



## Tony Peyser's "Blue State Jukebox" Review -- June, 2006

This picture in the CD booklet made me sigh: a bearded guy with long hair was dressed in black, barefoot, sitting with his elbows on his knees near some rocks and looking contemplative. I instantly thought: "Wimpy White Guys With Guitars."

That song was from *An Endless Series Of Accidents*, a sarcastic 2003 release. Here are some choice lyrics: "We're taking over/Serious and sensitive and sad/They'll be an open mic night on every corner/We'll be writing songs about your daughters/It's a sick gig/But chicks dig/Wimpy white guys with guitars ..."

Because of that poisoned pen song and that booklet photo, I did not have much hope for John Flynn's *Two Wolves*. I hadn't heard of him or his album.

But stop the presses and hold the phone: my hunch was completely wrong.

These twelve songs have the power and emotion of poetry and are brought to life with restrained but compelling production. And, I should point out, the real highlights here are a fistful of very political songs.

Before I get to Flynn's stunning third track, allow me a small digression. "Night Mail" was a 1936 British documentary about a delivery train from Scotland to London. In rough cut, the producers suddenly realized that how the train worked wasn't as involving as who the people were who wrote and received the letters. The narration writer was suitably inspired to pen these now famous opening lines: "This is the Night Mail crossing the border/Bringing the cheque and the postal order/Letters for the rich, letters for the poor/The shop at the corner and the girl next door." The fellow who wrote this classic poem became one of the greatest poets of the 20th century: W.H. Auden. (Even if you think you don't know his work, you do. Auden's aching "Funeral Blues" became famous worldwide when it was memorably recited in "Four Weddings & A Funeral.")

Flynn's "Dover" clearly had a similar sticking point: how do you write about the way that the dead are brought home from Iraq? Well, you focus

on the fallen men and women and their loved ones, not just the plane. Flynn did precisely this and then some: "Elijah was a sergeant, 42 years old/From Mesa, Arizona/Elijah won't grow old." It's just the first of many times that this stirring song literally took my breath away. "Jeremiah's son cries on his mamma's knee/There was no armor plating on his Dad's Humvee." The drums beat like thunder claps and the piano notes in the quieter early moments mostly seem in an appropriately minor key. PBS's "NewsHour" is one of the few places I know that regularly shows photos of our young men and woman who gave up their lives in the war on terror. Listen to Flynn's song and you'll always recall the heartbreak that accompanies every one of them. While he pointedly notes how this precious cargo only arrives in locations restricted from public view, Flynn's chorus frames these wrenching occasions without polemic but with a genuine sense of respect and honor: "Oh, big airplane bring 'em down easy/Out of the Delaware skies/Oh, big airplane Dover is waiting/To welcome the fallen you fly." Maybe the real sucker punch up Flynn's sleeve is that he mostly just presents the details and leaves us to feel the sense of loss and outrage.

However, three tracks later, Flynn's heart is Krazy Glued to his sleeve along with his conscience. This is as good an anti-war song as I've ever heard. It starts out like simplicity itself in the folk tradition with a harmonica riding roughshod over muted guitar, bass and drums. But this is no song about a girl who broke a heart or a guy feeling lonely on the road. This is Big Stuff right from the proverbial headlines: "There's a young man in a prison/Somewhere far across the sea/And his body's being broken/In the name of you and me." The notion of this horror being done in our name hits home with stunning precision. And things are only going to get worse: "He's been charged with no offenses/And convicted of no crime/He's protected by no law there/And he's running out of time."

Flynn next portrays a woman being beaten, then shifts gears a bit to address a young child whose mother is near death (presumably from AIDS) and finally to a student roughed up by people who didn't like what was written on his t-shirt. (I assumed it was an anti-war slogan.) Throughout the song, Flynn mixes it up a little with the end of the choruses to tailor it to everyone he's sung about from the prison yard to the schoolyard. But the gist of it remains constant and is a defiant call to action. It's also where the song gets its memorable title: "Put Your Freedom Where Your Mouth Is." Flynn is clearly a fan of the great Phil Ochs and even covers one of compositions. But Flynn's song is so good that I like to think if Ochs were still with us, he would have put "Put Your Freedom Where Your Mouth Is" on his set lists to sing himself.

This track is followed by the heartbreaking "Azizullah." Pulled along by the phrase "when the soldiers came that day" — which could have been deployed as the song's title — Flynn chronicles the accidental killing of a 12 year-old boy. His death came about because he was a 12 year-old Middle Eastern boy in the middle of a war. Unlike the Iraqi deaths now coming to light from last November's Haditha massacre, this one wasn't on purpose but the attendant grief and sorrow is so intense that it hardly matters. Sadly, stories like this appear to be fairly common. This explains why this White House has resorted to planting stories about how the roots on the tree of Liberty are taking hold and blossoms of Freedom are blooming. (That line is so awful and contrived, it should be on a Monster.com resume for someone hoping to be a military flack in Iraq.) Once again, Flynn paints an utterly haunting picture without hitting you over the head. Like a hot desert wind, his harmonica blows through "Azizullah" a few times and it sounds like weeping.

Ever since 2000, a lot of left wing folks have been feeling angry and depressed, some even at the end of their rope. Flynn clearly knows this, which is why he ends his album with a song called "Trust The Rope." Again, it displays the power of simplicity. Flynn's message, which he got from a mountain climbing pal, is that rope can be something you hold that saves you, not just something you hang from the end of. It's an especially adept and hopeful tone to set at the end of *Two Wolves*, the perfect kind of album to put in heavy rotation in The Blue State Jukebox.

Coincidentally, not long after Flynn's album arrived, Larry Gallagher e-mailed me. I reviewed a release by this singer-songwriter about three years ago. Gallagher's the ironic knucklehead who wrote "Wimpy White Guys With Guitars."

—Tony Peyser