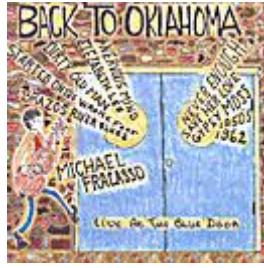


Mp3 Michael Fracasso - Back To Oklahoma



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Michael Fracasso blends soulful melodies with evocative lyrics to create an evocative style of Americana roots music performed on acoustic guitar. 19 MP3 Songs FOLK: Folk Blues, BLUES: Mellow Blues

Details: Michael Fracasso's World in a Drop of Water Something Worth Living For by Michael Bertin photograph by Todd. V. Wolfson There's a quote on the back of Michael Fracasso's third and most recent album, World in a Drop of Water, and it provides the two easiest and hence most common reference points given for the Austin-based singer-songwriter: Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison. While from a descriptive standpoint, there are clear and distinct vestiges of those two legends in the warm and naturally tremulous voice of Fracasso, it's peculiar that two of Texas' most sacred musical sons would find similarities manifest in him. You see, Michael Fracasso is not Texan. In fact, he's barely American. "My family, back in Italy, they were farmers," says the 46-year-old assimilated Austinite, "but after [World War II], it became a very depressed area. Where they grew up - in southern Italy between Rome and Naples - it was really ravaged. I think my parents, like a lot of Europeans, moved for economic opportunities."

Fracasso is not only the first generation in his family to be born in the United States, he's the first person, period, since his sisters were born in Italy before the family immigrated to the U.S. and ended up in Steubenville, Ohio, a city across the Ohio River along the West Virginia panhandle and the hometown of Dean Martin. Once there, Fracasso's father ended up in a steel mill, a lack of formal education limiting his "economic opportunities" in the land of milk and Rockefeller. By the time he was 18, son Michael, most likely even smaller than his presently slight build, was working at the same mill. "I tried to pay for my college tuition because my parents wouldn't pay for me to go away," says Fracasso. "They wanted me to stay at home and go to this school in Steubenville, and I was like, I'm going to pay for my own school and go away.' So I started working in the steel mills, and I was totally not fit to do so. "I mean, the first job I got

was working in a blast furnace. This is where they tap the ovens and all of this molten steel comes out and there are these laborers who have to break up the steel after it hardens. Most of it rolls into train cars down below, but then there's like a river of steel that has hardened and you have to break it up with a pick axe and put it on wheelbarrows and haul it off. Everyone around me was like a huge man, and there I am. The first day, I tipped over with the wheelbarrow. "The next day, I told my dad, I can't work there, you're going to have to get me out of that department or I won't make it past the week.' He got me transferred and I was working, operating a crane from above the mill. I was working in the scrap yard, picking up scrap and dumping it in the train cars. I did all kinds of things in the mill, but I just didn't fit the mold very well." Fracasso ended up going to Ohio State in Columbus, earning a degree in Environmental Science before heading out West for graduate school at Washington State - a situation with which he had an analogous albeit far less physically conspicuous incompatibility. Fracasso explains: "It was funny, I was playing last week and I said, After I got my master's.' And I'm like, Wait a second, I never got my master's. I flunked out of graduate school.' Well, I didn't flunk out, I just stopped going. I just quit. I hated it, because everybody was into their grades all of the time. I just didn't fit in. I found it really difficult to be in the science clique. I'm not even a scientist. It's absurd that I was there." Even if graduate school itself was a mistake, Fracasso acknowledges that, in some respects, going where he did was a very natural, reactionary thing to do. Growing up in one of the most polluted areas in the country, the clean air and the mountains offered by the Pacific Northwest made perfect sense as a geographic destination. Too bad that Fracasso found himself not only disillusioned with school, but also distracted from it by the coffeehouse scene in Seattle. As it turns out, Fracasso had been playing and writing music since high school, but had never performed it in front of actual people. Even after he stopped doing the academia waltz, Fracasso still didn't embark on his career as a musician; broke and without the reality-dodge that is higher education, he took a job with the Department of Natural Resources in Washington, working survey in the Cascade Mountains. "I was cutting down these big Ponderosa pine trees and taking these measurements on them like the weight of each section and the density of the bark. It was for some study or something, but on my days off I would just travel right in to Seattle. "I wasn't playing publicly at the time, I'd go to watch other people.... I guess I was just insecure about trying to do what I really wanted to do the whole time, which was be a songwriter. I was unsure of myself. Having not ever been in that environment of other songwriters for very long or not at all, I didn't know that I could do it. I think everyone goes through a

period where they are trying to find themselves. "When I realized that this is what I do better than anything else and this is who I am, I was like, Okay, this is what I am going to do,' and my life became very rewarding. I felt like I had something I was living for - something that made me happy as a person, something that I could offer other people." Liberated by this discovery, Fracasso admits his upbringing had a lot to do with his reluctance to pursue the life of a musician. "My parents wanted me to do better than they did and have an education," he explains. "They stressed that a great deal. I would have been a failure in their eyes if I hadn't gone to college, so it was hard for me to break away from that. When I did, it was very liberating. I called my parents and said, Listen. I'm moving to New York City. I'm going to be a songwriter.' And they were, surprisingly, like, Great.' I guess they were waiting for me to do that. It just took a while." Better late than never, and with the decision Fracasso did indeed move to New York and become a songwriter. Well, he had been one of those for a while, but now he had added the element of playing his songs for an audience. In New York, he became a singer-songwriter and immersed himself in the New Folk scene burgeoning on Bleeker Street - Steve Forbert, the Roches, Suzanne Vega. The Monday night routine: head down to Folk City, draw a number, then go around the corner to Cornelia Street and play your new song while waiting for your number to come up. "That scene lasted I wouldn't think more than two or three years," Fracasso recollects. "I didn't like most of what was going on there. I felt it was very precious and pretentious songwriting. The people who were in control were very pretentious, for lack of a better word. I felt like I didn't belong there, like my songwriting wasn't so snooty." By pure chance, Fracasso ended up falling out of that scene as it was falling apart. A local clubowner had heard some of his material and wanted Fracasso to play his club. One catch. He had to have a band. Fracasso didn't have a band, so he asked a friend of his in the Village to put one together. Then he went out and bought an electric guitar. photograph by Todd. V. Wolfson "I showed up at rehearsal not knowing how to play an electric guitar," he recalls. "And in this band I was trying to put together was this guy who became a really good friend of mine, but he looked like he was in some anarchy thing. He was this big black guy who wore shades and didn't talk. I was like, Oh man, this is like the Chicago 7.' And the other guy, who was a really great guitar player, he ended up overdosing a couple of months later, though he was really good. But the drummer didn't show up, and he was the guy I knew, so I'm in this room with these two guys I didn't know, and I couldn't play electric guitar. I didn't know the first thing about it. And the drummer, my connection, wasn't there. And so the guitar player said, I got this friend. I'll call him up.'

He calls up this guy who was like a heavy metal speed drummer. It was awful." Awful maybe, but it was also one of those seemingly insignificant moments on which life unknowingly pivots. Mr. Chicago 7 ended up befriending Fracasso and introducing him to everything else going on in New York City at the time: David Byrne, Debbie Harry, Television. It was something of a revelation for Fracasso. "I started to see new music and really get a feel for, Hey, there are other things going on," he says. "So I took this really circuitous route and I started exploring all kinds of different music, not having great success until I got back into being a singer-songwriter again, which took about 10 years. I had all these different kinds of bands, but in the process I learned a lot of different styles of music, and I think I learned them well. I learned how to write differently and I think I do that well. It was a good diversion for me. Musically, it was really exciting most of the time." Fast forward a couple of years to 1990, and Fracasso is ready to get out of New York City. Like everyone else who had ever picked up an acoustic guitar and become a "singer-songwriter," Fracasso decided to move to Austin because Nashville and L.A. didn't seem too inviting. Unlike most of those folks, however, Fracasso moved to Austin virtually sight unseen. His sole experience with the Capital City had been a glimpse out a car window speeding down the interstate. When the time came to escape from New York, he packed up his VW and drove south. "I was so blissfully happy being here," he beams. "I wasn't sure whether I was going to play music even though I had moved to a music town. I was hanging around painting and drawing and just really content with everything. I was writing a lot of songs, but I didn't feel the need to go out and play them publicly at all. Then I guess, I don't know, I thought, Okay, I'll see what it's like out there." Fracasso's first Austin gig, playing at the Chicago House, was played to an audience of two - count 'em, two: the owner and the other performer on the bill that evening, David Rodriguez. Fortunately for Fracasso, he made an immediate impression on both of them. The association with the former led to more shows and eventually a falling-in with the Jimmy LaFave, David Halley, and Jo Carol Pierce crowd, while his association with the latter helped land him a record deal with Rodriguez's label, former San Marcos indie Dejadisc. Having made a demo while he was in New York, Fracasso passed it on to a deejay at KUT, who played the song shortly thereafter while Fracasso was out in the Hill Country driving around and listening to the radio. Post play, the deejay commented that Fracasso ought to make a proper recording so they could play his music all the time. So he did. Rounding up a group of local musicians, Fracasso did the same with his songs and some cash, and finally put out his first recording, a tape, in 1992. Soon afterwards, he ran into Rodriguez at the post

office, who suggested he send his tape to Dejadisc. So he did. And in 1993, at the ripe young age of 41, Fracasso released his first record, *Love and Trust*, a tender batch of soundly written songs very much reflected by the title of their vessel. Influenced possibly by the fact that Fracasso met his now-wife Paula around that time, *Love and Trust* was more than just an album title by the time Fracasso, waiting tables at the Granite Cafe, bought Paula a cup of coffee after she had been stood up by a date. That act of kindness eventually led to the two being wed in June of 1994, and him quitting his day job (she works for the Austin Parks Foundation). A year later, after a divorce from Dejadisc (not his wife), Fracasso jumped to Rounder imprint Bohemia Beat (home to Jimmy LaFave and later Abra Moore's *Sing*) for 1995's *When I Lived in the Wild*. Both releases split space evenly between "new" material written since Fracasso's arrival in Texas, and bits of his unrecorded back catalogue from his Yankee-ier days. Both fully featured his lonesome, quavering voice, which more often than not was tagged with the adjective "Orbisonian." Yet, despite the voice (and the uniformly impressive press), both albums lacked the unmistakable thumbprint of distinction - something Fracasso would need help making. By the time he had those two albums on the shelves, Fracasso had a steady core band that included George Reiff on bass. Reiff also plays bass for Charlie Sexton, and that dual association turned out to be another one of those fortuitous events along the lines of meeting Mr. Chicago 7. Sexton explains his introduction to the man he calls the Italian Texas Tenor: "[Reiff] kept telling me about Michael," says Sexton. "And it took me about a year to go see him just because I don't go out that much. But by the time I did, I was really blown away. Not that the Texas folk-esque songwriter was such a new concept or anything, but with him doing it and the make-up of who he is, it was real interesting with that voice. The way he writes songs, it's not the average kind of vocal take on stuff. "Bottom line is that I was just amazed. I loved him from the first time I saw him. And every time I've seen Michael, regardless of what night or where, there's always that one moment in the show where I just get like, Wow.' The same kind of vibe you could get at a Roy Orbison show. It makes you want to get up and go, Yeah!" Sexton's status as a fan was initially nothing more than that, and it took Reiff's continually playing both sides for a relationship to materialize. "I was going through this period of no band and I think George saw that I was kind of struggling," explains Fracasso. "He knew Charlie was a fan of mine. I didn't know this, but Charlie really loved *When I Lived in the Wild*, and my songwriting. So [Reiff] was like, Why don't you call Charlie? He's not doing anything right now. I know he likes your stuff. Why don't you try to make some recordings with him?' So I did." The first recording

session at Sexton's home studio yielded two songs that would later appear on *World in a Drop of Water*. In fact, the two hit it off so well that Fracasso asked Sexton to play in his live band, since the demure singer-songwriter had recently parted ways with guitarist Michael Hardwick. Sexton started out filling in for Hardwick, but, says Fracasso, "he became like my utility man. If I didn't have a bass player: Charlie. If I didn't have a guitar player: Charlie. If I can't make it, I'll just call Charlie and have him be me, because I'm sure he knows all of the songs, all of the parts." After several months of playing together in various settings and configurations, the duo of Sexton and Fracasso headed into the studio. Abandoning the Hit Shack in favor of Sexton's home studio, things worked out relatively effortlessly and to the ultimate satisfaction of both artist and producer; *World in a Drop of Water* was born. Unlike its two predecessors, *World in a Drop of Water* is Fracasso's first album without holdover material from his New York days. As such, it captures a fully matured artist, resulting in the songwriter's most complete and colorful work to date. More importantly, whereas the first two albums sound a little like folk records with pop and rock elements retrofitted on them, *World* has a rare appeal in that it seamlessly combines qualities that most pop records neglect and most pure singer-songwriters lack. It was a duality that Sexton picked up on. "He had a bunch of really great songs - real immediate, but also something else beyond that," explains Sexton. "Pop records are like that; they're really immediate in that the first time you hear them you're like, 'Wow, this is catchy.' But that gets real old quickly. My feeling with Michael was that some of the songs had that immediate quality, but they also had a depth or an undercurrent that makes for the discovery as you listen to it more." To think, it only took 46 years for Fracasso to find that ability and really exploit it. "I guess I'm a slow developer," he speculates. "I mean it took me so long to figure out that I needed to be a songwriter to be happy, and I think I'm just starting to build a following in this town after all the years I've been here. It's a tough thing; you look at the listings and wonder where you fit into the city. But people are now discovering, 'This is Michael Fracasso, he's a great songwriter, we should go check him out.' That sort of thing is starting to happen to me for the first time."

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