



WPLN News Feature Transcripts

Peter Cooper's "Mission Door" (transcript)

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By Kim Green

You may know Peter Cooper as a music writer for "The Tennessean," and magazines like "No Depression" and "Esquire." What you may not realize is that Cooper's also a first-rate singer-songwriter. He's just released his first full-length solo album, called "Mission Door." He co-produced it with pedal steel virtuoso Lloyd Green, forging a folk-rock-Americana album that defies genre. WPLN's Kim Green reports.

Go ahead—try to pigeonhole Peter Cooper as a journalist who writes a few songs on the side. He won't mind.

COOPER: "It's almost an advantage if somebody knows me as a writer for the newspaper. Then if I get up and play a song and just manage not to trip and fall—(laughs) it's "Wow! He can kinda do that!"

(SOUND:715 (For Hank Aaron))

But if you want to get the story right, you should just call him a "writer." He says it's his job to observe human nature and write stories that explain people's motivations. A great magazine feature, he says, is a lot like a great song. With a few well-chosen details, they both paint pictures in your mind.

(SOUND:715 (For Hank Aaron))

Daddy sold beer at the Black Cat lounge /
Sold a little shine to the man come around /
Little boy walkin' through a place like that /
Hittin' bottle caps with a broomstick bat /
Skinny 'cause there wasn't much of nothin' to eat /
Walkin' through the mud 'cause there wasn't any street...

The opening lines of "Seven-fifteen," so-named for Hank Aaron's record-busting home run in nineteen-seventy-four, conjure vivid images. If you close your eyes, you can almost smell the white heat and red clay of Jim-Crow Alabama. Now listen a little harder, to what's layered underneath Cooper's smart, literary storytelling. (fade up SG solo) These are not country songs, exactly. And yet, there's something going on here that evokes Old Nashville without copying it.

(SOUND: Steel guitar solo from All the Way to Heaven)

This pedal steel solo is from “All the Way to Heaven,” one of two cover songs on the album.

LLOYD GREEN: “Nobody’s had the imagination to use the steel guitar in this fashion.”

Famed steel guitarist Lloyd Green played on more than a hundred # 1 hit recordings during his heyday in the sixties and seventies. He says pedal steel is an endangered species in Nashville today.

LLOYD GREEN: “First place, the steel guitar has been devalued in modern times to no more than a cliché or a color instrument for recordings, but this is one of the instruments that was responsible for what country music and the Nashville Sound was. So this is something revolutionary for me too, not only for Peter.”

Green: Revolutionary, because Cooper didn’t ask Green to lay down the same tired pedal steel licks of old. He handed Green the songs and gave him carte blanche to use his experience and creativity however he saw fit.

ambi: SG “shots” here

COOPER: “I liken it to having Michael Jordan kind of sitting over on the sidelines when you’re playing ball at the Y or something, and you need a two-on-two partner. (Laughs) Like, “Hey, Michael Jordan, you wanna play with me?” and Michael goes, “Yeah, I was waitin’ for you to ask.” (Laughs)”

Don’t let Cooper’s modesty fool you. These songs don’t play like a pickup game with one big gun running the court. A host of Nashville luminaries like Nanci Griffith, Jason Ringenberg, and Todd Snider also contribute voices and instrumental work to “Mission Door.” But the album is really a collaboration—a conversation of sorts—between two fine artists. (SOUND: steel guitar opening on Wine) Green’s masterful strokes embellish Cooper’s lyric and melodic structure, like spires rising from a cathedral roof.

(SOUND: Wine)

Wine don’t make me no dancer /
Don’t give me no answers /
It don’t bring you my way...

LLOYD GREEN: “My favorite song on this album is “Wine.” I think it’s just beautifully written, and it’s closer than any other tune on the entire project to a country song like we used to cut.”

(SOUND: Wine)

HALL: Lloyd probably says that he hears something in this music that he hasn't heard in a long time.

That's Country Music Hall-of-Famer Tom T. Hall.

HALL: "I think what he means is he's hearing something he never heard before. It's something new, it's—anything that sounds wonderful and new reminds you of, always compare things to what your consciousness tells you existed before. Peter's a new guy, and a new brain, and a new generation, and that's art, that's what art's about."

Hall calls Cooper's style a "mental melting pot." He says Cooper's distilled everything he's absorbed over the years as a journalist and music lover and refined that encyclopedic knowledge into a new sound that tips its hat to simpler times and lost heroes. Still, many of Cooper's heroes are still alive and well, and he gets to talk to them for a living.

COOPER: Writing about music gives me the license to pick the brains of the greatest songwriters alive. And I probably learned a lot just by being able to ask a question of Guy Clark and David Olney and Kris Kristofferson and Tom T. Hall. It's just—there's some short cuts, maybe, and I don't know if I would've arrived at these songs without doing that.

With his twin roles as "insider journalist" and "outsider musician" seemingly in perfect symbiosis, Cooper says he won't be quitting his day job anytime soon. For Nashville Public Radio, I'm Kim Green.