

TEXAS TROUBADOUR: Darden Smith gives charity a helping hand

2004-07-23

IF YOU GO

`Harmonies for Hearts' benefit concert, featuring Darden Smith and Mic Harrison

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: The Palace Theater, 113 W. Broadway, downtown Maryville

HOW MUCH: \$25

CALL: 983-3330

ON THE WEB: www.savinglittlehearts.com, www.dardensmith.com

By Steve Wildsmith

of The Daily Times Staff

Darden Smith may not be one of those instantly recognizable names, but the man himself possesses as much passion, talent and insight as any of his singer-songwriter peers.

Considering his roots, however, it's no wonder. Smith, who released his most recent album "Circo" back in May on the Dualtone label, hails from Texas. The Lone Star State has no shortage of talented troubadours, and Smith is just the latest in a long line that stretches back through Steve Earle, Lyle Lovett, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt and Billy Joe Shaver.

"I think there's a history of storytelling in Texas that nurtures songwriters," Smith said this week, shortly after touching down in Dallas after an overseas trip where he toured Europe with Joan Baez. "It's far enough away from any of the coasts that people tend to create their own thing there, and it's just a very creative environment."

Indeed, to listen to Smith's music is like taking a drive across Texas, from the hill country in the east to the desert scrub near El Paso, on the Mexican border. It's a drive across a landscape that's both desolate and beautiful, modern and primitive, rugged and rolling.

That Smith is able to pair the landscape with the musings of his own mind is a hallmark he shares with his Texan contemporaries. But "Circo" suggests that Smith is so much more than just a singer-songwriter. He's crafted a sound on the album that's anchored in his roots with plenty of pedal steel and acoustic bass but infused with the quiet power of a nylon-string guitar as well. Such an instrument may cause those loyal to Black Diamond steel to recoil, but it lends the album a weight that's almost ethereal.

"I got that guitar five or six years ago, and I just like making records with a nylon-string," he said. "I just thought it was an interesting sound, one I'm not hearing much these days. There's an emotional quality to it that's really cool -- it's quiet and reserved, but very powerful.

"It's just different, like those old Nick Drake records, or the Brazilian stuff that came out in the '60s or even things like Roger Miller records. It's just a really cool, nice, soft, mushy sound, just really different than steel-string acoustic stuff. It made me get quiet and feel things, because the harder you hit a nylon-string, the quieter it gets. You've got to really think about it and not hit it too hard. You've got to play with your fingers, and once you discover that, there are tons of sound you can get off of it."

Born in Brenham, Texas, in the dusty land between Austin and Houston, Smith initially established himself as one of the most promising young artists in the progressive country camp, in league with the likes of Lovett and Nanci Griffith (who provided guest harmonies on his 1986 indie debut, "Native Soil"). After receiving strong notices for the folkish country of 1988's "Darden Smith," produced by Asleep at the Wheel's Ray Benson, Smith showed the "don't fence me in" spirit that has continued to mark his career, teaming with British rocker Boo Hewerdine for 1989's "Evidence."

His subsequent efforts expanded his following and took him further from his roots, but he came full circle in 2002 with the release of "Sunflower." His career had bottomed out, his marriage had fallen apart and Smith went into the studio determined to make a record that was solely his own.

"Sunflower got me over the fear of the studio," Smith said. "I didn't have a record deal or an agent, and I was pretty much on my own. I just did it, and I figured I would sort it out later, because nobody cared what I was doing at the time.

"I just made the record. I did some of the overdubs at my house, and doing that showed me that the recording process isn't rocket science; it's not a mysterious thing. I felt I was back in the driver's seat with that album."

In the two years between "Sunflower" and "Circo," Smith expanded his musical interests beyond that of American music. He became interested in Brazilian music, enthralled by the way that style melds traditional and modern sounds. He knew that he wanted to work with talented contemporaries -- singer-songwriters Shawn Colvin and Kim Richey both guest on "Circo," as does guitar maestro Jim Lauderdale -- and he knew how he wanted the record to sound.

“I knew I wanted the nylon-string guitar, some electric and acoustic bass, lots of pedal steel and strings,” he said. “Other than that, it was totally unguided. I didn’t have a specific plan; I’m not that organized. When it’s time to start doing a record, I look at the songs I have and see what songs make sense and what songs kind of fit together and flow.”

The result is one of his most critically acclaimed efforts in more than a decade. Highlights include the transcendent “Rise,” inspired by the death of Smith’s nephew, and the provocative “One Hundred Ways to Kiss the Ground,” which some fans feel was created in light of the Sept. 11 tragedy, though it was written the year before.

Smith returned this week from Europe, where he toured England for five weeks and Germany for one. Saturday, he’ll participate in the “Harmonies for Hearts” benefit concert (former V-Roy and Knoxville singer-songwriter Mic Harrison opens the show), which benefits the Saving Little Hearts Foundation’s Surgery Package program. The program provides a surgery care package to every pediatric heart surgery patient at Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital.

“I’ve been going overseas for a long time, and the people over there are very open to music,” he said. “They love American singer-songwriters, and they really listen to what you’re playing. It’s nice to go somewhere where you don’t know everything, to go somewhere where you’re not a part of. It makes you look at home a lot different.

“I went to Dresden, which was pretty much flattened during [World War II]. It was one of the most cool places I’ve seen, but it’s also really sad, because you can still see the affects of that war. It’s hard to see that in America, and it gives you plenty of stuff to write about.”