

BLUESWAX

JULY 2009



BluesWax Spotlight On Grayson Capps

From the Alabama Country To Your Computer Screen

By Kyle M. Palarino

One of the beautiful moments in life is getting hooked on a musician you have not heard before. BluesWax has opened my ears to many such musicians. I had the pleasure of reviewing an album entitled Songbones by Grayson Capps. The beige cover with a silhouette in dirt brown of a male with long hair hunched over a guitar; that was my first vision of Grayson Capps.

The first sounds were stripped-down, lonely road acoustic pieces on guitar with either harmonica or violin accompaniment. The bare "songbones" were structures of songs, the beginnings, the foundation of what has appeared on Capps' other album, If You Knew My Mind. I was drawn in and started listening to other albums of his. Then I had the pleasure of seeing an advertisement for him playing in the northeast. I had to meet this individual who can create character sketches so vivid you know who he is singing about by the end of the song.

I sat down with Capps and learned more about this musician, this artist. There are musicians who play songs and there are musicians who create songs and time pieces, Grayson is the latter. He is a performer and an entertainer as well. His stage presence is that of Iggy Pop restricted by a guitar.

In the time we talked he shared quite a bit with me. He grew up in Alabama with no TV set. The entertainment was a cast of characters that would come and sit with his dad to visit. The household was the gathering spot for everyone to hang out, tell stories, sing some songs, and have a few drinks. Men with names like Frank Stokes and Bobby Long were two

of the personalities. By the age of three he remembers hearing songs by Hank Williams, Tom T. Hall, Tony Joe White, and Jerry Reed. Some of these songs are still in his set to this day.

Come with me to the present for a minute. Well, okay, 2004. Hollywood comes knocking on the door to tell the story that Grayson lived. Grayson's father, Ronald Everett Capps, wrote a book about his life and friends. Through several channels, John Travolta and Scarlett Johansson get cast to fill roles and here come the cameras to Alabama for the filming of A Love Song for Bobby Long.

Grayson said it was surreal to watch the story of his youth unfold before him. He gave pointers to Travolta on how to pronounce certain words, and also appears in the film a few times playing music. Of course the movie took some liberties on the book, but there are moments that make the movie worth the watch.

From Alabama, Grayson moved on to New Orleans to attend Tulane University. He has a very free air about him and his Theater major is fitting. We discussed some books and authors that inspired him. He loves the complicated simplicity of Dylan Thomas. There was a Charles Bukowski phase. The southern tales of Tennessee Williams enthused him. On the stage, playwright Eugene O'Neill, with his stories of despair, stimulated his thoughts. A more obscure reference that he spoke at length about was a book titled Liliith by J.R. Salamanca. Russian authors Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy are both well liked. Grayson loves the use of metaphors, which is part of his flame for Blues music.

The use of Taoist texts brings him hope through life. The sayings from the Tao Te Ching have sparked his thoughts and encouraged growth within himself. If he had one book to take with him, it would be the Tao Te Ching. With all the texts he has read, that is quite a statement.

Today he is still close to his parents. They were married for over thirty years and then divorced. This seemed to please Grayson. His mother was always the stable one, while his father was the eccentric. Nowadays his father spends his time building wind sculptures or mobiles out of odd items such as the inside of a typewriter. He constantly has multiple projects going at once including painting and writing and through time gets them all done. His nickname in the area is "Bayou Bukowski." Some is due to the fame from the movie; some is due to his unconventional behaviors.

There is an out of the way place that is his favorite place to play called the

Pirates Cove in Alabama. Most of the people who go there take a boat. Everyone shows up and lets loose. There are no cops to worry about since it is so out of the way and there is an understanding of what "Rott 'n' Roll" is.

After Katrina struck, Grayson and family left New Orleans and moved north to central Tennessee. He has two kids and balances fatherhood with touring and writing music. When he wants to get away he travels back to Alabama to 100 acres that his grandfather left him with nothing but a trailer on it. If he is heading out on the road he heads there to fish, play, and ease up before he hits the road.

As for the music that night, you can't rock Country 'n' Blues better than Grayson and the Stumpknockers. He brought the group up from New Orleans and Alabama to show their true glory. Tommy MacLuckie plays second guitar and has the deadpan delivery of the best comedians. I had no clue if he was joking or really pissed at me throughout the night, but there was never an awkward moment talking with him. Odd as he may be, his guitar solos soaked right into each song. I would say he and Grayson grown up together they played along so well.

Josh Kerin, originally from New Hampshire and now a New Orleans resident, played bass and also illustrated his talent at whistling throughout the night. I think even Bing Crosby would have been impressed. Kerin wanted a bigger music scene than New Hampshire had to offer, so he headed to New Orleans to see if he could make it in the circus environment, and here he was back in the northeast on tour with the southern windstorm named Mr. Capps. Kerin not only plays a solid bass, he has that perfect knack to lay back or just get nasty at the ideal moment.

Then, on drums is Alabaman John Milham. He is the quietest in volume when speaking, but he makes up for it with his cool grooves. And don't let his quiet demeanor fool you, he is just as crazy as the rest. He grew up in Mobile playing drums then went up to Berklee College of Music in Boston. He returned down south and toured with musicians of many different styles from Funk to Classical. He has a wonderful flare that accents each song.

Each of Grayson's albums has a slightly different sound. Obvious influences range from Waylon Jennings to Charlie Feathers to Junior Kimbrough to the Black Crowes to Wet Willie, but you have to see the songs performed live to really get the feel and experience of this little thing called "Rott 'n' Roll." That is how Grayson describes his music with the

lyrics full of vagabonds, roustabouts, vagrants, and loose women. I hear songwriting in the vein of Tom Waits, Kelly Joe Phelps, Preacher Boy, or Guy Forsyth. But it's always a unique approach without trying to emulate any of the aforementioned.

The night winded down with Capps and the Stumpknockers quoting the Old Gregg routine they had watched on Youtube. They were just having fun on the road traveling in a mini-van. Grayson can get very deep on certain subjects or clown and act the ass in a heartbeat. This is the man whose best memory of New Orleans was having sex in the back of a van on a hot, humid southern day and his worst memory was getting out of college and the reality of having to find a real job. I think we all could relate to that.

These are the joys in meeting musicians who are people that we all could understand. Just sometimes they get to do what we wish that we could.

Kyle M. Palarino is a contributing editor at BluesWax.

<http://www.visnat.com/entertainment/music/blueswax/feature.cfm>