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New CDs: ISS Members Deliver A Cornucopia of Musical Styles

BY PEDRO PEREIRA

At any point in time, an ISS member or two is spending time in the studio working on a CD. In the past two months, we have had the good fortune of seeing three excellent CDs released by members.

It's an embarrassment of riches, and the musical styles represented in the new releases are nothing short of diverse. Frank Gambino's new CD alone, titled "Backin' Out Ass First," regales listeners with a plethora of styles that nicely complement his now witty, now philosophical lyrics.

And speaking of philosophical lyrics, we get a serious dose of political, social and philosophical musings in Tony Tedeschi's debut CD, mischievously titled "Stuck in the '60s, Vol. 2."

The third CD is Tornado Alley's eponymously titled debut. The brainchild of ISS Director Sonny Speed, Tornado Alley has a distinguished membership that includes Sonny, ISS members Tim Huss and Vincent Crici, as well as percussionist Robert Langley and violinist Lora Kendall.

Each CD is unique musically and lyrically, but what the three have in common is the sheer accumulated talent tapped to record and produce the songs.

Frank invited a small army of vocalists and musicians, aptly dubbed The Semi-Casual Silver String Mezzanine Band, to record "Backin' Out Ass First," including ISS members Sarah Haddock, Sonny Meadows, Denise Romas and Tim Bailey, as well as Tornado members Vinny Crici and Tim Huss. Frank takes lead vocals only on two tracks.

Sonny Speed produced Frank's CD, his second, as well as Tornado Alley's debut. The latter features the skillful songcraft of three ISS stalwarts – Sonny himself, Tim and Vinny. The 15 tracks are a stroll through a very American music-scape. The music finds its roots in traditional folk and blues, with some country and western thrown in, tempered with a little bit of California easy pop.

When Sonny put Tornado Alley together, his vision was to gather some of ISS' most singular voices and able songwriters to create an Americana musical group. As the debut CD clearly demonstrates, that vision has become reality. Between Tim's amazing vocals, Sonny's experienced production hand, Vinny's song-crafting sensibilities, and all three men's songwriting prowess, Tornado Alley has delivered a collection of inspired and inspiring songs that ought to satisfy a range of musical palates.

Standouts include Tim's "It Ain't Easy," a gritty declaration of self, Sonny's "Cruisin'," which documents the life of a traveling musician, and Vinny's clever "Ain't Too Old for That." There are, of course, plenty of other tracks that now lift your spirits, now get

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you thinking about life's trials, now simply make you want to get up and dance. And music that can do all that truly deserves the Americana label.

Also deeply rooted in American musical traditions is Tony's "Stuck in the '60s." The 13-track CD kicks off with the politically-tinged "Sci-fi Movie Blues," a four-minute dissertation of today's social and political ills set to a shuffle beat. Next comes the lovely "Blue," a laid-back jazzy number brimming with poetry.

Throughout the CD, you get a real sense of Tony's musical education, heavily influenced by the blues and the rock 'n roll of the 1950s and 1960s.

But there is variety here. Tony takes us on minor-key detours to Europe on tracks such as "River of January," a historical trip through Poland after the fall of the Soviet Empire, and "A Long, Long Journey Home," a voyage of self-discovery that takes the listener from the forests of the Yucatan to the streets of Rome.

In "Summer Snow," Tony gets romantic: "We shared love that summer/when you made me believe it could snow/as I sat with my back to an ancient oak/loving you, loving you so."

Tony tapped a lot of top-notch musicians to record his CD, starting with the multi-talented Doug Kwartler, who produced all tracks and played several instruments. Other musicians contributing their talents to the project were drummer Mike Leuci, guitarist Dan Zellan and bassist Jim Leach.

Frank's CD wastes no time letting the listener know you're in for something a little different. The first line of the first track is belted out with gusto by soulful guest vocalist Slap Jackson: "I like a beer for breakfast 'cause it goes well with my Fruitloops."

From there, things get even more interesting. In the title track, "Backin' Out Ass First," Frank sings in the introductory verse, "The doctor was ready but the baby was breached/the doctor said, 'I don't see no teeth but look at the size of them gums.'" The song then builds into a gospel-tinged romp with guest lead vocal by Tim Huss.

There's plenty of fun in Frank's CD, and anyone familiar with his music would expect nothing less, and of course, this being Frank, there is plenty of serious stuff as well. In "They," with amazing vocals by Sarah Haddock, Frank gets philosophical. In "If There's No Such Thing as Free Will," he combines humor with philosophy over a playful arrangement that recalls something out of an old Hollywood musical.

Frank also gets serious once in a while, which is the case in tracks like "Bourbon My Friend," a song about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and "An Ocean Is Small," a song about longing.

"Backin' Out Ass First" is a must-have for your collection of CDs by Long Island artists. Some songwriters are funny, others are philosophical, and yet others deadly serious. Frank manages to be all three, and sometimes all in the same song.

Between Frank's second CD and Tornado Alley and Tony's debuts, one comes away with the impression from listening to them all that ISS is an incredibly talented group, with smart, thoughtful writers that can address a myriad of topics in a meaningful, yet entertaining way.

But of course you already knew that.

Go out and pick up all three CDs. Tony's is available at CDBaby.com, Frank's at www.zerojack.com/iss.fgambino.html, and Tornado Alley's at www.tornadoalleyband.com. Oh, and keep an eye on their web sites to find out where these artists are playing soon. You won't want to miss them live.

Throughout the CD, you get a real sense of Tony's musical education, heavily influenced by the blues and the rock 'n roll of the 1950s and 1960s.

Writer's Choice: Gambino Wins with 'How Come if There's Global Warming?'

By Gerry Dantone

The winner of the Writer's Choice award for the September meeting was Frank Gambino's "How Come if There's Global Warming?"

Protest songs that involve important issues of the day are especially tricky to write successfully. They often tend to be obvious, simplistic and, unfortunately, ultimately useless! Exactly what is the purpose of a song that naively implores everybody to "be good," as if anyone actually thinks they're bad in the first place (if they think at all)?

Therefore, good protest songs do not simply tell the listener to "be good." They must emotionally involve the listener and/or educate them by "showing" rather than "telling" them so that they are able to make better decisions based on the facts and whether the world is made a better place (if the listener cares about facts and is able to reason and cares about others).

Or the song could be funny.

Frank Gambino takes the latter path in his song "How Come if There's Global Warming?" in order to sell the obvious fact that the planet is getting warmer and obscures the preaching with a hell of a punch-line: "How come if there's global warming, you still a cold-hearted bitch?"

This is a great Daily Double for Frank: he gets to make the listener aware of global warming in a matter-of-fact manner and gets to call someone a "bitch." This is borderline genius.

Kudos to runner-up Walter Sargent for "Intermission," a song about intermission. This song is extremely self-centered; at the same time it's humble and honest about itself: It admits to being "filler." How many things can be this self-centered and humble at the same time? This is either the work of a selfish but honest mediocrity or the greatest song to inconspicuously fill empty space ever written.

I think...

Gerry Dantone has no finale for this column.

On the Big Stage

Lieberman Plays Madison Square Garden

ISS member Steve Lieberman got on stage at Madison Square Garden in September with rock band Weezer. Steve had participated in a WRXP-FM 101.9 contest calling for musicians to share the stage with the band for two songs.

Steve was picked for his trademark flute playing. He was one of about 40 musicians who won contests by four radio stations.

"Many of them were huge fans of the band, and many were very proficient technical players, which is so not me," Steve said. "I'm all about playing from the emotion, not technique."

The contest winners played "Islands in the Sun" and "Beverly Hills" with the band during the concert.

"In Penn Station after the show, eight different people said, 'Hey, there's the flute player.' I was anonymous, but I just played the garden and that was good," Steve said.

Who Played What

Here's a list of songwriters and songs from last month's ISS workshop:

Pedro Pereira

Shit

Hank Stone

A New Noel

Jeff Curtis

Going to Colorado

Andrew Kirschner

Dancer

Tim Huss

When I Get Home

Gerry Dantone

I Wish I could Tell You This

Estelle Henrich

Nick and Pedro's

Restaurant

Sal Weeks

Ditty for a Bird

Cousin Steve

Held a Ray of Sunshine

Howard Pavane

Martin Lake

Marguerite Cassell

Quicksand

John Finnerty

Hey Alex

Suzanne Ernst

Sweet Hollow Road

Frank Gambino

How Come If There's

Global Warming

Mike Svezia

Too Hot to Hold

Barbara Garriel

Falling

Ken "Kay"

Krummenacker

Summertime

Walt Sargent

Intermission

Mark Hussey

Simeans

iss

Director

Sonny Speed

Webmaster

Walter Sargent

Writing Coach

Mel Glazer

Newsletter

Editor

Pedro Pereira

Contributors

Walter Sargent

Tony Tedeschi

Suzanne Ernst

Dave Cook

Gerry Dantone

Sonny Meadows

Mike Svezia

Steve Robinson

Frank Gambino

We're on the Web!

See us at

www.islandsongwriters.org

ISS Open Mics

The next open mic at **Borders Cafe**, Route 25, Syosset, is Nov. 7. Hosted by Vincent Crici, this gig is monthly, on the first Friday of the month. Sign up at 7:30 p.m.

Monthly Workshop

Test out your songs in front of a crowd by playing them for fellow musicians who will provide constructive feedback with the goal of helping you improve as a songwriter. The ISS workshop takes place the first Monday of every month, except if it falls on a holiday, at Five Towns College, off Burrs Lane in Dix Hills. Run by ISS Director Sonny Speed, the workshop starts at 7:30 p.m.

Bring a guitar if you wish to perform your song live, or you may bring a recording on CD or tape. A piano is available for those who write their songs at the keys. Be sure to bring 25 copies of your lyric sheets so the other workshop attendees can follow along while listening to your song. It is much easier to provide constructive criticism when people can read the lyrics.

The ISS workshop is at the center of the organization's mission to help songwriters perfect their craft. Many performers on Long Island got their start at ISS.

General Information

For general information about ISS or how to join the organization, contact ISS Director Sonny Speed at mcspeed@optonline.net or 631- 462-3300. To submit items for publication in the newsletter, contact Pedro Pereira at pedropereira@verizon.net. Visit our web site at www.islandsongwriters.org.