

Celebration of Texas songwriters

Michael Martin Murphey is joined by a Texas musicians' "who's who" on *Austinology – Alleys of Austin*
By Jan Sikes

MICHAEL MARTIN MURPHEY HAS BEEN writing and performing music for the past fifty years.

It was 1972, and the legendary Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin hosted two nights of sold-out shows with headliner Michael Martin Murphey and his opening act, Willie Nelson.

Think about that fact for a long minute. It was that same show that garnered this comment from *Rolling Stone* Magazine's reporter, Chet Flippo, when he declared Murphey "is the best new songwriter in America."

New CD

FAST-FORWARD FIFTY YEARS to a new album release from Murphey, *Austinology – Alleys of Austin*.

Alleys of Austin is a collaboration of the "Who's Who" in Austin-based songwriters from a bygone era. It might be safe to say that these mavericks not only changed the face of Texas music but, Americana music forever. Murphey was in good company with writers such as Gary P. Nunn, Townes Van Zandt, Jerry Jeff Walker, Guy Clark, Willie Nelson, and Steve Fromholtz, to name a few.

The idea behind *Austinology – Alleys of Austin* is to celebrate these writers with some of their best efforts on one album. Murphey succeeds in doing just that.

"Everybody has been after me to write an autobiography," Murphey said. "But, to me, it was more important to use modern updated recording techniques, that makes everything sound so

good, and go back and do this material to show what an incredible time in songwriting this was between 1964 and 1974. That's when I spent the most time in Austin."

Murphey compared this era of songwriting to the Salon Cafe Society in Paris in which Ernest Hemingway participated.

Murphey said, "Those American writers almost had to exile themselves from the big cities where their publishers were so that they could write, and this era of songwriting I'm referring to was like that. People said it was the 'outlaw' movement, but there really wasn't much outlaw stuff going on. I wanted to give this music a fresh sound. So, I asked a lot of people who were either influenced by this era of music or were there when it was created to come and sing with me on the album."

Collaborators

THE ECLECTIC GROUP OF artists who joined with Murphey on *Austinology* are Willie Nelson, Lyle Lovett, Steve Earle, Kelly Willis, Bruce Robison, Jerry Jeff Walker, Amy Grant, Randy Rogers, and the Last Bandoleros.

Murphey continued, "I could have gotten a lot more people in their twenties and thirties, but I wanted to put the generations together in a sort of balance, to show that there is still an influence of that songwriting style. It wasn't so much the way the records were made, not so much the musicians that played on them, not so much the vocal



His new *Austinology – Alleys of Austin* will be released October 5: Michael Martin Murphey

style, it's the actual songwriting style that I'm underscoring here."

Murphey recalled a time when he went to Nashville to pitch his songs to publishers, and they told him they did not want story songs. They wanted plain ol' love songs. And, while these Texas wordsmiths were turning out some beautiful love songs, they also told a story.

Songwriting

AN INTERESTING ASPECT OF this era of songwriting is pointed out by Murphey.

"One thing I want to say about the songwriting of that time. Songs were written by people who were not on cell phones, not receiving faxes, who were not privy to more than three or four television channels, no internet, and we didn't have this incredible pounding of media and attention span deficit we have now. There are lots of good things about what all I just mentioned. For instance, I can talk to you out in the middle of nowhere on a wireless cell phone, and we can use all these things to promote the music. But one thing we can probably never go back to is that time where we were unplugged, and the way we were getting our influences for our writing was actually books."

Going back to what the Nash-

ville publishers said about the story songs, it makes sense that the major influence for these types of romance story songs was from books.

On the other hand, nowadays, as a writer myself, I draw lots of inspirations from the story songs.

"People back then sequestered themselves away when they wrote," Murphey said. "Even if it was back behind the kitchen in a coffee house where you were playing a gig. Guy Clark came from working alone, I came from working alone, Jerry Jeff Walker came from working alone, and the list goes on and on. I've always believed if a song doesn't work with one guitar or one piano backing it up, it's probably not ever going to be good enough to last very long."

Aspiring songwriters, take note. Songs written from the heart, not the chart, are the ones with "simplicity of impact," and Murphey explained it further.

"These are songs with strong lyrical impact and simple chords that you can learn to play really easily."

And while there may be some who disagree with that statement, all one needs to do is look back through history at the timeless songs that keep hanging around through generations.

Will this trend ever come again?

"Well, I am seeing this among the youngest songwriters I'm meeting that are out there working alone. Because you're never going to get around the fact that if you can work alone, you can survive. A lot of these young people, some who haven't even surfaced yet, are doing this. They're unplugging. They're going back and reading Hemingway and Mark Twain and people who wrote about their own backyard in an extremely impactful and simplistic way that has emotional gut touching statements almost anybody can understand. It's not fancy, not flowery; it's gutsy."

The Songs

IN LOOKING AT THE SONGS on *Austinology – Alleys of Austin*, I see example after example of the songwriting style Murphey is showing us. Stories told in such a simplistic yet impactful way such as "Alleys of Austin," "Wildfire," "Geronimo's Cadillac," "Texas Trilogy," "Backslider's Wine," "L.A. Freeway," "Little Bird," "Drunken Lady of the Morning" and "Grimo Pistolero," just to name a few.

The beautiful Amy Grant joins Murphey on "Wildfire," and Kelly Willis on "Little Bird." The harmony and blending of their an-

gelic voices are pure musical perfection. Steve Earle's gritty style fits "Geronimo's Cadillac."

As a listener the version of "South Canadian River," is my pick from the CD, but it rivals with "Outlaw Medley."

"My favorite cut on the album is 'Little Bird,' Murphey stated. "It is a great love song. But, it tells the story of a relationship long gone and what you go through in your soul as you remember back to that time you know is never going to come again, but you haven't thrown away the sweet memory. The way Jerry Jeff Walker spins out the narrative of those intimate feelings is a masterpiece. It's just brilliant."

Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, Lyle Lovett, Bruce Robison, Django Walker, Gary P. Nunn, Bob Livingston, and Murphey produce a fantastic version "Cosmic Cowboy" that music lovers will listen to for many decades to come.

There are fourteen tracks on *Austinology – Alleys of Austin*, and it easily accomplishes Murphey's overall goal of showcasing a historic and revolutionary era in songwriting.

The CD is due for release on October 5, with a livestream broadcast on countryroadtv.com on October 18.

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