

“Crossing That River” – Grant Dermody

by Cathi Norton

Could it be that after a wave of genre-dividing specialty playing we're moving into independent/variety playing once more? A blasphemous notion for record labels and merchandisers who don't feel comfortable with discs that fit into more than one bin, but a feast for music-lovers, and an essential ability for any musician who intends to coax a living from performance. When you're asked “what kind of music do you play?” – is the answer long or short? I've finally gotten my answer down to “good” – followed by a smile.

“Damn good” would be how I'd describe Grant Dermody's first solo effort, “Crossing That River” (2003). I laughed when I saw that he listed the “style” of each tune lest there be any doubt. We move from “funk-blues,” through “calypso instrumental” and “traditional gospel,” back to “folk ballad,” etc. Historically I could never categorize his music, and here he is...categorizing variety. Well, I just had to smile.

A voracious musical explorer, the Seattle-based Dermody has tackled the Alaskan frontier (and its many musical adventures); fallen deeply for blues; studied acting; learned subtle harp techniques with Kim Fields; studied music in college; played harmonica with a symphony orchestra; did electric/blues “boot camp” with “The Harmonicasters;” sang with the Seattle Bach Choir; completed a stunning country blues CD (“Improbabilities”); taught harp at festivals and grade schools; worked to teach future school teachers how to incorporate music into their classrooms; and just generally made an excellent musical nuisance of himself for years.

Now with his first solo CD Dermody brings it together with a feeling. Liner notes by drummer Dale Fanning describe that feeling best: “This recording is not only about exploring and building on various ‘roots’ music styles, it's about roots in a deeper sense of the word as well; community, the root of culture, the basis of music.” Dermody plays from “inside” each genre, with the familiarity and care of a lover of each. Surrounded by friends and respected musical peers—excellent musicians each and every one—he creates community even as he dispenses it. I hear the relationship between him, the players, and the musicianship, and yes, it's clearly a spiritual thing.

The overall harp work is a beautiful example of what support harp ought to be—never calling attention to itself, but by its phrasing, tone, and syncopation claiming it anyway. Yet solos add exactly what is needed. I had my favorites of course, but the disc is a keeper from first to last. Guest spots by Phil Wiggins, John Cephas, and Joe Filisko are delights atop those already presented by an excellent array of musicians. Guitarist John Miller burns on tunes like “I'll Get to Heaven on My Own,” and provides stellar support throughout. Scotty Meyer scorches the strings off that fiddle, and every player listed pulls twice their weight and then some. I loved the bold spaces (leaving room just where it should be) in the gospel numbers: the beautiful comping of harp-player Phil Wiggins beneath Grant's harmonica lead on “Anacostia Two-Step; John Cephas on “Look at the People Standing at the Judgment,” and the visceral thrill of Joe Filisko's harp on “I'm Gonna Cross That River of Jordan.”

Mickey Newberry's folksy tune, “Why You Been Gone So Long,” was a delight, standing next to old-time fiddle tunes like “Greasy Coat,” and the funkily arranged “Breakthrough.” Above the musical prowess, though, I was most partial to the unconscious “soul” expressed in the tunes/playing (which to me is “blues” no matter what genre you're attempting). This is music from people who understand what makes music live and breathe—whatever the genre. This music is from a man on a quest. I'm impressed...and refreshed. It's a disc that belongs in the roots bin – all of them.

(“Crossing That River” – contact information: gdermody@yahoo.com)