

## **Graham Weber : *Beggar's Blues***

From a certain glass-half-empty point of view, Austin, Texas needed another singer-songwriter when Graham Weber moved to town about as much as young Graham, six years earlier, needed to be dumped by the girl who left him for another guy named Graham — weeks after he'd moved halfway across the country to live with her in Los Angeles.

But because the last thing the world needs now is more pessimism, let's reassess things through glass-half-full glasses. Fact is, even a music town as glutted with songsters as Austin could use a hell of a lot more of 'em of Graham's caliber, even if they have to be imported from decidedly non-music towns like Kent, Ohio. And had it not been for the gal who dumped Graham in the City of Angels, leaving him heartbroke and a long, long way from home, he might never have hit rock bottom and put himself back together as a songwriter in the first place. Which means he probably wouldn't have moved back to his hometown of Cincinnati, then back to Kent to meet the woman who married him and record his first album, *Naïve Melodies*. Which means he probably never would have migrated south to Texas to make his second record, *Beggar's Blues*.

And if there were no *Beggar's Blues*, you, good sir or ma'am, would most certainly not be reading about Graham Weber right now, on the cusp of discovering not just another damn singer-songwriter of the Americana persuasion, but rather one of the very few really good ones who jumps out from the middling crowd and makes a lasting impression the first time you hear him do his thing. Just ask fellow Austin transplant (and fellow "really good one") Slaid Cleaves.

"He really struck me when he opened for me at a show in Pittsburgh," says Cleaves of his introduction to Weber's music. "Usually, opening acts that you've never seen before don't make much of an impression on you, but Graham really did. He's bright, quick and very agile on stage. He has a gift for reacting really well to the audience and is very comfortable in front of a crowd — much more so than I was when I was starting out."

Weber's songs impressed Cleaves, too. Among the songs in Weber's short set that night was "Oh Roberta," a tune from his first album that Cleaves — who's since asked Weber to open several more shows for him — has recorded for his own next album, a collection of songs by some of his friends and favorite writers. Ask any songwriter who's ever had a song cut by another artist they really look up to or admire, and they'll tell you there's no higher honor.

"Slaid's really been a mentor to me," says Weber, 25. "He's single-handedly helped me along this year. On my third day in town after moving to Austin, I played during his break at the Cactus Café. And getting to play a real listening room like the Cactus for the first time was a huge deal for me. I could tell right away that people in Austin, they really appreciate a songwriter if you can prove you have something to offer. They pay attention."

And the songs on *Beggar's Blues* serve notice that Weber is a songwriter worth paying attention to. The opening "After All" sets him up as a stern disciple of the Woody Guthrie/early Bob Dylan school of rapid-fire, image-rich word-play over simple acoustic strumming and folksy harmonica. But long before you have time to grab hold of any one line to dissect it, Weber's moved on to something completely different. The words fly even faster through "Love and Money," darting in and around a playful Vaudevillian/rag-time clarinet, and then, just when Weber's got you smiling, he slams on the brakes and hits you unaware with "Starving Days," "Devil's Night" and, a little later, "Cincinnati" — three minor masterworks of mood and haunting, heartbreaking melody that recall Wilco, John Prine and even Closing Time-era Tom Waits at the peak of their powers.

"Musically, I wanted to create some kind of roller coaster feeling for the listener," he says. "I like going from just myself on guitar on one song to full production on the next, because I try to look at it as, 'What would keep me interested if I heard this record?'"

Lyricaly, Weber admits he has a tendency for leaning toward "a lot of melancholy introspection." "I've got a lot of songs about leaving places, and songs about thinking about what I left behind, and songs about trying to figure out what's going to come next. But I've got my light-hearted songs, too," he says — pointing a little sheepishly to *Beggar's Blues*' resident goofy howler, "Stars and Circles." "It's good to make people laugh, then turn around and break their heart and then make them laugh again. If you just get up there and play sad songs, it's like sending people off to a warm bath with a razor blade."

"I heard Rob Reiner describing his movies one time, saying, 'Whatever I do, I try to deal with the human condition,'" Weber continues. "I liked that line, and that's what I try to do, too. Everybody's got the same emotions, and a good song is one that everybody can identify with on some level." Although he didn't start writing or performing until his early 20s (busking a bit on Venice Beach and on the Santa Monica Pier during his unhappy L.A. days), Weber grew up immersed in his parents' John Prine and Willie Nelson records. His father was hip enough to turn him on to Todd Snider, too, and it was a Snider show that inspired Weber to shelve his ambition to become an actor and focus all of his creative energies toward songcraft.

"I had taken some guitar lessons off and on as a kid, and had taught myself to play a few Beatles songs," says Weber. "But it was that Snider show that really got me going." He returned to Kent, initially intent to finish college but instead hooking up with the roots rock band the Whiskeyhounds, primarily as a keyboard player and rhythm guitarist and to learn the ropes of performing on stage. After he stepped out on his own with 2003's *Naïve Melodies* and was making a decent enough living playing solo that he didn't need a day job, he figured it was time to move to Austin — sight unseen — and test his mettle in the "live music capital of the world."

"There were a few other good writers in Northeastern Ohio," he says. "I mean, the Whiskeyhounds are still my favorite band. But there's not a very big scene there for songwriters. I hadn't really seen anybody new there in well over a year who even remotely sparked my interest, so I could see it being a dead end. But as soon as I got to Austin, I was fortunate to become friends with Slaid and guys like Adam Carroll and Hayes Carll, and I was blown away. Because they all do such great work, it inspires me to keep trying to do my best work to keep up with them. It keeps me challenged.

"I figure if I can cut my teeth and make a dent in this town," he continues, "then I can do it wherever else I go. Playing for the Austin crowd toughens you up, because they've heard everything a thousand times. If you can crack them, it's like cracking the most discriminating audience that there is for this kind of music. And I look forward to that."

And with *Beggar's Blues* as Weber's current calling card and signpost toward the promising road ahead of him, discriminating fans of good music — be they in Austin or anywhere else — have a lot to look forward to, too.

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