



Bruce Brackney a.k.a. Haywire Brack: Case History (a CD Review)

Recently I received a CD from Bruce Brackney of Victoria BC. I sat down and listened to the entire thing, and I can't sit through a cricket chirp these days.

Haywire Brack, as he is known in hobo, is a versatile finger-pick and flat-pick guitarist, stylistically influenced by the likes of Dave Van Ronk and Dave "Snaker" Ray. Brack adores guitars and has owned many. His CD is called **Case History**, tying together his "Haywire" persona and his instrument fascination. "I started off on my dad's 1917 L-1 Gibson. Still have it," Bruce told me in a phone chat I had with him the other day.

But Bruce is also an extraordinary folk singer, with a confident clarity of diction that reminds me of other of my folk singing heroes, like Michael Cooney and Art Thieme. And you can tell that these songs have special meaning to him. He presents just enough of an edge to assure that he has suffered the emotions portrayed, and is sincerely listening to every word he sings.

Brack's childhood had its difficulties, including his being surrendered to an orphanage from age 2 1/2 to 4. His father suffered debilitating migraines and ended up in treatment at the Mayo Clinic. His mother in Minneapolis had no access to day care, therefore the orphanage. "I have [the recollection of] feeling quite strange, in that this woman would come and visit me, take me out of there for an afternoon... and then take me back." Turns out it was his mother. This is the sort of experience that gives his rendition of the song "Orphan Train" its strength, for example. "I don't know if [the orphanage] impacted me subconsciously... I'm not a cross dresser or anything because of it..." he insists.

He also had a footloose twelve years in the 70s and early 80s, having no fixed address, crashing with friends, riding the rails, courting the girls, and playing music all over the country. "There were circuits... funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities... You play rest homes, title three meal centers, usu-

ally a humanities class... The 3.5 gigs a day at 3.5 towns a day." Eventually he teamed up with Jeff Cahill of Minneapolis, and they would each play a short set then team up for jokes, dressed as a voyageur and a Scandinavian bloke, calling themselves the Snoose Brudders.

Jeff was on the site crew of the Winnipeg Folk Festival. He helped Brack enlist with that outfit, where Brack soon met Margaret Potter of Winnipeg, and they were married. They moved west in 1986, worked a few adventures around Vancouver, and ended up in Victoria. Though Brack gave up long touring, he still performs sporadically and enthusiastically, but most often locally.

But many of the songs on this CD suggest wandering, being homesick, being lovelorn. The songs are traditional folk or folk-style songs, each described in Brack's brilliantly vintage writing style in the notes. The first rollicking hobo song, **Ragged but Right**, Brack says that when played as an opener, it "... serves notice to the audience that we prefer a rude vigor to a polished banality."

These are interesting songs of interesting origin. The second song is **North Star**, "A stellar, so to speak, example of the folk process." Utah Phillips wrote the lyrics of this hobo journey, Mark Ross put a melody to it and taught it to Brack "late one night in Missoula," and Brack, driving toward Minnesota, the North Star State, turned it into a "home" song. Song number four is called the **New Lee Highway Blues** written by David Bromberg, about which Brack mentions that the 60s and 70s saw many young troubadours roll across the country resulting in "an Avogadro's Number of 'Road Songs'..." and this is one of his favorites.

There are 18 songs and a poem here, including a version of the **Wabash Cannonball**, with a melodic update by Utah Phillips, but first learned by Brack from his father, who had been a gandy dancer on the Wabash RR. There's **The Dreaury Black Hills**, a cautionary song about the fake gold rush trumped up by the Northern Pacific RR to stimulate business. A hobo's love of trains is evident in many of these songs, so it's nice to hear this awareness that the old railroad tycoons were often heartless. **Old Coyote**, written by the late Al Grierson, will give you the goosebumps. Brack agrees with Art Thieme who says, "This might

be the best song I've ever heard." And Bill Monroe's **Body and Soul** will give you goosebumps the willies.

Many of the songs were recorded recently but some came from shows at old venues like the **Cafe Extempore** of Minneapolis or **Holstein's** in Chicago. This CD is haunting to me, in the best way, as my musical partner Lou and I have known so many of the characters and venues mentioned (Brack himself kindly hosted a gig for us in Victoria in 1995, as a matter of fact.) Speaking at length with Brack about his personal history, and regarding our having many mutual friends, he gave me this obviously pre-Facebook quote: "Everyone you know knows everyone else you know whether you know it or not."

Many of the names mentioned are, or were, members of or at least elbow-rubbers with what Brack calls the "self inflicted myth" of "far-flung rounders, boomers, railroad habitues and sons of habitues," called **The Rose Tattoo**, begun in the early 70s. I'm surprised I haven't written about these dozen or so trudging plunkers, with Utah Phillips as member one, father figure, and guru. Membership requirements: "1. Must spend a good deal of one's life around the railroad. 2. Must sing old songs. 3. Must have a rose tattoo."

I would add that the **Tattoos** also all use humor as a lubricant in their lives on and offstage. And, due in large part to Phillips, expound and create with an empathetic nod to the disenfranchised. Brack's CD is a prime example of this hobo-socialist-humorist-troubadour Rose Tattoo sensibility, and a grand tribute to the many inspirational figureheads in this subculture who have passed on, such as Utah Phillips himself, but it is also purely a great stand-alone traditional music recording. Thank you Bruce Brackney. This is a marvelous CD; a treasure.

This is a very limited (200 copies) recording. Brack tells me they cost him \$10 each to have made, and postage alone from Canada to the US costs \$5. He has decided to sell them at \$20, postage paid (US funds are okay). That is a steal, considering everything.

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