

Tom Dyer interviews Jim of Seattle 2016

TD: Hey Jim! It's been nearly four years since you put out your first album. How did this one evolve from what you thought it might be four years ago?

JoS: Hey! Nice to be back, but I never really left. Shortly after the release of *We Are All Famous* I had a lot of ideas for using music I'd already written that had never found a home, but I didn't know how to fit it all together. "We Are the Elders" really got the ball rolling, and gave me the idea for the planet Frank stuff, but it was still only half an album's worth. I had a lot more music I wanted to use, but too much of it wasn't going to fit with the alien planet theme. "The Chet Lambert Show" was already written, and at some point I realized it was another opening to a show of some kind, recognizing the similarity to "We Are the Elders." From that I came up with the TV show idea. Again, just half an album's worth though. The idea of two separate EP's crossed my mind, but then I thought how cool it would be if instead it was one album, with the Elders and the TV shows interconnected in mysterious ways. And with the theme of dual conflicting identities in "Great Big Beautiful Day", how I've always grappled with my music being neither here nor there, which seemed to completely echo the dual-album idea, everything sort of fell into place. That whole thought process was a long time ago now and probably happened in about an hour. I went "Ooh, how cool!", and then the last 3 years has been all about realizing that initial vision. So really, this final product is pretty much what I envisioned that afternoon. It kind of has to be that way for me, I think. I'm not like those artists who say it's all about the "journey". I think I need to have an idea of the whole enchilada at the outset, or I'll lose my way. Even among all the different musical styles, I tried really hard to make this whole album feel like everything belongs.

TD: Were you surprised by the positive press reaction to your first album?

JoS: I didn't know what to expect, really, since it was the first one. I knew the songwriting was fine, but what I wasn't sure of was whether the album as a whole would hold together, or if it would just bewilder people. And when all the raves started coming in, I still didn't know if this was to be expected or was unusual in some way. I've since been informed it was unusual. But the positive press definitely made me relax into this second one, since I'd already passed one test. It also emboldened me to give it everything I've got. I'm glad the first one was received well, because I think this one is even better. The music is more ambitious, for one, and while the first one had some conscious cross-song connections, I went all out this time around, making everything point to something else. This feels more like a cohesive whole than a collection of unrelated tracks.

TD: How much of the material on this album are things you wrote long ago that were waiting for a home and how much is new?

JoS: Most of the album is total reworkings of music I already had lying around. I have almost never written music that isn't part of some larger thing, such as a comic book opera or a musical or a video game. I had all this stuff that I thought was great but that would make no sense as-is when taken out of its original context. So I made a new context (or two, really) and changed the songs to fit. Some songs like "I'm Gonna Be Your Man" are pretty much intact from their original incarnations, and some, such as "Travelling (The Battle of the Tapirs)" are new, borrowing bits from multiple other songs. The oldest bit on the album is the single note violin solo in the middle of "Tapirs", which I wrote at 19. "By Inches" is the newest song, from 2013. It also was the fastest by far, written and recorded in just a few hours.

TD: The Elders thing seems like it may be fictional. Is it? Where did that all come from?

JoS: That would be telling. Fictional?

TD: Was your process for making this album pretty much the same as the first or were you able to take it up a notch?

JoS: All the same software and gear. My satisfaction with the first album gave me confidence to work a lot harder on this one. I wanted the whole album to feel more like a single work, and I didn't shy away from ambitious ideas. I also wanted to include a lot more live recording and not just rely on MIDI. Most of the percussion in "Tapirs" was recorded live, the majority using a single cheap drum I won in a raffle. Pretty much every song seemed like the hardest musical work I've ever done, and I finished each one saying "OK, never again. I really have to lower my expectations or I'm never going to finish this thing." And then of course the next song would end up an even bigger undertaking. The album was positively exhausting, but I'm pleased to say I didn't cut any corners. It's very satisfying to look back and know that there's no moment where I thought "Oh that's good enough, move on", or "No one's going to notice that". Having the Big Idea all set up front helped me keep my standards up.

TD: Your "Wichita Lineman" cover could fairly be described as a bit of as novelty item, but your "Superstar" cover is not. It is simple and beautiful. What inspired that?

JoS: Novelty item!!? Both of those came from cover competitions on songfight.org. (Both songs won, by the way.) I was assigned Superstar randomly when I entered the Carpenters contest. The original song has never been a favorite of mine. Though it's supposedly a sad lonely song, the Carpenters get all uptempo in the chorus, undermining that sadness to make a pop hit. When Karen Carpenter sings "Don't you remember you told me you loved me baby" it's party time all of a sudden, with the blasting trumpets and all. Doesn't match the words. I saw an opportunity to keep it lonely through the chorus, so I approached it from that angle. (Bette Midler's version is truer to the original intent I think, but I didn't know that version until after mine was finished.) I also love my wife's voice, and found her rendition inspired a lot of the instrumental choices. I'm glad you think it's "simple", because it didn't start out that way; getting to that point was a tortuous exercise in subtraction. (And I hope people notice that the spoken bit that opens the song is the same sentiment sung by the Elders in "Entertainment Parade" and "Both"!)

TD: Listening to songs like "I'm Gonna Be Your Man" I could see you as a 40's song and dance man, perhaps a Fred Astaire for the 21st century. How are your dance skills?

JoS: No, I can't dance, and/or won't. I was aiming more for Roger Miller's "King of the Road" than a 40's Astaire thing. But hey, cool either way. Funny you should say that though, because I could see the entire album performed as a choral ballet. That would be awesome.

TD: The "Mathematics Song" was originally written for Disney, correct? What the story behind that?

JoS: That was one of five songs I wrote for a Disney video game called Nightmare Ned in 1997. It was a great project and a ton of fun. They would give me scenarios in the game and ask me to write songs for them. My favorite was "You are running across a long chain of half-full bathtubs floating in the air. Meanwhile, rats are scurrying in pipes over your head and dropping electrical appliances down to try and electrocute you. We need a song for the rats to sing." What an assignment! Now the game and the songs have a tiny little cult following, so occasionally I'll get people asking me about them. My website has all the original Ned songs on it, (which I didn't produce or arrange). The original version of the math song accompanied a game where the player was running around on a chalkboard and being attacked by math symbols. This version is different, though. The lyrics are better. They were so much fun to write, and were mostly an exercise in how to make the syllables as easy to sing as possible. That's why you hear lots of eight and two and no sixes. Otherwise you can't spit it out at that tempo. So the super fun challenge was to use math terms and keep it easy to sing at that speed.

TD: There are two songs titled “Traveling” on this album (actually one is “Travelling” and the second “Traveling”) - one subtitled the Battle of Tapirs and the other by The Chet Lambert Dancers. They do not sound vaguely alike. Are they theoretically different versions of the same composition or does the double “L” in “Travelling” denote a key difference?

JoS: Ah, but they ARE related! There’s a tune I repeat over and over in both songs. Also they are the only two songs with a solo violin. Actually, there’s no song on the album that isn’t related in some way to one or more others. Hopefully some of the fun comes in figuring out those connections. “Bantamazeh” and “Storm” are telling the same story, for example.

TD: What song on this album is your favorite?

JoS: I’m reluctant to call any out individually because they all feel subservient to the whole. But I have two kinds of favorites. One kind is the songs where I totally nailed the original vision, and I’m proud to be able to say “Yes, that’s EXACTLY what I was going for”. (“Bantamazeh,” “Tapirs,” “Entertainment Parade,” “Traveling/Dancers”). The others are favorites because of my satisfaction with the songwriting craft, (“Great Leader,” “Great Big Beautiful Day,” “Chet Lambert Show,” “By Inches”). I’m big on craft. I have no patience for what I call “lazy cool.” Too many artists disguise laziness as coolness, when really, it’s just being lazy.

TD: When should we expect the third album?

JoS: Depends on what I decide to do. I have one pet idea I REALLY want to do, that would involve a lot of other people. (Including whoever is currently reading this, if you want to.) Other ideas: I want to do an album of several hundred songs that are ten seconds long, to be played on shuffle. I want to do an album of instrumental dance music for very young children. I want to write a soundtrack to Eraserhead. I want to cover my favorite Residents album (Not Available). I want to do an album of mono lo-fi piano solos. I suppose I should see how this one is received before I decide what to do next though. I promised myself I wouldn’t work so hard on my next album so it won’t take another four years, but I probably won’t heed that. This one took this long because a) I had absurdly high ambitions for it, and b) I have a day job and a life. It took a long time, but really I’ve been working on this without a break for about three years. When you only have between 6:30 and 7:30 every morning, something like this album is going to take a very long time.

TD: Anything else you’d like us to know?

JoS: This isn’t a genre album. It’s not rock or pop or theatre or tribal or tin pan alley or anything. One might say it’s all those things, but it’s more accurate to say it’s none of them. I’ve tried using musical genres like individual paint colors in service of a larger picture. Yes, the album is eclectic. But it’s not eclectic for shock value. I’m trying to get across ideas that reside outside any individual type of music. I see genres more as vocabularies used to express ideas or feelings. Take “Bantamazeh” and “Storm.” Completely different vocabularies, but expressing similar ideas. The challenge I put to the listener is to step outside the vocabulary of a particular genre and hear the sentiments behind them. “Travelling (Tapirs)” isn’t a so much tribal pseudo African march, it’s a song about desperate people heading bravely into what seems like certain disaster. Whether I use drums to get that across or a Mexican ska band is, I hope, incidental.

Really I think this philosophy comes from my equal enthusiasm for so many divergent styles. “Wow, I love that song! Now I want to write something like that!” Of course, refusing to stick with any one genre is off-putting for people and kind of music-career suicide, but I had to be true to myself. In that regard this is a very honest, personal album. It is perhaps best summed up by the intermission song “Great Big Beautiful Day,” the only song on the album in which I’m the one singing -- everything else is sung by

some other character. And that is telling, because the song questions my own sense of identity. In the song I'm acknowledging my own inability to stick within a style, and how I grapple with that perpetual sense of "outsiderdom". I eventually realize that I (and the whole world) am multiple conflicting things simultaneously. Stretching oneself to that degree can be a liberating experience. This is exactly why the first word in the album title is "Both."