

Life surrounded by The Night Tribe

Jimmy LaFave's wrote many – if not all – of these songs at night . . . or at least on the road.

By Tom Geddie

SO, JIMMY LAFAVE THINKS THE MOST interesting people are out at night, prowling the world for whatever. If you – reading this – are more of a day person, don't take it personal. He likes you, too. It's just that, well . . .

He's spent most of his life playing music in clubs at night.

"There's just more of a mood at night, just more of a groove," he says. "The night is kinda a comfort zone for me, more of a soft place to fall into. Maybe it's just darkness itself that lends a lot to a song. Maybe it's unexplainable, and maybe that's the beauty of it."

It's no surprise, then, that the Austin-based LaFave's new album from Music Road Records is named *The Night Tribe*.

The band

HE EXPLAINS THE IDEA IN the album notes: "The Night Tribe is the name of my band that I have used since my early days of playing music in Oklahoma. It is also the name I use to describe all of the after-hours people who exist in my world of music. They are the Kerouac people, the all-night waitress, the 24-hour truck stop attendant, the after-midnight radio host, modern-day Beatniks and poets, creative, restless, insomniacs up all hours of the night searching for truth."

LaFave has that seductive voice – just a little bit of Van Morrison, perhaps – that is, again perhaps, what romance might sound like if romance had its own voice. He and the band and studio guests share 13 songs on the new album; I hear a lot of yearning in them although it's true that what the writer writes and what the listener hears don't always match.

"People always ask me to explain a particular song," he says. "If you explain them too much, it takes away from them. A song can speak to people in their own way."

On the fourth track, his own "It's not on Me," LaFave sings that falling out of love is neither person's fault; it's just the price they both pay to be free. I wondered: Is that price loneliness? Is this the ultimate romantic truth, wondered, somehow recalling young Arya Stark's line in "Game of Thrones" that "the only true god is Death."

No way that entered LaFave's mind when he was writing the song, nor does that thought enter when he performs it. But, for some reason, he roused that connection in my mind so I mentioned it to him and he responded politely.

"There's things you probably

get out of those songs that people who kinda listen on the surface don't get out of it," he says. "That's an interesting thought. You might be onto something."

Then he laughs.

Writing at night

HE WROTE MANY – IF NOT all of these songs at night. Or at least on the road.

"I guess you are always seeing a different scene; every time you look out window, and, of course, the rhythm of the road sometimes gets in your head, sets a tempo. You see a certain road sign or sunset that starts something in the mind."

"It's Not on Me" is one of eight songs on the new album that I consider to be excellent: his versions of Neil Young's "Journey Through the Past" and Bob Dylan's "Queen Jane Approximately," plus his own "The Beauty of You," "Island," "Never Came Back to Memphis," the closing, hymn-like "The Roads of the Earth: 'peace be with you, my friend, wherever traveling, take good care of your heart. . . it

are always kinda right there," he says.

"They are among my top five. They always inspire me. With other artists, you might hear something that inspires you, then move on. I really like Chuck Berry and Jackson Browne. Right now, it's Butch Hancock. Sometimes J.J. Cale. Sometimes somebody else."

(It's interesting, perhaps, that Hancock was, especially earlier in his own career, compared closely to Dylan.)

"I usually try to stay fairly close to their melodies," LaFave says when asked what new he brings to interpretations of others' songs.

"But stylistically, the way I sing, I bring twists and turns. Instrumentally sometimes – for example – 'Bluebirds' by Butch Hancock – I added an extra chord to that.

"So I'll change some chords, mess with the melody just a little bit so as not to just do exact covers. I'm amazed at these cover bands that can sound just like the Beatles or Chicago or something like that."

"I was able to spend a little more time on this album than I could in past," he said.

"A week or so on basic tracks, a month or so for people to come in to finish up parts. We have our own Cedar Creek Studio as part of Music Road Records, and that takes a lot of budget pressure off."

LaFave has turned to Dylan fairly often in his career, once putting a dozen Dylan songs on a 30-song album, *Trail*, that collects songs from studio outtakes, live performances, and radio appearances in seven countries.

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Power of music

"MUSIC, TO ME, IS JUST A powerful force. When I was working with Bob Johnson — who produced Bob Dylan — we

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—JIMMY LAFAVE

had a discussion that it wasn't diplomacy that brought down The Berlin Wall. It was blue jeans and music. Radoslav went to Afghanistan last year and got with some Afghan musicians.

"He said when he left, a lieutenant colonel teared up and that was finally a win. This musical idea really brought people closer together. The power of music is pretty much undeniable."

Not surprisingly for an artist who likes Woody Guthrie's cultural ideas, LaFave has strong Populist opinions. "Populist" in the real sense of, generally, defending the so-called common people.

"I don't

speaking up much on stage. When people come to hear me, I pretty much stick to the music and my songs are not overly political. If I'm doing a Woody show, I might a little," he says.

"But I can't really separate myself from music. With the overall vibe of my music, I hope you understand kind of person I am and what my belief system is. I've become very outspoken on my Facebook page, which has gained me more friend requests and lost only a few."

"I think I've gained a lot of fans on Facebook."

Even without the new album and the touring, LaFave would have a busy schedule.

He helps Kelcy Warren with the Music Roads label and is finishing a new album as producer, for blues-oriented musician Lance Canales from Fresno, California, and is working on Music Road projects with Rita Coolidge and Jonah Smith.

"Sometime this summer, I plan on working on 20 Woody Guthrie songs from the archives," he says. "I've had that going on for like eight years now, mostly adding music, but I can also make changes to the words. I run it by Nora Guthrie (Woody's daughter)."

It's almost more than a man can do surrounded by the night tribe. ■



The Night Tribe is scheduled to be released on May 12: Jimmy LaFave