**COWBOY JUNKIES**

***SUCH FEROCIOUS BEAUTY***

A hollowed-out guitar, aching, echoing and haunted plays, pulling at our consciousness. By the time the lower guitar string pulls it back to earth, our ear moves from captivated to captured. “What I Lost” is a nagging reckoning. Margo Timmins’ lagging vocal suggests a laconic disorientation: things are there, yet, the world’s slipped into a void that almost defies expression. “I love the power of these songs and the images they conjure. To me, they reflect more upon life and nature and the impact they have on us. Within our own humanity, there is great heartache and misery, but also great joy and comfort. There is nothing more humbling to me than the ferocious beauty we live amongst, including life and death.”

***Such Ferocious Beauty*** is vintage **Cowboy Junkies** *and* another dimension from the lo-fi Canadian band comprised of, well, family. A tangle of sonic textures,***Beauty*** is a rumination on aging, losing parents, facing mortality and creating space for one’s life in the midst of the ruin that comes from merely living. “Mike has never shied away from the darker, harder and sometimes uglier realities of our human condition,” Margo Timmins explains of the band’s singular focus, “nor has he shied from its beauty. Thankfully, with one comes the other.”

Michael Timmins, the oldest, is the chief architect; the songwriter and guitarist, who works with Margo on sculpting the emotional planes and vocal performances before bringing in younger brother Peter on drums and lifelong friend Alan Anton on bass to create the soundscapes that have made Cowboy Junkies a band who defies categories. Alternative? Rock? Americana? Roots? Perhaps the answer is a simple “yes.” The churning *Beauty* builds on all those things, evoking the best of a group who’s evolved over three and a half decades. Michael offers, “This record is connected to *All That* *Reckoning*. I see our recent work in a cycle: *Reckoning, Ghosts, Such Ferocious Beauty*. They were all done in very violent and tumultuous times. The violent side is so much a part of our society now; not just the physical, but the way we relate to each other. It’s hard to escape.”

What can’t be outrun becomes the thing that serves as an anchor. Written between the long isolating summer of 2020 and 2021, Michael would take leave of his family, travel to a cottage to focus on writing armed with books from DH Lawrence, Walt Whitman, Rilke, David Whyte, the *Bible*, the *Odyssey* and a desire to make sense of this phase of his life. His wife asked what he was writing about. “She knew everything that was happening, especially with my father, who was slipping into dementia. I said, ‘You can probably guess...’,” he reflects. “And she said, ‘Impermanence.’ If there’s one word that describes these songs, that’s it.”

While these ten songs serve as aural Rorschach takes on emotions, life, even fate, an unspoken common ground unites them. From the haunted blues of “Hell Is Real” to the languishing meander of “Knives” both delivered from singer to the listener, observing, cautioning, drawing back the curtain. They eventually come down to the same place: the individual and looking out into the world, asking ‘How do I fit into this? How do I keep my humanity?’

Whether drawing on a pop culture reference like a quote culled from Mike Tyson or mining Greek mythology, there’s an ease and fluidity to how Michael draws songs together. For the sinewy “Mike Tyson (Here It Comes),” he employs a high plains spaghetti Western tension that marries a nervy acoustic strum and tympani rolls to a creeping bassline, while “Circe & Penelope” deploys a wheezy fiddle and an acoustic guitar with its strings more flicked than strummed. “I love the blunt reality of this song,” Margo offers. “I love the two women’s strength and realistic view of the situation. They have a great love for their men, but also this discontent.

The image of these two women waiting for their men to return but getting on with the work that needs to be done and living their lives as strong women is truly empowering and reflects upon many of the women I know today.”

“Flood,” especially, leans into a dissonant, high-pitched electric guitar that dissolves into what feels like warning sirens. “The way I communicate urgency is through guitar. On ‘Flood,’ it flows through the entire song. I wanted to evoke pure urgency, so I wanted the guitar to be a five-alarm fire. There’s no real solo, just this underlying howling, dissonant guitar to support the lyrics and *not* stay out of Margo’s way. That conflict raises the urgency.”

For a band formed in Toronto, Canada in 1985, selling 3,000 copies of *Whites Off Earth Now!!!* in 1986,then hit public consciousness with *The Trinity Session* in 1988, the ability to communicate volumes before the lyrics kick in defines an enduring career. Where most bands chase trends, the Junkies have stayed their course, maintaining a low impact excavation of melody and evocative language delivered sotto voce in Margo’s feathery alto.

 “The expectations and responsibilities of what we all do, it’s a big part of this. We’re still amazed that we’re doing this, but the longer (we have), the more fun it’s become. We don’t take it for granted,” Michael offers. “We do what we do,” Margo agrees, “and it feels right for all of us. After 30-plus years of playing together, the band and its music are more important to us than ever. The music we make brings each of us a great sense of contentment, a knowing of place and a sense of doing what we were meant to do.”

For *Beauty*, Michael stresses that he and Margo spent more time working through the songs, letting her interpretations really settle before taking them into the studio. And once in the studio, he and Alan took the time to layer and experiment, to focus on the musical and aural foundation of the songs and to create even more dynamic tracks than they often do. “On *The Trinity Session*, because of the way the recording was done, you could hear a bunch of people in a room communicating with each other through their instruments. That's what was best for that material. This is a different kind of recording; there’s a denseness to it. In many ways the music, the choice of certain structures, the tones used become as important in communicating the albums themes as do the lyrics; like the grating and sawing of the fiddle in “What I Lost”; the incessant circular bass/piano groove of “Flood”; the sound and attitude of the guitar solo in “Hard To Build”; and even the birds chirping in the background of “Blue Skies” and the frogs trilling away throughout “Hell Is Real”. It's all there to add another dimension to what is also being communicated by the lyric and the vocal.”

With its fat, rolling bass line and wah-wah guitar solo over a lagging shuffle, “Hard To Build, Easy To Break” is a cautionary lob to “all the future kings and all the future queens, standing impatient in a row...”

“It’s about appreciation for what we have”, says Michael “even if what we have is imperfect. These days there seems to be this pull towards destruction. I'm more interested in the effort it takes to create something or the experience of seeing something evolve; whether that be a relationship, or a glass vase, a reputation, or a democracy. On the flip-side of that is how easy it is to utterly smash and destroy whatever is at hand. The line ”Tend the flame that lit your way / stop worshiping the ash”, kind of sums

it all up for me”.

The string-bathed, electric guitar embroidered “Shadows 2” brings life’s end into focus: a son at his father’s bed as the world moves just beyond them. Michael remembers, “This song was inspired by the DH Lawrence poem 'Shadows' and more importantly, inspired by the last several months of our dad's life. He was pretty much housebound and not very mobile so a visit would consist of just sitting beside him and not saying much. I would often wonder what was going through his mind as he sat there and stared out the window. He had dementia so there were times, especially as the dementia grew worse, when the conversations became very surreal. The song “What I Lost” is a reflection on those conversations and on his dementia. Memories of his flying days as a bush pilot in northern Quebec and his love of jazz and his experiences of seeing the great big-bands of the 50's would often work their way into those conversations. I would often think about all of those memories and experiences that were slowly being eaten away by the dementia and would eventually completely disappear with his death. Lines like “This is what I lost” and “I can sit here and wait” from “What I Lost” and “Shadows 2” are not so much about him, but about me.”

“When I’m writing, I can’t say I’m thinking of the listener, but lyrically, I am trying to make sure the songs ring true to people outside our immediate circle. We are creating something to evoke emotion, to move people forward, because that’s what music does to me, to us. I want to make somebody feel the way I did when I heard *Ziggy Stardust* or *Transformer* for the first time; to spark something in the listeners heart and brain, just make them feel something, make them curious, make them wonder. That's the point.”