols. "That was all new, the sound, the fury, the politics, all of it." And it led straight to the road again, this time to New York. "I was seventeen", recalls Jeb, "and New York was like nothing I'd ever seen. I'd always felt like an outsider and then there I was, in a town of outsiders. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven." In New York he was awarded a full scholarship to study painting at Parsons School of Design. He also started hanging out at clubs like Tier 3, The Loft and the Mudd Club where he became friends with members of the Slits and Neneh Cherry. "It was a great time to be in New York, the whole scene was so wide open." It was the emerging hip hop scene that was most fascinating for him. "It was 1979 - and nothing in the world was more exciting than rap. The Treacherous Three, Funky Four Plus One, Grandmaster Flash - that stuff was so great! And then you had DJ's like Larry Levan, it was fantastic."

After three years in New York, Jeb hit the road again, this time to London. He shared a house with Ari Up from the Slits, Neneh Cherry and producer Adrian Sherwood, and, as he had in NYC, dove into London's artistic community. "I formed a country band with some friends and we played every kind of show you can think of. We did some bluegrass, some country, a lot of old protest songs." In 1990 a tape of songs ended up at OKra Records, a small label in Columbus, Ohio. OKra offered Jeb a deal, and Jeb put together a band that included his wife Loraine Morley, On-U Sound man Martin Harrison, and jazz trombonist John Harbourne. The Fellow Travellers merged country-tinged, acoustic-based songs with a dub bottom. "It was fun", says Jeb "it just worked. We all played what we wanted and stayed out of each others way, and it sounded great. I've never had more fun." The Fellow Travellers released three more albums and were described in Spin as "the lonesome children of Merle, Marley and Marx".



The Fellow Travellers stayed on the road for most of the first half of the nineties. “We had a hellava time - did well in Germany where they understood what we were doing. We never rehearsed, just did what we felt, it was a real fluid thing, real casual. I think it was probably the easiest music I ever made.”

In 1996 Jeb released a solo record in America, the critically acclaimed Lovers Knot. “We got great reviews and had a great record, but the label never really knew what to do with us - we kinda got lost.” His next release, Just What Time It Is, included the hit Heaven Right Here, a track The Philadelphia Enquirer called “the ultimate summer record, brilliant, the sound of the summer.” His next release, Easy Now, was called “a groove filled, rural, soulful record, an uncompromising slice of slow burning melancholia” by Time Out.

For now, Jeb is content to stay put on his Welsh small holding. He moved there in 2000 and, with his wife, has slowly reclaimed ten acres of neglected scrub land, renovated a barn and put in a large garden. “I’m sure I’ll move again”, he says, “but not just yet. This feels good, feels like something close to home.”

PART TWO: NOW THEN

“It’s all about give and take, “ says Jeb Loy Nichols. “All about tension, about restraint.” We’re talking about his new CD NOW THEN, a collection of songs recorded in Nashville. “The way the country pulls at the city, the way the old plays with the new.”

It’s a remarkable record, a masterpiece of distilled soul. “This is the record I’ve been leaning towards,” Jeb says, “all these years, all this moving around, all this listening and watching.” Hard bargains and divided families, absconders and runaways, holy dread and love, it’s all here. The record pulses with seductive stories that talk of shifting fidelities and damage limitation.

“I knew I wanted to make this record in Nashville”, Jeb says, “because Nashville is nowhere I’d ever want to live. I love Nashville, but it’s definitely not home. And I wanted that feeling of being unfixed. And I wanted to work with Mark Nevers. “ Mark Nevers, member and producer of Lambchop, producer of Will Oldham, seems at first an odd choice to work with. But “Mark’s great, “ says Jeb, “the best in the world. I’ve known him for awhile and he brought the exact right feeling. Dirty and perfect and warm and unexpected.”

The record was recorded in five days in Never’s studio in Nashville. The band was a mix of young and old; Mark brought some members of Lambchop while Jeb brought Muscle Shoals veteran Clayton Ivey and soul legend Dan Penn. They then brought the tapes back to London where they recorded bassist Wayne Nunes (Tricky, African Head Charge) and backing vocals by reggae legends Roy Cousins (The Royals) and Struggle. Then it was back to Nashville to record the strings and horns. “More travelling,” says Jeb. “But worth every minute. It had to be done that way - had to get that mish-mash of people, that gumbo.”

It was risky, but it works. The record brims over with conversations between players, between generations, between countries and cultures. The same give and take that Jeb first heard on southern soul records is updated here. “It was great to be a part of it, to watch it. To listen to everyone playing off each other. That’s the point - to tell stories, to listen, to be a part of something bigger and better than yourself.”

SONG BY SONG COMMENTS BY JEB

SOMETIMES SHOOTING STARS

I wrote this song years ago and never really knew what to do with it. It was the first track we recorded in Nashville, just me on acoustic guitar and the rhythm track. Paul Birch put some vibes on it and we brought it back to London so Wayne Nunes could play bass on it. Then we gave it to the great Dennis Bovell to mix and he put the BV’s on. For me it’s got it all, a reggae bass line, a killer rhythm, an open ended story.

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REALLY TOGETHER

This is an old reggae song by the legendary Bob Andy. He's always been one of my favorite singers and songwriters and this is an all time classic. On the original he dueted with Marcia Griffiths - I decided to slow it down and give it country flavour. Sheila Prospere came and sang it with me.

LELAH MAE

I wrote this song three days before I got to Nashville, sitting in my mother's house in Arkansas. I was thinking of songs like Widow Wimberly by Tony Joe White and I was reading the local paper and it all just fell into place. It was the second song we recorded, me stomping on the floor and playing an old gut string guitar my dad brought me back from Mexico.

PAINTED MY DREAMHOUSE BLUE

I wrote this one in Wales with my good buddy Joe Brack. Joe and I played in a country band together and shared a squat in London. He's not only a hellava writer but one of the best country bass players I've ever heard.

BAD FRUIT

We recorded this in one take, Tony Crow on keyboard and me on guitar. This is an answer to all those awful "I Love My Family" songs that Nashville churns out.

LET'S MAKE IT UP

This is one of two songs on the record that weren't recorded in Nashville by Mark. I did this one at home in Wales - I played all the instruments and pressured Loraine Morley to sing some BV's.

MORNING LOVE

This is another song I've had laying around for a while. We recorded a version five years ago for „Just What Time It Is” but it didn't work. It started life as an incredibly slow 3/4 waltz - much sadder and lonely than the version we cut in Nashville.

BLACKWATER ROAD

This is the other song not recorded in Nashville. I recorded most of this at home on Wales and then drafted in Andy Hamill on bass, Rebecca Hollweg on BV's, and Jennifer Carr on piano. Like "Let's Make It Up", I wrote this after the record was recorded and thought I'd demo them - and then they seemed to find their way onto the finished CD.

DON'T DANCE WITH ME

I first recorded this song, in a radically different style, on The October EP. That was a stripped own, reggae driven affair - this version is completely different, we used strings, vibes, BV's, a full band and the kitchen sink.

EVER FEEL LIKE LEAVING

This song was inspired by a line from a song off my last CD "Easy Now". I wanted to do an Eddie Hinton/Bobby Womack kinda thing. When I played it to Dan Penn he said, "that's a hellava groove right there. Don't do anything to it. Keep it raw." I said, "Don't do anything?" and he said, "leave it alone." When I asked him to sing some BV's on it he smiled and said, "well, I guess some BV's wouldn't hurt."

WHEN DID YOU STOP LOVING ME

This was the first song we recorded with the full band. I was a little nervous as everyone worked their way though it and figured out the changes. Then I counted it off and halfway through the first verse Clayton Ivey came up with that incredible keyboard part and I new it was going to OK. This song was real special for me - we recorded it in something like twenty minutes - it just felt like magic.

Additional information you will find here: www.jebloynichols.com

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