

Mp3 Sam Leopold - Mixed Business



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American folk/blues storyteller recorded Downunder and backed by Sydney's finest. 11 MP3 Songs

FOLK: Modern Folk, BLUES: Acoustic Blues Details: Sam Leopold: A Troubadour Survives in the Age of Spin by Frank Beacham

It is perhaps fitting that I first saw Sam Leopold on stage in a small club on Bleecker Street in New York City's Greenwich Village. It being the first decade of the 21st century, Leopold's performance that night was about as close as I could get to reliving the glory days of the troubadours who played on these same streets during the folk music revival of the 1960s. Yet, from the first moment Leopold hit the stage, it was clear that this was no oldies revival. Here is a performer who commands attention. He projects a force field of fierce independence. I felt it in the first sounds from his guitar: a subtext of prickly attitude that tells you this is a man who is serious about his music and incapable of subservience to the whims of commercial fashion. This night on Bleecker Street I had plugged into the grand tradition of the troubadour, a resilient musical genre that dates back to the 13th century and shows no signs of losing its relevance in a musical culture increasingly driven by synthesized pop diversions. The troubadour survives through the deliverance of timeless stories that reflect the human condition. As with the best of his predecessors, Sam Leopold is a seeker whose songs are derived from the wellspring of his own life and experiences. His songs cover every topic, from love and war, to supermarkets and an old canoe. (Not to mention an amazing crowd pleaser about nothing...that's right, nothing at all.) Leopold's performances on Bleecker Street are as relevant and fresh in 2005 as were those in 1962 of one of his great influences, Bob Dylan. Of course, the powerful aura of the singer-songwriter, a healer of hearts, is a tradition as old as humans. However, it's not a profession for the faint of heart. Those who truly move us through this solitary art form go far beyond the simple telling of stories in song. They are the visionaries who dig deep into their own lives and experiences to create the metaphors that help us bring perspective

to our own lives. Sam Leopold is such a visionary. A deep diver of the human soul, he's learned to create a huge metaphorical mirror that reflects our hidden needs and desires in ways we often can detect in the hurly-burly of modern life. Though he was born in Philadelphia and raised in the blues tradition of Chicago, Leopold is truly a man of the world. He has lived and performed on the streets and in the nightclubs of many of the countries of Europe and in Israel. In later years, he lived in Japan and Australia before returning to his current home near New York City. Given his first guitar at age 11, Leopold's earliest musical encounters came from the random choices of his mother after she made a monthly six record commitment to the mail order Columbia Record Club. My mother didn't know music, so she would just close her eyes and randomly check off records, he recalled, noting that Columbia introduced him to the likes of Frank Sinatra, Eddie Duchin, Benny Goodman and his first taste of jazz. One record, Louis Armstrong's Satch Plays Fats: The Music of Fats Waller became a lifelong favorite. But it was his older sister's boyfriend, a blues fan, that set the young Leopold on fire. He turned me on to Big Bill Broonzy and I became a fanatic. I spent hours listening to Broonzy records. There was such joy in his singing. He could sing the blues, yet make you so happy at the same time. That led me to Blind Willie McTell, Mance Lipscomb, Merle Travis, Charlie Patton, Lemon Jefferson, and Blind Blake...guitar players with a syncopated thumb. I copied their playing through sheer repetition. If I could make my thumb bounce over the bass strings a million times or more I figured it would start to work by itself so I could concentrate on my other fingers. At 13, another creative explosion hit Leopold: the release of Bob Dylan's first album. The realization hit that he, like Dylan, could write and perform his own songs. And, just as Dylan himself had discovered a few years earlier from the same influences, making one's own music was about as high a calling as a person could have. In the 1970s, Leopold experienced a brief collaboration with Chicagoan Shel Silverstein. Though known for his children's books, Silverstein was also a prolific songwriter, whose hits included A Boy Named Sue for Johnny Cash. I learned so much from Shel. Mainly, I learned simplicity, simplicity, simplicity. Every time you think you have something very clever, it's probably best to be willing to throw it away for the sake of the simplicity of the story, Leopold recalled. I followed that advice and have always tried to keep songs simple. Yet, as he got older and gained more life experiences, Leopold found himself resisting the fight to simplify, realizing some of his best songs were not necessarily so simple. I want to weave a spell through my own imaginings, make them clear, give them purpose, he mused. As time goes on and I get older, I realize I don't have the answers to make

songs simple. Life is not black and white. Im thankful that the gods of music are still giving me complex ideas and situations to struggle with and write about. Challenge abounds! Though he has written more than 150 songs that he considers worthwhile, Leopolds ideal song is always tied up in the performance. How the song works in its presentation to an audience is where it succeeds or fails. It was another early influence in Chicago, Oscar Brown Jr., the poet, playwright and civil rights activist, that shaped the young Leopolds thinking about performance. How unhip...light musical comedy, Leopold quipped in trying to explain what was an unlikely attraction to Browns work. I auditioned for one of his shows when I was about 15. I didnt get the job, but his encouragement was a major boost. He took me seriously and gave me respect. I took him very seriously and worked hard to get better. Ironically, when he died in 2005, Brown was considered anything but unhip. To the contrary, he was referred to as The High Priest of Hip, and had become a regular favorite on Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam television show. Following in the steps of the perceptive Leopold, young rappers began adapting Browns material for their own work. Though Leopolds songs and performances are as contemporary as the days news, he honed his craft in Chicagos Old Town, a crucible of American folk music. In the early 70s, he opened for Steve Goodman, writer of the classic City of New Orleans, at Earl of Old Town, one of Chicagos legendary folk clubs. Soon he was a headliner himself, joining other club stars like John Prine, Jim Post, Bonnie Koloc, and Fred Holstein. It was here that Leopold was discovered by Mercury Records, a development that led to a short and unhappy stint in the commercial music business. The arrangement, however, did result in a critically-acclaimed album and Leopolds performing on stage with such artists as Pete Seeger, Harry Chapin, Bonnie Raitt, Emmylou Harris, Lightnin Hopkins, Leo Kottke and Charles Mingus. It was during the turbulence of this period that Leopold returned to basics, learning to separate what mattered the music from the business of recording and performing. These days Sam Leopold continues to write and perform on his own terms. A recent passion is teaching songwriting to disabled children, which he said helps spur new ideas for his own music. I look at my life like a roadmap, he explained, "everything moving along on an unconscious level. I started in a certain place, and though I search for a destination its all just movement, so I dont really expect to arrive anywhere just change. Most good songs are like that, they come from an elevating purpose of wanting to learn, he continued. Im strongly motivated in my desire for knowledge. Its beyond curiosity...its more a search, a quest for the meaning of things. Theres always a more concise way of putting something. It shows me I understand the thing better when I can describe it

better. I follow a line of the folk language that passed through the old bards, troubadours and blind storytellers. What I learn I seek to bring to the listener. In a media-centric era when its hard to detect truth from commercial spin, the concept of the troubadour survives. It perhaps is more important than ever before. Sam Leopolds songs ring true because they seek truth. They are the genuine article. They reflect a man on a mission to honestly examine his life in his music. Hes not trying to sell us anything. That alone makes he and his music specialvery special indeed.

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