

Jeff Kelly Beneath the Stars, Above the River

Interview with Jeff Kelly by Tom Dyer June 11, 2019

TD: Hi Jeff – Congratulations on your beautiful new album. This is your first “post-performing Green Pajamas” release. Was making that change significant in your approach to recording this album?

JK: Thanks. Not so much, except it was nice just to be able to think about recording all of the time again and to be done with rehearsing for live shows.

TD: Did you start working on this album before you made that decision or is this a completely new page?

JK: We got back from that second trip in the spring of 2018 and I started writing songs for this album. Then we did the last PJs show that summer, so, yes, I had started on this before that. But I think the trip may have had some influence on the decision to stop playing live because it made me feel inspired creatively and I think I felt a bit like the live Green Pajamas performances had fallen into a rut and become mundane. I think most artists or songwriters or performers in general, want to perform new material, to present what excites them at the moment, and since we rarely got everybody in the band to show up for every rehearsal, it became easier to just keep playing the same old songs over and over and not learn anything new. I became less and less interested in doing that and finally said, why am I still doing this if it isn't fun? There is also the question that you have to face as you get older about whether you want to keep doing these same old songs that you wrote when you were a kid when you can't relate to them anymore. If we were the Rolling Stones and a million people showed up to see us play Kim the Waitress every night that would fine, you know? But we're not.

TD: When one considers your body of work, this album is pretty low key, mellifluous. Did you set out to make that kind of record or did it just end up that way by the time you got to the finish line?

JK: There has always been a kind of respect from those early tapes you and I did in the 90's - a sort of reverence by those that knew of them: “Well, this new thing is okay but did you ever hear his *Portugal* or *Coffee in Nepal* album? Now that was special.” And, in a sense, I always sort of agreed, though it sort of annoyed me that whatever I currently doing was often compared to shit in the past. But those old albums were special, recorded on 4-track without much synth sound. Just a cheap mic, my old Hammond organ, acoustic guitars, a bass and some percussion noises. Joe's old sitar... But I think the feeling behind those songs really did come through in a way unique when compared to the rest of the things I've done. The simplicity was monumental in a way and they are still in a lot of hearts. I wanted to go back and honor that and write some simple songs without thinking like it is going to be the next Green Pajamas record. Just me and an acoustic guitar, tapping a drumstick on a desktop and ad-libbing a cool bass part and thinking, “well, it's not quite consistent is it? but it sounds great. I'll just leave it as it is.” I wanted simple songs with simple but good melodies. Nothing earth changing, just catchy and entertaining, if you were to give it a few spins. That was my goal.

TD: Your album was inspired by your trips to Spain and Portugal. Did you expect that when you went there, or did it just happen that way?

JK: Well, I think I was hopeful something would happen like that. I wrote only one song though, before we left on our second trip which was, “Alleys of Madrid,” which I did with Eric Padgett at his place.

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But when we went on the second trip, I was ready: I had a little black notebook that I would scribble down song ideas in. So a good deal of the album comes from that. "Douro River Wind," "Lisbon Vampire," "Juliana." And almost everything on there was inspired by things that happened to us. "Todo por la Gitana" was the only old song. That goes back decades now and I've tried to record it multiple times but was never satisfied.

TD: You also shot a lot of footage that you've used for videos there – good planning or just serendipity?

JK: I took more videos on the second trip with the vague idea that I might be able to use them somehow combined with music but with no real plan as to how. I think mostly I was thinking of our personal travelogue things that I would make. In the old days you put photos in a book and wrote, "Our Trip, 1998." Now you can make whole little movies with the apps on your iMac or phone...

I actually wrote the song, "Hush of the Southern Night," based solely upon our photos and videos we took in Seville. It was written based upon that collection of images which brought back those couple of nights to me in such wonderful detail. Without those videos and photos, I might have a foggier memory and not written the song.

TD: How literal are the songs on this album – you know, actual descriptions of places and people vs. using a situation as an inspiration? Is Juliana of the One-man Scanner Station a real person?

JK: Yes! Juliana was a real person. I think that's why that song is so idiosyncratic. Because I would have never made up that story out of the blue. It is just a little bit of humanity, a little slice of life, that we just happened to notice halfway across the world in a tiny train station just outside of Antiquera in Spain. Granada has no direct train station out to Antiquera so you have to go to this little tiny, beautiful town by bus and we decided to stay there a night and check it out. It turned out to be one of our favorite stops. Hardly anyone spoke English as it isn't a big tourist destination. But we met some of the kindest people there! These were just spontaneous, small, passing moments and connections - the kind that you don't forget when you come back from traveling to another country.

Anyway, as we waited for our train out of Antiquera, in this little station, there was a security person - just one - who was overseeing the baggage scanner. She was pretty and wore a uniform. And she did wear those high-heel boots, like so many women in Spain. In between watching the baggage x-rays she would wander over to the little in-station cafe and flirt with one of the guys who worked there. We found it endearing and romantic and quite a different scene entirely from the super-security of the Madrid train station, for instance. That's some serious shit. And so I just imagined their relationship and made it a song. And Susanne said, "you could write something like, 'Juliana of the Antiquera, Santa Ana-One-Man-Scanner Station!'" So I wrote it down. She thought it would be cool like, *Lola Versus Power Man and the Moneyground Part 1*, or something like that and I agreed. But I shortened the title out of necessity.

"Señor, Señor" was inspired by the fact that I was often accosted by older Roma women asking for money, some dressed conventionally, others less so. They seemed to gravitate to me. Perhaps because I looked for sure like I was from another country and they thought I might have some extra dough. Maybe they just liked my kind and handsome face. Don't know. But

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they loved me - in Lisbon and Madrid mostly, rugged and beautiful old women, but then you would see the children going out too, to set up shop, whatever their strategy might be. I didn't interact with them much. Mostly the old women.

"The Lisbon Vampire." So Susanne and I were sitting outside an Italian restaurant in Lisbon, having lunch, on one of those streets where there are no cars, just people walking. People and more people, all of the time. It doesn't matter which day of the week or what time of day. And I spotted these two young women coming up the street towards us and eventually passing us.

One of them was taller, with an extraordinary, superior countenance. They were arm in arm and there was a kind of air about them that struck me as otherworldly - like, "yeah, sorry, but we're from someplace you are never, ever gonna go, man." Something like that. But it was effortless, unaffected at the same time. They were in a zone of their own and we weren't going there. But I could, at least, watch them walk by us and I just said, "Susanne, look at those women, they're like vampires or something." I wrote it down in my little black book and came home and wrote "Lisbon Vampire."

It was supercool being in Madrid on Halloween night, so I put that in a song. There was a tiny coffee shop in the Alfama neighborhood of Lisbon that we loved and went to every morning, so I put that in a song.

All of these songs are a bit like that, inspired in some way by events that happened. Maybe not, "The Initial Kiss," which is based on an ongoing story I'm writing. But the structure and melody are a little bit based upon my love for Portuguese Fado song structure. It's loose, but it's a little bit of a tribute to that sort of sound. Same with, "Kiss the Moon Hello." The songs are not diaristic, but definitely inspired by what we experienced and witnessed.

TD: You've talked about doing some acoustic shows with Phil and Laura from the Pajamas. Do you see that as local only or might you get out and tour a bit?

JK: We'll see how that all goes. If it is successful, and I am happy with the presentation and response. I think it might be fun to play these songs, as well as some of the other ones Laura and I are associated with over such a long history together, in a more intimate setting.

TD: You've been seeing a fair amount of vinyl releases lately, mostly mid-period Pajamas, but some new. What are your thoughts about that in general and what are your thoughts about releasing music on vinyl specifically?

JK: I love the vinyl reissues. Which is ironic because, I remember well a time when we were just dying to put out a compact disc! But I grew up with vinyl LP records so it's always thrilling seeing these being reissued in that fashion. Plus you always do such a nice job of remastering them for that format. One of my favorite PJs albums was the vinyl-only *Supernatural Afternoon*. So I am very happy with this new wrinkle in the discography! Thank you Sugarbush!

TD: You've been making records for over thirty years. Other than the technological changes, how has that changed for you over time? Do you enjoy it as much as you used to? Do you always feel (like most people) that your newest album is your best album? Have the technological changes made a significant difference to you or are those changes just a means to an end?

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JK: I loved making music on quarter inch stereo tape, 4, 8 and 16 track cassette, (and those things that looked like VHS tapes - ADATs?), stand-alone 32 track digital porta-studios and now Apple's Logic Pro. It doesn't matter. I have always loved recording, so in that sense, it's all a means to end. But, I would be lying not to say I don't enjoy the advancement of each technology. It's always exciting learning something new. Especially now, when you can record as many tracks as you want. That's a bit of a dream come true. But, I admit, I am lazy about learning the technical stuff. Whatever it takes to get something down and make it sound reasonably close to how I imagined in my mind, is good enough. I'll never go and study all of the technical stuff. It's a bad trait of mine, detrimental to a degree, I know.

TD: What's next? Are you working on a new album now? Will your next album be as relaxed as *Beneath The Stars*?

JK: I want to make as many more records as a sixty-year-old guy can make and be proud of and hopefully not embarrass himself. I'm not done with making Green Pajamas records. I just want to make stuff that those who care might still say, "that's kind of cool" or "that's kind of poetic" or, mostly, "I love that one." That's what makes me the happiest in my life, I'm obviously not in it for the cash. My kids like my music and I like that.

When we were in Providence for Terrastock, Susanne overheard this guy, getting on an elevator, whisper to his girlfriend, "That's Jeff Kelly, one of the best songwriters in America." I just want to make that guy happy and not have him ever change his mind.

TD: Anything you'd like to add?

JK: As with any artist, musician, whatever - I think this is just about the best thing I've ever made. It's very close to my heart. And I hope everybody likes it as much as I do.

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