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Open Spaces, Horsewomen & Personal Views

by Irv Yarg

Good news for those of you planning to rent a DVD of "Boraxo" next Thursday evening and suffer through Ron Reagan's performance as a Pakistani mule-driver attempting to rescue a digital goddess from a vast electronic desert... There's a better alternative of LIVE performance at the High Falls Cafe featuring Mark Donato as a singer-songwriter musically exploring the liquid labyrinth of life's existential jar of half-sour pickles, a performance sure to be fraught with around-the-corner perspectives and rhythmic wit... And isn't that what alternatives are all about?

The "Acoustic Thursday Nights" series at Brian and Buffy Gribbon's High Falls restaurant is hosted by popular singer-songwriter and ace guitarist Kurt Henry and designed as an Early Show, starting at 6 pm and ending around 8:30. Hence, weekday audiences, home by 9 or 9:30, can then wag a bushy tail to the morning car radio on the way to work with memories of a good time awash in their minds as the AM sports station airs enthralling replacements to the recently removed 'Anus In the Morning' show that featured the contempt-based humor of Don Imus and his sycophant hyenas. But you won't hear anything like this in the songs of Mark Donato during this rare area appearance.

Donato, who has been quietly resident in Olive with his wife and daughter since 2002, hails originally from the southwestern Pennsylvania town of Connellsville. His first step toward New York was a college stint in Pittsburgh, where he studied writing and psychology until a statistics course prompted retreat from the latter subject. "I don't think I read a lot before I went to college, so I used those years to catch up on my reading- which turned out to be a good thing," Donato observes. Also, having played drums in high school, Mark added gig playing to the studying and fiction-writing he was doing at the time.

"It was a group called Zone Bleu, led by a guy from Paris who was actually quite good," the softly spoken songwriter recalls. "He had a big, deep French-accented voice which the girls loved."

Still a bit surprised that music has become so large a part of his life, Donato didn't pick up guitar until he started writing lyrics at around age 22 and began playing his songs around Pittsburgh as a solo act when funding problems prompted him to leave graduate school.

"I always sang to my stereo, so I think I always wanted to sing," Mark notes in tones of self-discovery. "I always remembered all of the words to songs more than anyone else I knew, so I guess it's not surprising that I started writing lyric-type things."

Upon arrival in the Big Apple, Donato began playing drums in various bands, including Tom Adelman's The Oswalds and Mark Lerner's Flat Old World. When Adelman left the former group around 1990, Donato "inherited" a bass player and a guitarist, recruited a new drummer and began playing his own tunes around city clubs with them as Canoeful of Strangers. His first CD, *I'm Flapping and Other Favorites* was released in 1996, sporting such intriguing titles as "Between Now and California," "An Expletive Or Two," "Ms. Breath and Mr. Go Away" and others. As suggested by the titles, the tunes were somewhere away from ordinary themes of the day.

Prior to this release, Mark had teamed with Robin Goldwasser, the better half of John Flansburgh (himself half of the eccentric, creative and celebrated Brooklyn duo, They Might Be Giants) on an EP called *Spondee*. In this period, Donato also toured with John Linnell, the other principal half of TMBG and played on Linnell's solo 1999 album, *State Songs*. In 2001, Donato issued another solid collection of slightly strange, original songs called *The Old Joy*.

Since they frequently gesture more than evince or expound, it's not always obvious what Donato's songs are really about but, typically, their individual lines offer unexpected glimpses into common or idiosyncratic moments of life and situational existence carved into identifiable feelings, thoughts, observations, attitudes and pretenses. They each have a certain 'You think you know, but-' smirk and, in fact, its lead-off tune- "You Think You Know What It Means," (which some readers may know from its inclusion on the *Woodstock Film Festival 2003* CD compilation along with music from the illustrious Karl Berger, Tony Rice, Peter Rowan, Slidin' Jerry Douglas and others) insists otherwise.

Leaning over the Alt-Rock fence from the folk side, the binding music sometimes strives to demonstrate that 'melodic punk hybrid' doesn't have to be an oxymoronic objective and guitar lines from gritty nips to flares of mellow zest are available to punctuate a point. As Donato's characters stride, interwoven and sometimes seemingly unrelated images unwind and stretch, dart across the flowing stream of melody and duck behind the next line, leaving us reaching to shape our own forms of logic and association.

Donato also plays and sings on Flat Old World's *Musicale* CD, including his own tune "Final Product" as well as on Rosine's album *A New Broom Sweeps Clean But An Old Broom Knows Every Corner*. His most recent release, only a few months old, is a project of collaboration called *Good Loser Club* with Donato, Mark Lerner and Frank Randall (of the Minneapolis band, The Sycamores) each contributing songs. Donato, who also chips in some fairly tasty harmonica licks here, leads off the list with "Woman On A Horse"- a quirky number which might, on some level, harken back to interests of his college days by finding fascination with a woman reading Dostoevsky in a coffee shop, rousing him from his "moral sleep" and making him want to "get deep."

Another brand new album called *I Haven't Wasted All This Time Alone* features the poignant "Infirmary Ball"; the pensively yearning and vaguely rural "Help Me Put Some Meat On These Bones"; the direly bouncy "Moods of Extreme Desire" (which declares that "If there's one thing that I can't abide/ It's this feeling that I'm satisfied"); "The Architect of Open Spaces," a prancing lyrical plea which found its title in an obituary, and other unusual compositions. This last mentioned title may offer a sliver of insight into Donato's poetic process and calls to mind an album project now in the works called "A History of the Boys and Girls." This was adopted from the projected title of a never-completed novel by mid-20th Century poet Delmore Schwartz, a semi-tragic figure honored by writers as divergent as Lou Reed and Saul Bellows.

"I just thought the title should have something attached to it," Donato explains. "The songs feel interconnected to me and this is the first time I'm sort of demanding of myself that I keep all of them on the same record."

The standard format of the popular Acoustic Thursday Night series includes sets by three musical acts and several wrap-up numbers from Kurt and Cheryl Henry- four performances for five bucks! Such a deal! Sharing the bill with Mark Donato on May 17th will be the accomplished and widely-traveled guitarist and prolific songwriter Sharon Klein and Gary Terbush, songwriting brother of the veteran Hudson Valley bluegrass band, the Bush Brothers, a title in use for decades which now carries a disclaimer- no, not related to Sam Bush or George Bush or any of those other contemporary growths.

**An extended version of this article is available at
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