

Cup of Loneliness: David Peterson and 1946

CD Review

CD: *Cup of Loneliness*

Artist: David Peterson and 1946

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David Peterson is a Bluegrass veteran who does things his way. He regularly posted on social media about progress on his new bluegrass recording, his eighth, which is a substantial body of work. When the recording was finished along with the thousand details that needed to be completed and it was ready to release, I sent my money along with everyone else. I got my autographed copy in the mail, wrestled with the plastic wrapper (Is it just me, or is the plastic a lot tougher than it used to be?), broke the jewel case (I never liked jewel cases, but what else is there?), and to soothe me after the mechanical vexations, I jumped right to attention at the sound of triple fiddles, and a high, piercing tenor: an uncompromising, unapologetic tenor, reaching for orbit it seemed, and getting there. It was as remarkable as it was startling.

David Peterson and 1946 has brought to us sixteen lonely songs with stellar musicianship and vocals. Fiddlers Stuart Duncan, Aubrey Haynie, Shad Cobb, and Tim Crouch in various combinations give us triple fiddles that raises the hair on the back of my neck, reminding me of my young self sitting at the foot of the stage at Bean Blossom and peering up at Kenny

Baker, Joe Stuart, Tater Tate, Curly Ray Cline, Enoch Sullivan, Byron Berline, Blaine Sprouse, and whoever else was handy playing triple fiddles in the midweek shows. The memory of past witnessed excellence jumps out at me right now as I listen to "Nashville Blues", the only instrumental on **Cup of Loneliness**, a foreboding tune that has its own banjo-ic loneliness, and some fine banjo work by Brent Lamons.

Right off the bat, David gives us a taste of his powerful vocals with "Prisoner's Song" where he startles with his dynamics and range. One minute he croons like Perry Como, the next, he blows the top of the mountain off, erupting like a Caribbean island volcano sitting astride subducting tectonic plates, except in this case venting the pressure in the form of music with a power that cannot be ignored.

"Short Life of Trouble," "Memories of You," "Travelin' Down This Lonesome Road," "Cup of Loneliness" and "Kentucky Waltz" are about as lonely as any songs I ever heard. "Short Life of Trouble" is one of my favorite songs and I like to hear it in any iteration or interpretation. I can hardly think of anything more lonely than a short life of trouble. Yet David delivered. On all these songs David delivered. I bought a CD and David delivered a fabulous Bluegrass band right into my studio. I'd say that's a bargain. And, I was just about transported to another realm by "Kentucky Waltz," which was just marvelous, until the band modulated to a higher key, which was unexpected, and where its marvelousness had superseded loneliness, it found itself superseded by sublimity. That was as far as I made it before dialing the number and getting David on the phone.

"So, tell me," I said, "Just how many overdubs on this CD?"

"There aren't any," he replied. "I am determined to keep everything in the realm of human performance. It was all recorded live in the studio, no click tracks, no headphones, no overdubs."

I asked him about "Kentucky Waltz," and its modulation. "It was the first song we cut for the record, and what you hear on it is the unedited first take." I was astonished. I listened to it again and again. David's high tenor shot forth like a bullet from a 30-06, breaking into a falsetto that would make Bill Monroe smile.

I could hear it. I could hear the music breathe, as alive on the record as it was in the magic instant it was created. It was not confined, nor constrained. It was not merely competent journeymen executing the songs; it was far beyond that. Everything I heard was a performance, not an execution. An execution plays it safe. An execution's reward is its own competence. **Cup of Loneliness?** It was reaching for something much higher, and reaching far enough to take the risk of falling, yet it never fell. It reached and grabbed the brass ring. If you like Bluegrass, **Cup of Loneliness** is for you. If you like it live, throbbing with loneliness and loss, this is it.

"Run Mountain" I had not heard in a long time and was glad to hear it here. My foot could not help but pat. "Lost in This World" is always a joy, and done here with remarkable vocal and fiddle harmony, a sense of timing that lures you in, and an archaic natural chord where modernity demands a minor adds tremendous tension. The banjo work of Eric Ellis on this song was particularly enjoyable.

We get a triple dose of Hank Williams with "My Sweet Love Ain't Around," the dark, dark, dark "Alone and Forsaken," and "My Heart Would Know." I had to look out to the sky while listening to "Alone and Forsaken" to make sure that storm clouds weren't gathering. The verses were mournfully tortuous, and the chorus was a lamentation, a Jeremiad, and the *a capella* chorus at the end delivered all of the loneliness and loss the protagonist of the song was feeling, just what David said was his goal. The person praying to The Lord in the song is in the midst of living loneliness and loss. To make us feel

his pain, to make us lament with him, is the work of an artist. What has been delivered was more than the order required. *Lagniappe*, the folks in Louisiana call it. *Lagniappe*. A *lagniappe* of loneliness. Lots of *lagniappe* in **Cup of Loneliness**, but it is a big cup.

Then there's "Old Southern Skies," "The First Whippoorwill," "Lost to a Stranger," where, again, the natural chord adds tension, and "Lonesome Wind."

The triple fiddles kick in like a hornet-stung mule heading back to the barn. Mickey Boles' tenor harmony to David's lead definitely has the sound of experience, as they sing and phrase together like brothers. Sometimes, it's Mike Compton giving us his great, percussive mandolin chops, and sometimes it's Boles. There are three banjoists on this record. Brent Lamons, Jeremy Stephens, and Eric Ellis. I enjoyed every note I heard. The indefatigable Kent Blanton (Superman) at times thumps the bass and at others walks it like a man commanding a half-dozen leashed hounds.

In the liner notes, Jim Beaver noted that "The recordings have the right amount of natural imperfection to be perfect." I might have heard one uhoh, yet when I listened again, it seemed like the uhoh was intentional. A few more listens, and the uhoh seemed to my memory to have been in every cover of the song I ever heard, as if *spinto adagio andiamo* was penciled in Italian right on the original score and the uhoh-less covers are the pretenders. Live music can do that to you. I don't hear any uhohs anymore. I don't think I ever heard one. Now, I just hear a superlative performance.

This recording satisfies. It is unhurried, unrushed. It has drive without the pressure of speed, thus sounding faster to our ears than it really is. It is easy to mistake drive for speed, yet the two have no connection. **Cup of Loneliness** is Grammy material. It is remarkably well done, and done in just the way David Peterson wanted to do it. That's the only way he

does things. I respect that. I admire it and want more of it. And if that is what gets us performance excellence, then I want a bigger **Cup of Loneliness**.

I'm not sure it can get any bigger.