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Opening the 'Mission Door'

Music scribe (and sometime Todd Snider bassist) Peter Cooper makes witty music of his own at Coffee Gallery Backstage

By Bliss

Balance can be mighty elusive for a writer. As a songwriter, you can spend so much time inside your own head that you lose touch with everyday reality. If you write about music, you can get so mired in the deadline grind that you lose track of what inspired you to start writing.

Yet Peter Cooper has fashioned an admirably balanced life. Writing about music as a journalist for Nashville's Tennessean is no more academic to him than teaching the evolution of country music at Vanderbilt University — because he's also a respected songwriter.

"My first few years here," the South Carolina native recalls, "I would [play] the Bluebird just enough to remember what a bad monitor mix sounds like. It lends you a different perspective; it's real easy to get snotty about somebody else up on a stage if you don't remember what it's like to be up there yourself. Todd asking me to open for him on some shows was really the impetus to playing and writing a whole lot more."

Todd is singer-songwriter buddy Todd Snider. With Snider's encouragement, Cooper recorded his album "Mission Door," co-produced with pedal steel genius Lloyd Green. Featuring guests like Snider, Nanci Griffith, Jason Ringenberg, ex-Jayhawk Jen Gunderman and onetime Emmylou Harris backup singer Fayssoux McLean, the album's out in Europe (as "Cautionary Tales") and will be released stateside in May by Red Beet Records.

That revered artists like childhood hero Kris Kristofferson are publicly touting Cooper's talent speaks volumes. "Mission Door" is rife with graceful melodies, intelligent humor and pithy turns of phrase; his songs feel lived in and relatable. Singing in an amiable baritone reminiscent of Slaid Cleaves, he ponders dreams and racism ("715 [For Hank Aaron]"), ex-FEMA director Mike Brown ("Boy Genius"), Townes Van Zandt ("Take Care"), the time Dylan scorned Phil Ochs as "a journalist" ("Thin Wild Mercury," co-written with Snider), and religion's slippery absolutes (the wickedly amusing "Sheboygan").

Unlike many writers ensconced in the industry, Cooper's retained a healthy balance between personal and professional interests. Whenever he feels burned out from listening to "mediocre flavor-of-the-moment" artists, he pulls out old vinyl and listens to songs all night. "Nothing cures burnout like Kristofferson's 'Spooky Lady's Sideshow.' It's probably like living in LA," he quips. "You can gripe about traffic and smog, or you can go to the beach."

Cooper jokes that he benefits from "lowered expectations" of listeners who don't expect journalists to make good music, but most don't realize what he does by day. "There's no such thing anymore as a famous music journalist," he says with a chuckle. "Writing music and writing stories aren't quite the same; different parts of that skill set are different. But you're either putting down interesting ideas or not."