

HEARTSONG

An introduction by Jerome Clark

More than three decades ago, I happened upon James Talley's *Tryin' Like the Devil* in a record store in Chicago. His name was vaguely familiar to me from an article or review I'd read somewhere. It was sufficient, in any event, to give me reason to reach for the billfold in the expectation that I might like his music. I was not, however, quite prepared for what I was to hear. After the first spin of the LP, I sat there in a state of puzzlement, asking myself, *How does he do that?* Even now, after hearing just about everything he's recorded, I still wonder.

The influences, of course, aren't hard to discern. James is a son of Oklahoma and New Mexico, and he sounds like it, and he's proud of it. The full-blooded musical traditions of the Southwest flow through his heart and soul: Woody Guthrie, Bob Wills, Lightning Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas, Lefty Frizzell, Merle Haggard (a Californian of Oklahoma stock), and more. His is rooted music, an astoundingly integrated hybrid of country, Western swing, folk, and blues (and even, here and there, rock'n'roll) rising up from deep soil, yet sung in a voice – a baritone rich with emotion and nuance – stamped "James Talley" alone. Any of the just-named would be happy to claim his songs as their own.

Though thought of – accurately enough -- as a singer-songwriter, James also happens to be an exceptionally gifted interpreter when he turns his attention in that direction. His 1999 disc *Woody Guthrie and Songs of My Oklahoma Home* marked a return from years of recorded silence and inspired a *New York Times* profile which informed this fan as much. In a remarkable reimagining of the work of the legendary American bard, James transforms these familiar songs into something spectacularly fresh, not least – in the memorable concluding cut -- "This Land Is Your Land," giving voice to a mature, chastened patriotism which captures both the glory and the heartbreak of our national experience.

That album holds a special place for me, too, because it was after reading my review of it that James got in touch with me. I was surprised and pleased, and his gesture initiated a close and valued friendship. As I've come to know him over the past decade, I've learned that – no surprise – he's a good guy and a thoughtful artist. Of course, anybody can figure that out just from hearing the singer and the songs. But he's also a man who means every word he sings, which means his social conscience and empathy for the underdog are anything but affectation. They're at the core of his being. Even if I didn't share his politics – though I do – I would respect that level of sincere, sustained commitment to the humane social order that still eludes us. Just as impressively, he takes that sense of justice and puts it into songs that are, well, *songs*, not sermons. As lots of well-meaning but mediocre, preachy protest songs attest, that's not so easy.

In any event, I'd have a hard time compiling a list of my favorite Talley songs. Such a list would be a long one. "Richland, Washington" would be there. "Deep Country Blues," "Bluesman," "I Saw the Buildings" (an almost overwhelmingly moving,

compassionate anthem inspired by the horrendous events of 9/11, everything that a Toby Keith-style jingoistic rant is not), “Are They Gonna Make Us Outlaws Again?” (though written in the 1970s, suddenly newly urgent), “Song of Chief Joseph,” “Nashville City Blues” ... well, it goes on. I notice that some of these are recent songs, products of the present century. Though James’s laurels are considerable, he doesn’t rest on them.

Heartsong reminds us – or will inform you, if you’re coming to James Talley’s music for the first time – how good his albums are. The songs are, as usual, uniformly strong. I’ve never been any particular devotee of love songs, but I make an exception for James’s because – in common with everything else he writes – they’re true to life, and in particular to experiences, wounding, rewarding, or both, of grown-ups who struggle to make relationships work and struggle to carry on when they don’t. He is no Hank Williams imitator, but the songs share the same piercing sense of unsentimental joy and unhealed hurt.

There are, too, the grand themes to which James returns again and again, each time with original insight: travel and trains, the travails of working folks, the lives of rodeo riders and American Indians, destructive wars and official lies, diminished dreams and unflagging hopes. He also delivers a beautifully heartfelt remembrance of a beloved dog, with nary a false note; all who treasure the canine companions with whom many of us walk this pilgrim’s road will know exactly what he means. (For all that dogs have meant to humans, by the way, only three good songs on the subject prior to James’s “Song for Shiloh” come to mind: the folk songs “Old Blue” and “Old Rattler,” Ian Tyson’s “Casey’s Gone.” Like good topical songs, good dog songs are harder than they look.) And as we can always confidently expect, *Heartsong* just plain *sounds* good. Dependably, James has assembled a band of top-drawer pickers and set his songs in arrangements that pretty much define both perfection and satisfaction over the long haul.

It’s a world of broken hearts, James sings here. It is also, fortunately, a world in which James Talley writes and records as powerfully and as truthfully as ever.

Jerome Clark
December 2008