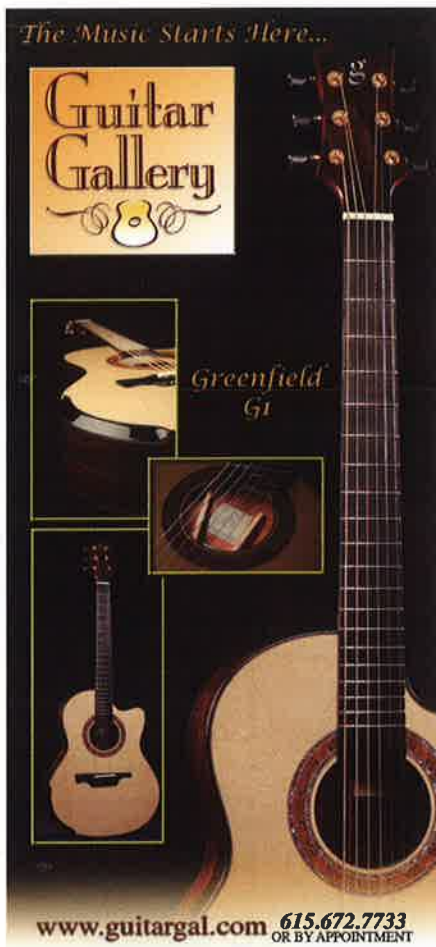


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Tom Russell

On *Mesabi*, the singer-songwriter pairs songs about fallen idols and drug violence across the border with a rich, cinematic mix of Tex-Mex guitar and exotic instrumentation.

By Céline Keating

WHEN IT COMES TO SINGING ABOUT COLORFUL CHARACTERS, Tom Russell has the terrain covered. His gripping narratives have included iconic figures such as Charles Bukowski, Muhammad Ali, and Edward Abbey, and that trend continues on *Mesabi*, his 26th release, where idols, true and false, come under scrutiny. A cautionary tale about the way our dreams can both inspire and disappoint, *Mesabi* references the birthplace of Bob Dylan (Hibbing, Minnesota), Hollywood's hidden sorrows, and the border town of Juarez, Mexico. After being asked to write two songs for Monte Hellman's film *Road to Nowhere*, about a fictional movie director besotted with a star, Russell was inspired to learn about the hard lives of some of the actors he'd admired when growing up in Los Angeles, like Bobby Driscoll, who played Peter Pan and "started walkin' backwards in a junkie's shoes" ("Farewell Never Never Land").

More broadly, *Mesabi* is about Russell's own musical journey. On the title track Russell sings, in his rugged, satisfying baritone, "I wanna sing like the troubadour kid." But "as much as this album has to do with Dylan in certain ways from start to finish, as an inspiration, I don't write like Dylan—nor does anybody," he says. "I had to find my own way as a lyricist." As he sums up on "When the Legends Die," he learned he had to "write your own freedom songs." Like his muses, among them Leonard Cohen and Ian Tyson, Russell's love of language is apparent in his tight, economical, and graceful lines: "She chased furious love / Dancing between the rhyme and the reason" ("Furious Love [For Liz]"). "I've always been a big fan of intelligent songwriting and that mysterious third point where you can't put your finger on why a song is great," Russell says.



Border Songs

Russell, a former criminologist, is an incisive social critic who has taken on controversial issues throughout his decades-long career. That aspect of his work is reflected

DREW REYNOLDS

on *Mesabi* in the cluster of songs that focus on the area around El Paso, Texas, where Russell lives. His lyrics are tough and punchy, but not polemical: "We send them the guns, they send us the drugs" (from "And God Created Border Towns," co-written with Augie Meyer). While he writes some songs, like "Border Towns," to deal directly with a political issue, other songs with similar themes may stem more from an emotional response. "Border Towns" leads into another type of song on the record, "Goodnight, Juarez," [which is] about being

"I don't listen to a lot of basic songwriter music. I listen to flamenco and classical. Doing that jerks you into a new area so you don't get static or stale."

sad that the place where I used to go and enjoy is gone [because of drug cartel violence]," Russell says.

While *Mesabi* is similar to Russell's previous recording, 2009's *Blood and Candle Smoke*, in his collaboration with members of Calexico, it breaks from earlier albums in several ways. "I really did want to push this record out sonically to new territory," Russell says, "to use odd instruments to bring different sounds, world sounds" beyond the Tex-Mex flavorings Calexico lends to the border town songs. He also recorded in several studios and with a range of musicians, including Fats Kaplin on ukulele and oud, Joel Guzman on accordion, Van Dyke Parks on piano, Viktor Krauss on bass, and Will Kimbrough on acoustic, electric, slide, resonator, and dobro. An album standout is Jacob Mossman's exquisite flamenco guitar soloing on "Jai Alai." In yet another departure, Russell accompanies himself solo on "Love Abides," one of the most beautiful songs on the album. A cover of Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," a duet with Lucinda Williams, is likewise stripped down and commensurately powerful.

Over the decades Russell has created an enormous catalog of strong, compelling music that has been covered by musicians such as Dave Alvin, Johnny Cash, and Dave Van Ronk. How does he do it? "Your hands fall into the same positions on a guitar," he says of his songwriting, so he often turns to the piano, where "your hands run through different chord changes. I also don't listen to a lot of basic songwriter music. I listen to flamenco and classical. Doing that jerks you into a new area so you don't get static or stale." On *Mesabi*

the influence of Broadway musicals can also be heard, particularly on "Farewell Never Never Land" and "The Lonesome Death of Ukulele Ike," with a vaudevillian lilt and a clever weaving in of "Singing in the Rain" and "It's Only a Paper Moon" melody lines.

Even at this stage of his career, Russell keeps striving to improve his guitar playing. Given his intensive touring, when he and his sideman of 20 years, "monster guitarist" Andrew Hardin, parted ways in 2006, "I had to sit down with my guitar for a year. I was a pretty lazy guitarist." Russell, a self-taught fingerpicker, considered performing solo, but ultimately realized that he prefers backup. "Some things [in the live shows] were quite difficult, like 'Gallo del Cielo' or other wild, wild songs that Andrew played so well. It's very difficult for another guy to step in and play [that] machine gun stuff." With that in mind, Russell started touring with guitarist Thad Beckman, who also contributes to several songs on *Mesabi*. "Thad is a master of fingerpicking guitar style," Russell says. "His approach appeals to me because he really gets his head inside the song and accompanies. He stays inside and enhances the song."

Russell's approach to his career has been to build his audience slowly but steadily, away from the musical mainstream. "I feel really strong now finally as an artist and a writer and a performer and part of that has happened because I have stayed outside the box," he says. "What I really like is that [people are saying], 'This guy is the opposite of most people—his stronger work is coming now that he's older.'" AG

Céline Keating is a writer and editor living in New York City.

WHAT HE PLAYS

- **ACOUSTIC GUITAR:** Custom Collings OM2H, painted black with mother-of-pearl inlay on the head, neck, and fingerboard, a Sitka spruce top, East Indian rosewood back and sides, and ebony fingerboard and bridge. 1948 Gibson J-45 (used on *Mesabi*). Martin D-18 for composing, which Russell says has a bullet hole in the back from an incident at a carnival in Puerto Rico in 1980. Resonator from an unknown manufacturer that Russell thinks might date to the '30s or '40s.
- **AMPLIFICATION:** Factory-installed undersaddle Fishman pickup, run through an L.R. Baggs Venue DI.
- **STRINGS:** D'Addario phosphor-bronze light.
- **PICKS:** Planet Waves .70 mm.
- **CAPO:** Planet Waves NS.



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