

Reflecting the mood of the times

Ryan Berg releases new *The Velvet Ears*

By Jackie Don Loe

RYAN BERG IS RIDING HIGH ON THE TRUMPH of his first release *The Velvet Ears*! The Texas singer/songwriter has been playing guitar and paying his dues the last few years in and around the D/FW metroplex. He has gone from lonely open mic nights in forgotten East Dallas at coffee shops and blues jams to headlining treasured live music venues brimmed with hungry crowds and with his name in lights. Primarily acoustic driven songs from solo performances to a full band show, he can deliver the goods and hold the audience's attention.

Look at today's world, the times are a changin' but the song can remain the same. Some debut records get lost in time while others "reflect the mood of the times." Ryan has captured the magic of converting today's emotions into a perpetual art. His music conveys a full spectrum of sensations with melancholy melodies and lonesome lyrics ranging from lost love to eternal sadness.

Song after song, you hear a vintage smooth vibe with flashes of rock on top of warm soulful grooves. In conversation, Ryan is polite and soft spoken yet on stage he transforms himself into the King of the mountain and takes no prisoners. His look is one of the timeless hipster, his style is one of laid-back cool and his songs are the medicine to cure your blues. He has a smoky voice that knows how to whisper to yesterday's ghosts as well as scream madly at tomorrow's devils. The songs have been worked and reworked but now is the time to reveal their charm and power. The musicians he has on the record are duly noted around town and can play anything from jazz to blues. However this record isn't just another blues record.

The Method of Song

THE VELVET EARS IS A gathering of the tribes, a brotherhood jamboree consisting of

some of the most proficient musicians this town has to offer such as Patrick Smith and Matt McClellan on bass, Charles Alexander and Mayo Valdez on drums, Glen Fleischman and Nick Snyder on guitars, Kirk Hampton and David Kapsner on keys and several other denizens of the late night music scene.

Ryan says, "It's more of a collaboration project than it is a solid band, it's a collection of whoever is available and can hold on to a song." Berg has become a bandleader of bandleaders and found it easy to take charge on stage or in the studio when you surround yourself with that much talent. On recording this CD, "I had all the songs plotted out; I had the form, the lyrics, and music down. There were multiple takes of the parts; I spent more time going over the tracks than the time it took recording them." All of the musicians just laid their parts down over the tracks and the sessions were complete. The record was recorded at Sound O Matic studios in Allen, Texas. It was engineered and produced by Carlos Savetman with many of the arrangements by Mayo Valdez who is currently on the road with Charley Crockett.

The first song released was "Sunflower", one month before the great American Eclipse, not to be overshadowed by the cele-



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tial happening; it is a radio gold pop tune with a tropical twist that began the sizzle of summer. The song almost didn't make it, "That melody came back about four or five times before it became that song", recalls Ryan. The method he uses to write a song is simple, in fact simplicity is the key, "I start with a progression that matches the mood I want to write about, and scat a melody for about an hour, if it doesn't work in that time, then it usually won't work." Another method Ryan uses in songwriting is the four-chord song structure. It establishes space and allows the song to breathe, "A lot of people get really technical with their music to impress other musicians but the simplicity of the

four chord song is so important to me." That approach allows the space for the other musicians to be as creative as they need to be for the song.

Interpretations

BERG'S SONGS DEMAND AN introspective listen that produces very insightful thoughts, sure to stay with you long after the song is over. "My songs are open to interpretation and if means something really profound to someone, then it makes me look a lot smarter than I really am," laughs, Ryan. In "The Resolution," learning from your mistakes and understanding forgiveness, seems to be the lessons here. It gets deep with the observation, "People try to improvise and say

that their lives are not their lives. They are lies." Ryan goes on to lament that he is not the man that he used to be, he is somebody else living a double life, and "Sometimes I walk on water, only to pray I'd see you." He then realizes his broken love will remain in fragments with a Dylanesque line, "And although the ashes blow, our hearts remain to soak the wine that is love." He then concludes with the inevitable truth, "I owe everything I have to you." Take it any way you want, if it helps you through something. On songwriting, Ryan says, "I'm a selfish writer; I write to vent myself to nobody." In his song "I'm Just Sayin'" he writes, "My existence is none of your busi-

ness" it is a song and also a document of defense. Although he can be happy and lighthearted too as in "What Your Love Does" written about his girlfriend Kathy Nguyen, he had just dropped out of Texas State University and had done two rounds of *America's Got Talent*. It was a lonely time, Ryan was at a crossroads, "She resurfaced my purpose, gave me life again, I thought to myself, finally I'm writing a happy song!"

It is this assortment that helps the record take you on a journey, and put you in different manner of mindsets. "Backseats and Concrete" was written when Ryan was about fifteen years old and it tells the story of loss of innocence, one day you're just a little kid in the backseat, next you're strung out on the concrete with the devil on your shoulder. Some of us grow up quicker than others, and the loss of youth is never regained. The song "Pain" was recorded live with no overdubs or edits just a little extra reverb. It was written through his Dad's eyes to help fade the pain rather than suffer through it. The songwriter is not always selfish when he can write songs for others.

Performance

Ryan Berg is a spirited front man and commands the stage when performing his expertise. He knows the value of dynamics and keeps the energy fresh and loose. On the record and his live shows he leaves plenty of room for the guitar players to show off their chops while staying within the context of the song. The songs are continually growing and changing with the mood of the times. The Velvet Ears are absolutely poised to be the next big thing out of Dallas. They are primed and ready to hit the festival circuit and move on up to the larger arenas. They are now managed by Ken Welker and 13th Floor Music and are destined to pick up new fans and opportunities to showcase their craft. Music is the one thing that we all can be a part of, the universal language that will see us through. Ryan Berg has a vision and it will be approaching a town near you, sooner than later. ■

You can catch Ryan Berg on October 10 at San Francisco Rose, Oct 14 at Henry's Majestic and Oct 15 and Nov 6 at The Rustic.

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