

Former Spartanburg resident Cooper to release album at The Showroom

By JEREMY JONES

Published: Thursday, March 27, 2008 | Updated: 4:10 pm

Peter Cooper's new album, "Mission Door," opens with "Boy Genius," a song about realizing that maybe you didn't live up to all that potential you once thought you had. The chorus rings with self-mockery and fear as Cooper sings, "Don't let them find me out."

Fortunately, Cooper's long-awaited album exceeds expectations.

Cooper's voice, which starts out smooth and finishes a little rough, sounds like early Lyle Lovett with a hint of Todd Snider (who lends backup vocals and harmonica to a few tracks on the album). However, Cooper's dark humor is more subdued and a little less wry than either Lovett's or Snider's.

Slippery with Lloyd Green's lyrical pedal steel guitar, "Mission Door" possesses the beautifully haunting undertones of Townes Van Zandt (about whom Cooper sings in "Take Care") without Van Zandt's lapses into utter despair. Throughout the album, Cooper praises Hank Aaron's hard living, his grandfather's singing and a barfly's broken life.

This understated album is neither "too this" nor "too that." All 12 of the simple, straight-to-the-heart songs are well-written and direct. There is no over-writing or pretension. As Cooper says in "Thin Wild Mercury," "you know what they say or you don't."

A former Spartanburg resident and Wofford College graduate, Cooper has spent the past few years playing gigs in Nashville, Tenn., writing songs, working as a

music journalist and teaching classes at Vanderbilt University. In preparation for his performance Friday at The Showroom, he spoke about songwriting.

Question: Do you play a song that you have written differently than a song you are covering?

Peter Cooper: If it's a cover song that I really love — and it is, or I wouldn't do it in concert — I tend to like playing it as much as an original. I feel like I have a foot, at least, in folk music, and the folk tradition was always to pass songs along.

There are only two covers on the “Mission Door” album, and they're both from the pen of Eric Taylor. He's one of the greatest singer-songwriters I've ever heard, but not enough people have heard his music.

Q: What makes Eric Taylor great?

PC: Eric Taylor created his own way of constructing songs. And in so doing, he found his own way to open his heart up to people.

In other words, there is such a thing as an Eric Taylor song. That's a pretty good trick. Most people, myself included, spend a long time getting to a place where we aren't just aping what others are doing.

A big thing I learned from Eric is how to reveal something about myself while writing about other people. He can write about a barroom shooting, but he's also writing about the tingling excitement of a night on the town where you know something's going to happen but you're not sure what.

Q: Do you ever drastically reinvent your own songs?

PC: If my feelings shift about a song, or if I find that people are hearing one thing and I was trying to say another, then I stop playing that song, put it back into surgery and bring it out when it is functioning as it should.

With the exception of three songs — “Couple of Lies,” “Take Care” and “Andalusia” — every song on the “Mission Door” album has been in surgery.

“Andalusia” has been to the emergency clinic, but X-rays revealed it was only a sprain.

Q: What is the greatest challenge for you about writing songs?

PC: Aside from finding the time and space I need to write, which is a constant issue, the greatest challenge is saying something in a new way. People a lot smarter than I am have been writing songs for a lot longer than I have. Most of the subjects have been well-covered, and brilliantly so.

So I try to draw from specific experiences and then relate those in, hopefully, a universal way. If I start with things that really happened to me, I have a pretty good chance at not just coming up with a second-rate version of someone else's song.

Whereas, if I sat down and said, “I want to write a song about freedom,” then chances are I'm just going to end up with a lousy attempt at a (Kris) Kristofferson song. And that's no good to the world, since he already wrote a bunch of great songs about freedom.

Q: What do you enjoy most about songwriting?

PC: I don't enjoy songwriting at all. It hurts my head. But I do enjoy having written a song. Once you're done, it's like if your brain was a bat in the on-deck circle that had those heavy weights around it, and then someone removes the weights and you feel like you can swing really fast. What I most enjoy is playing something that came out of my head and hands for an audience, and having them like the story, get the joke or tap their feet.

More information

WANT TO GO?

What: CD release concert for Peter Cooper and Fayssoux McLean

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: The Showroom, 149 S. Daniel Morgan Ave.

Tickets: \$10

Info: 864-597-0929 or www.Hub-Bub.com

Extra: Both CDs will be available at the show.