

# 3<sup>rd</sup> COAST MUSIC

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## I GOTTA BE ME (WHOEVER THAT IS)

How glad I am I didn't participate in *Nashville Scene's* 2009 Country Music Critics Poll, the results of which were headlined "The Mount Rushmore of country music's future—Brad Paisley, Miranda Lambert, Taylor Swift and Jamey Johnson." Mount Rushmore? You mean alongside Hank, Johnny, Patsy, Buck, George, Waylon and Merle? God's teeth.

I sympathize with poll compiler Geoff Himes, who has the thankless task of making a pig's asshole look something like a silk purse, but his spin on the results was that Paisley and Lambert "bet their reputations on edgier songwriting and edgier performances, trying to fix something that wasn't even broken. They gambled and won" (though he does slip into his commentary that he didn't actually vote for them himself). Himes' rationalization is that instead of using their clout to get a better deal while leaving the formula alone (the Garth Brooks model), Paisley and Lambert went the Willie Nelson route, using that clout to pursue artistic dreams.

My esteemed colleague William Michael Smith also refrained from voting but that didn't mean he was about to refrain from comment, and, in fact, he devoted most of his January 'Lonesome Onry & Mean' blogs at the *Houston Press* website to lambasting the poll, including posting my January editorial. Among those blogs was a commentary on Himes' cloying praise of Paisley and Lambert for showing such "courage" in stepping outside their comfort zone and "challenging" their audiences by an anonymous Nashville veteran, who signed himself 'The Nashville Phantom,' on which it would be hard to improve,

"Oddly enough, over the past 15 years there seems to have been more decent, important, soul-searching country-music writers than there have been important stories to write about. When there is nothing to write about (and personal drug or alcohol abuse is not an option), the stories have had a tendency to be about sales, lack of sales, mega-sales, artist prayers for increased airplay, boring blabber about video shoots or, most sadly, commentaries by many major label artists that joyously declare, 'I'm finally doing a record that is really me!'"

"When you hear an artist say that, you just sort of sadly hang your head and quietly surmise, 'Well, what in the hell have you been doing for the past three albums, putting us on?' It's a legitimate question. It's also one of those questions that never gets asked and, if it did, would never be answered.

Many artists try 'the major label way' thinking they will get the chance to 'be real' down the line. That's what many Nashville personal managers tell new clients to ease their guilt for recording songs they hate. Problem is, it doesn't work like that. What you stick on your music ledger stays there. You are responsible for its existence."

"Few if any artists have ever righted themselves who knowingly made that compromising choice in the beginning. You can't get a little bit pregnant, but even more difficult is trying to get un-pregnant late in your second or third creative trimester. The wagon is already in motion and everybody wants that next release to turn that Top 10 corner no matter what the damn thing sounds like. Announcing that an artist is stepping out on a limb usually means they've been playing it pretty safe around the trunk of the tree for quite some time."

Or to put it in a nutshell, you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas. **JC**

# HANK & SHAI DRI ALRICH WITH DOUG HARMAN CARRY ME HOME

(Armadillo \*\*\*\*)

Ever read a music feature and wonder, what's the point? Of course you have, and that's because it didn't have what we ink-stained wretches call a hook, something solid on which to hang the story. With Hank & Shaidri Alrich, I have a different problem, too many hooks and too little space.

Let's start with an Austin-centric one—the CD artwork was turned in by Bill Narum, one of the city's legendary graphic artists, just two days before his sudden death last November. Apart from being extraordinarily talented, Narum was a really great guy. I used to think he was the only one of the breed who was also a regular Joe, but I have it on good authority that he was as crazy as the rest of them, just much less obvious. He's probably best known, if not by name, for the iconic covers of ZZ Top's LPs, but you can find many images of his distinctive work on the Internet.

Moving on, we have a long dormant label's first release since 1981. Armadillo Records put out LPs and 45s by acts like Shiva's Headband and Balcones Fault, scoring a runaway success with Bugs Henderson's *At Last*, but crashed and burned with Kenneth Threadgill's *Long-Haired Daddy*. "We pressed 10,000 copies and sold about eleven. A major fuckup." Recently, Fletcher Clark of Balcones Fault approached Alrich, who has no interest whatsoever in ever running a record label again, about reviving Armadillo and its sister publishing house for a project of his own, but along the line *Carry Me Home* emerged as the relaunch title.

Then there's Hank Alrich, a Californian with a permanent place in Texas music history. While serving as an Army X-Ray technician at Fort Sam Houston, Alrich lucked into a posting that gave him every Friday, Saturday and Sunday off, "musician's hours," enabling him to establish his band, Tiger Balm ('music to sooth the savage beast'), which played everything from jug music to "hippy space shit." This did not always go over well, but, starting with being the opening act for three nights over New Year's Eve, 1970-71, the group found a home at Armadillo World Headquarters, in which Alrich became heavily involved, investing money in it and eventually taking the debt-ridden joint over when Eddie Wilson burned out in 1976. With the help of corporate dropout Randy McCall, Alrich got it back on an even keel only to have the property sold from under him in 1980. The wrecking ball, in early 1981, is still a painful memory, and with the Armadillo gone, Hank and his family, including his daughter Shaidri, who was born in Austin, moved back to California.

There's a lot more to Alrich's Austin involvement, playing with various long-gone outfits, including being guitarist in both Shiva's Headband and Balcones Fault, back in the day, more recently, visiting regularly to see his daughters Shaidri and Mylie, and help Eddie Wilson work on a history of Armadillo World Headquarters. If you want a quick fix while you wait for that book to come out, there was a long and detailed feature on Alrich and the Armadillo in the *Austin American-Statesman* (January 24th). Having rather less space available, I'm moving on to Shaidri, a child prodigy, winning open fiddle contests at six and able to perfectly mimic singers like Emmylou Harris, leading her mother to wonder "What would you sound like if you sang like Shaidri Alrich?" Ambivalent about her talent, Shaidri kept it secret for many years, which Hank regretted but didn't press her, "my wife and I agreed, don't say a word." However, one day, out of the blue, she called Hank with a question about chord progressions, coming to terms with music just as her father finally figured out that his decades of depression were due to not playing it anymore.

This combination of circumstances led to the father and daughter performing and recording together, which brings us to the always fascinating subject of blood harmonies. Once a staple of popular music, especially country, family groups with their very special magic (think Carter, Andrews, Boswell, Isley, Maddox, Louvin, Everly) are now, sadly, extremely thin on the ground. While it may sound rather obvious, father/daughter duos being much rarer than brothers and sisters, the Alrichs really do remind me of Royce & Jeannie Kendall, if less patently radio-friendly.

Which, finally, brings us to the album itself, ten timeless tracks, of which Alrich's four originals sit comfortably alongside arrangements of Charlie Poole's version of *The Great Baltimore Fire*, Jesse Johnson & Dixie Smith's *The Death of Ellenton*, *Stillwater* by Gerry Barnett, former Shiva's Headband drummer (Alrich tells me his groove was the key to the band's success), Peter Rowan's *Before The Streets Were Paved*, Utah Phillips' *Daddy, What's A Train?* and, reviving a long ago side project, *Blarney's Ghost Medley* ("Shaidri loves to play Celtic fiddle tunes"). Alrich, singing and playing guitar and mandolin provides the solid core, Harman gorgeous cello swirls while Shaidri, what can I say that adequately conveys the beauty of her leads and harmonies? She glows in the dark.

Many years ago, Hank told a reluctant Shaidri, "You don't have to be a star," and that advice is perhaps the key to their album's special magic. This is music for music's sake. There's no agenda—though if anyone wants to exploit the closest thing to a weak track, the opening *Austin City Limits*, Hank's open to offers. **JC**