

G R E G W E E K S

Where to begin? If attempting to express the meaning and inherent spirituality of music is akin to cycling on water (futile, impracticable and tending to result in acute embarrassment for all concerned), then try throwing a little competitive juggling into the equation. Greg Weeks is one of the best word-jugglers around; a respected music critic in his own write, a poet, savant and unparalleled lyricist, I must confess I sit in awe of him, as indeed do many others lucky enough to fall into his sphere of influence - as we shall see. First though, some scene-setting from the man himself:

“I was born in a small college town called Oswego, New York. Three years after that my parents divorced and I tagged along with my Mom to Rochester, NY, where I spent my life both as child and awkward teenager. I played first clarinet in a band until my teacher,

Mrs. Barinowski, made the experience so miserable that I ended up abandoning music altogether. Around 16 I bought my first guitar from a big fat ex-hippie named Buzzo, a notorious character who ran weird homemade ads on local tv to advertise his store - Rochester is loaded with dudes like Buzzo. Armond from The House Of Guitars, who after getting out of jail bought this gigantic house on Titus Ave., filled it pell-mell with records and instruments, and made it his mission to hire every disenfranchised metal-head that came his way. The Record Archive guy, who used to dance around with a man-sized record attached to his front and back while cheesy theme music blasted out from behind him on the ad. There's weird stuff in the water over there. Anyhow, soon after that I bought a Gibson Les Paul Custom (no doubt because Jimmy Page had one) and started goofin' around learning Deep Purple, Hendrix

and Guns n' Roses songs. I messed around with some friends, but I never had a proper band. When I went to college (Plattsburgh, NY) I kept practicing, but it took me forever to get anywhere with it. Then all of a sudden things clicked and, after moving to NYC, I started writing my own songs. Most of the initial ones were post-Slint kind of angular guitar pieces. Not too much of it was all that good. I tried to put a band together (Wormwood Star) with my girlfriend of the time (she had played flute on tour with My Bloody Valentine I discovered, to my amazement) but that didn't pan out. Then I discovered Nick Drake and the whole ballgame changed. Of course, a fixation on Leonard Cohen was leading me in the general direction of the melancholic acoustic troubador, but Drake broke the floodgate.”

The collection which first alerted the 'Scope to Weeks' skills as a singer / songwriter was

the 1999 CD on the Ba Da Bing! label 'Fire In The Arms of the Sun', "*a shamelessly minor-key romp through the hushed empathies of the Nick Drake school of melancholy from a New York based singer/songwriter so wracked with pain he's in dire need of something stronger than a mere couple of paracetamol to settle his tortured soul*" (as earlier declaimed in these pages). The CD had originally been self-released on Weeks' own label Secret Sister Music and consisted mainly of material written during the year leading up to the Summer of '97. "I went in[to the studio in] mid '97 and attempted to record, but for some reason ended up taking a break from it, probably out of frustration and nerves. That was a stroke of luck, actually, because I improved greatly as a player during the hiatus. I listened to that earlier stuff and just decided to go over it when I went back in."

The sixteen songs on 'Fire In The Arms Of

The Sun' (fourteen are actually listed; track 3 actually consists of two, 'Joan of Arc' and 'Shady Skies and Lullabies' while track 8 likewise includes two which originally started out as one song, 'New Silver Finger II' and Weeks' tribute to Nick Drake, 'Molly Bloom' – "the closest to his style that I ever attempted to get") – instantly wove themselves into the very fabric of my life in a way few albums have done in recent years, the similarly impassioned material emanating from the Neutral Milk Hotel perhaps being an honourable exception. The collection is entirely self-penned with the exception of a gorgeously warm reinterpretation of Cat Power's compelling 'King Rides By', which was the first thing I asked about: why that particular song, Greg?

"Oh, let's see. Partially it was the sheer ache and beauty of the song. It spoke to me in ways that so few other songs ever have. But it was Chan's mesmerizing

presence that pushed me full-tilt into wanting to make the song, in some way, my own. It all happened directly after an interview I did with her back in '97. A more guileless and unknowingly seductive individual you'd be hard pressed to meet. Not a person who enters Chan's sphere, male or female, fails to fall instantly in love with her. Hyperbole, perhaps, but there's plenty of evidence in favour of the position. Anyway, a few days after the interview, Chan asked me to attend a private show she was doing at a wedding reception. It was there, after her performance, that I asked her if I could cover the song. We were all dancing at the time, and I must have looked like a complete idiot (I'm all limbs akimbo and disjointed when it comes to dancing), but she agreed and said she'd be honoured. She's very gracious that way."

The opening song 'Tin Angel Of Death' marks

a conflation of influences. Joni Mitchell is referenced in the title and the French film 'Travolta And Me', by Patricia Muzuy, provides the inspiration. Greg claims that 'Tin Angel' sets the stage for something much grander than the following songs deliver, but then again nothing about it prepares you for grandeur of the mighty Mellotron which carries the second and subsequent songs through to another dimension altogether. Greg:

"'Starless' came from me seeing a Mellotron for the first time, sitting down in front of it the night before I was set to use it in studio, and coming up with a little instrumental on the spot. It's as inspiring an instrument to touch as it is to hear. It was a rental item. I'd spent several weeks attempting to locate one, only to find that most of the rental companies that owned them made so little use of them that they ended up selling them for next

to nothing. A friend turned me on to a web site that had tons of vintage analogue keys instruments, and it's there that I found the Mellotron. It's a bit worse for wear, but I was ecstatic to have just been able to locate one."

"Tracey Bowen's 'Double Life' is about a British gal I met while studying at Lancs Poly, Preston. The bit about her fingertip being a loaded gun refers to how she flirted with me at a club one night on the dance floor during Dinosaur Jr.'s 'Freakscene.' She aimed her hand like a gun and took a pop (at my heart, I assume). All the imagery is based from experiences we had during the two or so brief weeks we hung out before I left for Scandinavia, the daisy-chain images being the dearest to my heart. The title throws Kieslowski's film Double Life Of Veronique, which we both saw together, into the mix, as does the song's final notes, which mimic the film's soundtrack."

Arguably one of the strongest songs in the collection is 'Leaves And Limerance' (arguable not regarding whether it's one of the most powerful, but which those songs really are: whoever you ask seems to have a different opinion, a result no doubt of the way Weeks' songs seem to effortlessly touch people in so many different ways. For what it's worth, my own would be 'Leaves and Limerance', 'New Silver Fingers II', the brilliant and deeply personal 'Harvester of Sighs', and the William Ackerman-inspired 'Straw Days', almost omitted by Greg as he originally considered it "too bland"...).

Greg: "'Leaves and Limerance' is a celebration of life and the most melancholy of seasons, the Fall. It's inspired by a girl who worked at a furniture store on the corner of my block. Limerance is a word taken from a novel which I admit I haven't yet read. The

word describes the state of obsessive crush that exists between the initial crush and the love-relationship. It's perhaps the most difficult and satisfying of all love-related emotions, I think, and it fits perfectly with the turning leaves and cooling temperatures of the season. My buddy Matt Martens was responsible for that fantastic Rhodes solo near the end. He'd heard an earlier version I'd recorded and mentioned that my initial Rhodes part was a bit dull, so I asked him to play it instead. We both share a love for Italian progressive bands, so that's the direction we went for and I think he succeeded to stunning effect. I only gave him the tempo and the first few notes to play and he improvised the rest in one take on the spot. It was so good that I ended up having to keep it, even though I was just fucking around with the guitar during the take. That's why you hear all sorts of fret buzz and tentative

chords being played in the background."

A thousand copies of 'Fire In The Arms Of The Sun' were initially pressed, receiving next to no reaction (other than congratulations from friends), principally because of Weeks' own reluctance to promote the album. "I had issues with self promotion... it felt so strange putting my own name in large letters on the front cover that I decided not to do it at all. The decision also tied into the aesthetic of the packaging, but mainly it was an anti-ego thing." Merge Records were apparently the only label to even acknowledge receipt – a salutary lesson in the dynamics of hawking, I suspect.

With little or no press or publicity, a grand total of some eight or nine copies were eventually sold. "It was quite thrilling to do even that much in sales, truthfully. Lack of sales means very little on an artistic level, anyway.

Look at National Health, or These Trails, or a million other bands that suffered while creating the most astounding music that nobody paid attention to. It felt like a victory to me just to get the damn thing completed."

Fate, as she so often seems to do, then took a hand in ensuring all the necessary pieces fell into place in order for a glimpse of the puzzle to be revealed to those people who she had chosen, those she considered essential if her mysterious master-plan was ever to be completed. Whether or not they recognise the fact and pick the pieces up is of course up to them; luckily in this instance though they did, and the results fully justified the action (*having been on the receiving end of just such a sliver of life-altering serendipity myself just recently, you'll have to take my word for it on this one.*)

Greg: "One day I opened up my mailbox to find a note from Ben



Goldberg asking if I'd be interested in submitting a track for the CD with the next issue of his magazine *Ba Da Boom Gramophone*. It seems he'd seen my record in the Other Music 99 cent bin and snatched it up. We got together for dinner, talked about stuff, and before he knew it I had bamboozled him into re-releasing my record. Get enough drinks into that guy and he'll release anything...."

Shortly afterwards, the two of them sat down and began sticking *Ba Da Bing!* labels on boxes of unsold Secret Sister Music CDs of 'Fire In The Arms of the Sun'. Completists might wish

to note at this point, before they go completely off their heads with the thrill of the chase, that the sole difference is an inch-long clear plastic sticker bearing *Ba Da Bing!*'s logo on the rear face of the jewel-case; there *are* no Secret Sister logos to be found, on the CD itself or indeed on the cover. Ben Goldberg:

"It's true, I found out about Greg Weeks by scanning the cut-out bins and buying his CD for ninety-nine cents. It had an interesting cover (which you often *can* tell a record by) and, being named "Fire In The Arms Of The Sun," had the chance of being either disgustingly

pretentious, beautifully amazing, or most likely, both. For me, the scales tipped more towards the latter, so I sent Greg a postcard introducing myself and saying it would be great to do something with him, a song for a compilation perhaps. He called me back, and we met up for dinner. It turned out he worked only a few blocks from me, was sane (always a mitigating factor when meeting a musician for the first time!), and to boot, had an textbook knowledge of obscure folk music like I've never encountered. Since he never distributed the album beyond local stores, I offered to "re-release" it (i.e. stick a *Ba Da Bing!* sticker on the back of the existing copies.) Once I made back my two hundred dollar investment, I've been paying him all the profits, since he paid for the original manufacturing."

Greg: "The wider audience I reached was about 300 people, which didn't have much of an

effect at all. It was a reality check. You formulate grand ideas about sales and recognition once a label snatches you up, but when that label doesn't do the entire dog and pony publicity thing (and who can blame labels for not jumping through those hoops?), and you don't play out as a performer, well, you're not going far unless you stumble upon a group of listeners or reviewers that make it their mission to champion you. Ben is nicely connected, and did a lot to get my music to the right sets of ears. I owe him just about everything. Nevertheless, it's quite shocking to see how few people really listen to non mass-marketed music..."

Another vital piece of Fate's cosmic jigsaw fell into place at this point. Weeks received a promotional copy of Tinsel's 'I Wish The Talkies Would Have Never Come Around', was impressed enough to review it for 'The Big Takeover' and during

the course of an exchange of correspondence with Tinsel's Michael Hopkins the two of them developed "a mutual respect based on similar interests and a shared ideology (meaning neither of us are finding much exposure and we sit around bitching about it to each other!)"

Hopkins: "A few things struck me early on, when I only knew Greg by his music. First that this was someone of extreme sensitivity, one who walks with much heaviness (an acute and dark humour provides the balance, I would soon learn.) Also, I had to check the address on the package to confirm that this fellow actually lived in New York City. 'Fire in the Arms of the Sun' is a quiet record that takes its sweet time, and it was a surprise that the one who made it was not a countryside dweller. Some music reflects the reality of externals, but I've found that Greg's is a mirror of a curious internal world. Those

Weeks musical talons haven't let go, and I mean that in a most favorable way. Greg and I have since been in contact on a somewhat regular basis, and the restrictions of email and phone haven't kept me from getting an idea of what he's about. About graciousness. About endless knowledge of 70's Italian prog and folk bands. About quiet determination. About a Brit in American trousers. About staying true to himself, even as attention to his music has increased. About living straw days and still smiling. About timelessness. Another person who received my tape sent some music by a Madrid, Spain band called Migala. The first song of theirs I heard was 'A Fistful' and was stunned, to say the least. Both Greg and Migala were interested in increasing their profiles, so to speak, and I wanted to do my part in getting their music out there."

The friendship resulted in Greg having two songs from 'Fire In The

Arms of the Sun' plus one otherwise unreleased number, 'Avalanche', included on a compilation CD on Hopkins' label Keyhole Records, 'Songs from an Attic'.

Hopkins: "I had started a label, Keyhole, to release my music (Tinsel) and assisting other artists seemed to be a logical next step. Typical compilations feature lots of bands doing one song each and there tend to be lots of duds to sort through, though there are obviously major exceptions to this. Everything seemed to point toward 'Songs From An Attic' being a three band / three songs each focus, and the major benefit is that it allows the listener to better put a finger on where each group dwells musically. I couldn't find a third band to include, so I included some of my songs. I think I can speak for everyone involved in saying that we expected more interest in Attic, but there's not room to complain since doors

have been opened because of it. In my biased opinion, it's a strong release and by his placement as "middle band", Greg's songs provide the anchor to the whole record. One of the highest compliments that I can pay to Greg Weeks, the musician, is that he's one of only a handful of artists who can cause a shiver with a song. 'And All Shall Gather To Leave (or Die) - Song for Chan' never fails to elicit that reaction."

Unfortunately, unless people seek out and buy his albums, it's unlikely that a wider audience will experience those shivers in the near future: another thing Greg Weeks shares with Nick Drake is an abject abhorrence of performing live. In a particularly telling little exchange, Greg recently admitted:

"I've performed out twice since the release of the record. It's not something I do too often, for various reasons. I have a tendency to forget song

lyrics. That's what happened the second time I performed. I had the lyrics taped to the mic stand, but I was premiering some new songs written on electric guitar (for which I stand while I play) and unlike the time before (which found me seated) the lyrics were in such a position that I couldn't make them out very easily. Thus I ended up tripping over my lines and feeling a bit like a fraud. The stress of the whole experience was such that I ended up getting sick after the performance. I had a cold for about two weeks. I don't take smoke very well, so it's hard for me to play out anywhere other than private gigs and California (which I don't see happening anytime soon).

Ben Goldberg adds: "It's really tragic that he can't play too often. He recently played a new song at pirate radio station party, and through the various obstacles of unpracticed hands and modest stagefright was a

potentially stunning live performer. His songs manage to be both arcane and intimate, which is really a tricky balance to obtain."

Terrascope readers may well have previously stumbled across Greg Weeks' name without even realising it is courtesy of New Sonic Architecture, the mail order outlet he runs along with Matt Martens and Jen Mesiano (an advert of theirs graced the back cover of the festival programme for Terrastock III).

Greg: "New Sonic Architecture came about simply because Matt, Jen and I wanted to involve ourselves more deeply in music while extending the influence of a particular type of music that seems to have slipped under the radar of current popular culture. We specialise mainly in the underground music of the latter half of this past century. While its true that we centre our attentions on progressive rock, what

falls under that rubric -- for us anyway -- is so great a variety of musical styles as to make the definition almost worthless. It just gives people a starting point from which to address our stock, which is upwards of 4,000 plus titles now. Our scope extends from post-rock, musique concrete and avant-classical, to krautrock, wyrd-folk and modern indie-rock. It's most important to us not to feel limited in what we should stock, so we keep a constant eye on future expansions."

Finally, I asked Greg about future plans.

"Keyhole Records are hoping to release an EP's worth of material that I recorded at home on my 4-track called 'Bleeker Station'. We expect a Fall 2000 release. It'll be vinyl only, and limited to 500 copies or less (all for financial reasons, not wilful obscurism or collector-stoking purposes). The songs for Bleeker Station were originally written as a

love letter of sorts to a girl I was involved with at the time. It was a long distance relationship at that point, and to close the gulf between us I decided I'd write a song a day for 31 days about our relationship. Hearing the songs you'll soon realise just how crazy a rollercoaster that relationship turned out to be. Eight songs in and it was over. Actually, 'Down A Dark Corridor' was written and recorded a bit later, as was 'Duess'. I recorded each song to cassette 4-track, wound up keeping all of the guitar parts and most of the original vocals (many of which were done at the height of a cold) even after moving to a studio proper to do the mix down. The playing is rough, but I wanted to keep true to the feelings that spawned each song. Re-recording them would have ruined that effect. My interest was also in crafting poppier, more straight-forward sounding stuff, similar to the handful of songs I demoed before releasing

‘Fire’ (which I recently stumbled across and have to say may be the best stuff I ever did). I was really getting into ‘Village Green’ by the Kinks, so maybe there’s a little of that in there.”

“I also have an album’s worth of material written on electric guitar (most tunes around the 6-10 minute mark) which won’t see the light of day for a long while. Plus, there’s an album of organ/harmonium (if only I could *find* a harmonium!) and acoustic guitar numbers ready to go. Other than that, look for a song on a See Through Records compilation, cover songs on a Jandek tribute record, and a song on the latest Badaboom Gramophone CD compilation, #4 [out now]”

Greg Weeks
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