

Halleluiah He's a Dreamer

By John Radanovich
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Pianist and songwriter David Egan doesn't want to be known as Louisiana's best kept secret. "That's seems so 90s now," he jokes about his aspirations for his quartet, and how some blues musicians like to suffer in obscurity for its own sake.

To a larger audience Egan has been an unknown, yet for musicians Marcia Ball, Irma Thomas, Solomon Burke, Percy Sledge, Etta James, John Mayall, and Joe Cocker, Egan has long been a go-to guy for an intelligent story song. Egan's most recent brush with the Grammys is a shared writing credit on "Peace, Love and BBQ" for Marcia Ball and several for Irma Thomas' "After the Rain." His striking talents are so obvious that you wonder when he will emerge from behind the songwriter's curtain, like Willie Nelson or Randy Newman did. His small but fervent fans would like him to be better known, too.

Before Egan studied jazz theory at North Texas State, blues and Bizet came with his grits and eggs in a musical Shreveport family. His mother sang opera and had cast parties until 4 am on school nights. "It was a real atmosphere of tolerance and artistic sensibilities," he says. The Egan household also employed a lady named Marie, who introduced Egan to Little Stevie



Wonder, Bobby “Blue” Bland, and Elvis. While in high school, Egan formed his first group with longtime song collaborator and guitarist Buddy Flett.

Egan spent 14 years on tour for Cajun groups like Jo El Sonnier and Filé, but he’s not a Cajun musician with an Irish name. He does live in Lafayette, however, but is as much a Charles Brown of the bayou as anything. His stylized singing has some indirect influences of Mose Allison, but is less an acquired taste. His piano voice contains plenty of New Orleans piano rhythm and blues, and speaks in a wide blues vernacular that stretches from Memphis to New Orleans to Austin.

Yet a song like his waltzy second line “Hallelujah I’m a Dreamer,” recently covered by Papa Mali, is a melodic masterpiece of emotional expression and stirring lyrics that reach far higher than most blues ever hope for. Egan retitled “I’m a Dreamer” for the soundtrack of “The Promised Land: A Swamp Pop Journey,” a documentary about Lil’ Band ‘O Gold, founded by C.C. Adcock, and containing guests Egan, Steve Riley, “Lil’ Buck” Sinegal, and swamp pop pioneers.

Another Egan hallmark is “Half Past the Blues,” a blues with a piano vamp that follows Johnny Taylor’s “Cheaper to Keep Her.” “Half Past” leads to comparisons not only with pianists like Charles Brown but with Ray Charles: “She fired off your pistol in the middle of the street/Screamed out your name and that you was a no good thief/And while you were sleepin’ she stole your watch right off of you/Now all the time you’re showin’ is half past the blues.”

With titles like “Twenty Years of Trouble,” “Slingshots and Boomerangs,” “I Just Can’t Do Right,” and “Love, Honor and Obey,” it’s hard not to wonder if Woman-Done-Me-Wrong reflects a chronic domestic situation in Egan’s house. He laughs and admits that “No, I have a very good woman who has nothing to do with my songs. We had conversations before we got married, like ‘Listen, I’m a songwriter...and there are just gonna be some songs...’” He adds that “I do write the other kind, too.”

Don Was was stunned when he heard Egan’s “Fading Footsteps” on a demo (Solomon Burke recorded it). “After we first listened to it, nobody could speak...behind a brave face of literacy and wit, David had eloquently captured the profound pathos of a moment that’s burned into the souls of all struggling artists.”

Producer and friend Scott Billington uses Egan compositions whenever possible. “David is a great American songwriter in the same way as a Hoagy Carmichael, Dan Penn, or a Doc Pomus,” he said. “Even with a pretty standard format, he always comes up with something surprising. He is especially good at hitting at the heart of what matters most for an artist. In just a few days he came up with exactly the song that suited Irma Thomas: ‘These Honey-Do’s’.”

Egan’s love for Johnny Adams’ talents led to paying his respects at the Tan Canary’s funeral. “Through Scott, Johnny had recorded my ‘Even Now’ for his last album when he was very sick, but he had long been one of my all-time favorite singers. When Raymond Myles played at the funeral, I had never seen anyone play a Hammond B3 like that in my entire life.” Myles was murdered not long after, just behind Frenchman street during a car jacking, while Egan was back in peaceful Lafayette writing more songs.

Egan’s group plays the first day of the Fest. His excellent veteran group of fellow Louisiana natives includes David Hyde on bass, Bruce MacDonald on guitar, and Mike “the Yat” Sipos on



drums. Egan will lead them happily through barrelhouse blues, a history of New Orleans piano professors, and his ballads. Look for guests to be anyone from CC Adcock to Tab Benoit, and possibly others.