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NOVEMBER 21 - 27, 2003

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Al Bruno: Poetry on Six Strings And Merle Haggard's media war

by Jonny Whiteside

It's another boozy Friday night at Crazy Jack's in Burbank, but this one comes superloaded — Al Bruno is on the bandstand. Brought to the USA by Conway Twitty in 1959, the Canada native is a 14-time winner of the Best Guitar Player award from the Academy of Country Music and a onetime member of the house band at the Palomino, North Hollywood's country shrine. He's sitting in with Michael Dart & the Flatlanders, a modest unit who prefer a hardcore set list: Floyd Tillman's "Driving Nails in My Coffin," Jimmie Rodgers' "TB Blues," Merle Haggard's "I Think I'll Just Stay Here (and Drink)."

Bruno takes a relaxed jazz player's tack. His runs and fills cascade in an easy flow, all rich hollow-body tone. His leads intoxicate: Each effects-shaped note glimmers with a half-opal, half-onyx aura that strikes a perfect balance between spontaneous expression and country tradition. Bruno's playing is both seductive and elegiac, while hinting at so much more.

Local picker Harry Orlov comes in grinning, wads up a scrap of paper and tosses it at Bruno — a love tap — then sidles up to the bar. "When I first got to town," he says, "I went down to the Blue



Bruno: An opalescent aura

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Cayucos. BY PETER GILSTRAP
Resistance and revelry: Pastor
Gibbons offers worship without walls.
BY ROSS TUTTLE

Plus, [Snake Bites](#), party photos by
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[A Lot of Night Music](#): Dark the night
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ALAN RICH

COMICS

["BEK,"](#) BY BRUCE ERIC KAPLAN

RESTAURANTS

Bayou in Lakewood almost every night for a year just to see Al.
He's the greatest guitar player nobody's ever heard of."

There's a quality hanging over this shadowy room that's far
removed from the usual music grind. The drunk woman on the
next barstool, cocking her head attentively during one of Bruno's
solos, makes an apt summation: "It's poetry."

The compact, soft-spoken Bruno was born January 22, 1937, in
Sudbury, Ontario. "My first professional job was a wedding, at 5,"
he says. "I had a band called the French Trio when I was 8 —
two guitars and a fiddle; the others were 9 and 10. We're in the
Guinness Book as the youngest band ever to open for name
bands. I was always doing country, and in 1957, Conway came
to Toronto when 'Make Believe' was big and said he wanted to
hire me someday. On my birthday, in fact, in 1959, he hired me,
and I was with him for four and a half years. It was a lot of road
work — two cars a year worth.

"I left, quit the road in '63. Moved to Philadelphia, and my first,
now deceased wife had been roommates with Dick Clark's wife,
so I worked for Dick Clark. I was doing *Bandstand*, and when he
did his Caravan of Stars tours, I was his musical director —
Chicago was my band. When he moved his offices here in '64, I
moved out also and went on tour with him — the Supremes,
Dionne Warwick, Jan and Dean, Gene Pitney, too many to name.
Then I heard Duane Eddy needed someone in his publishing
company in '65, did that for a while, and I started doin' club work
and sessions here and there. I was doin' all the stuff at Capitol. It
was cool at Capitol, are you kiddin'? What better way to learn
about producing than working with Ken Nelson? Played with
Buck Owens and the Buckaroos, in the studio mostly and some
special shows out here. Haggard was '67 — 'Farmer's Daughter'
was the first thing I did with him."

Haggard thought enough of Bruno to use him on the
tremendously influential Strangers instrumental albums, and
Bruno maintained a lifelong friendship with the late guitarist Roy
Nichols. He also cut with Mancini, did TV themes, scads of
different jobs. He's no Coast studio cat, though — Bruno's gone
the route in country music: "Went to Nashville in '71. I was lucky
enough to land the Columbia account, working with Billy Sherrill.
I did Bobbie Gentry's 'Ode to Billie Joe,' Tanya's 'Delta Dawn.'
'Behind Closed Doors' — Charlie Rich was so cool, a playin'
mother-man. And George and Tammy, Paycheck. I did Lefty's
[Frizzell's] last album. Came back out here, I was at the
Palomino for about three years. I was kicking ass."

Bruno's still doing that, using an ax given to him by his primary
guitar guru, Nashville monster Hank Garland. But what Bruno

[Ask Mr. Gold](#): Dim sum in the 310, and the 411 on frozen -pastrami. BY JONATHAN GOLD

Where to Eat Now: [New to the List](#)

[Counter Intelligence](#): Lost in transliteration: Noodle Thai Town. BY JONATHAN GOLD

WHERE TO EAT NOW
[Database of restaurant listings](#)
 compiled by JONATHAN GOLD and MICHELLE HUNEVEN.

CALENDAR

[Tsunami Disaster relief](#): For a list of aid agencies accepting contributions to help those affected by the earthquake and tsunami in South Asia, please see the "Do Good" column in Calendar.

[Good Times](#)

[>Picks of the Week](#)

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does with it hurtles far beyond anything Garland — or any other player — could imagine. He's tricked it out to a degree that allows him to indulge in a sort of aural sculpture, but the use of technology is never obtrusive, always in good taste and startlingly effective.

Back on that crummy bandstand, Bruno continues to map undiscovered territory like an artistic cartographer, even as the road behind erodes. Spare, lush, underplayed, riveting, Bruno's style is a combination of prodigious technique and a sly commentary on country evolution and interpretation, delivered with an elegance that bends both listener expectation and recognized boundaries. A chance to hear his guitar speak out is something to covet, to savor. He still does some session jobs, but is heading out to Vegas soon for more steady work; for Bruno, all that matters is playing. "When it becomes a job, it's time to quit. This is supposed to be fun."

Merle Haggard has never put much creative stock in fun, but to hear him tell it on the new *Haggard Like Never Before*, he is having less than ever on the road. The title track addresses the predicament of being forced to tour at age 67, and while Hag's vocals and phrasing are sublime, the tune is merely another stuck-on-the-damn-bus ramble, paling alongside the similarly themed 1979 masterpiece "Footlights." Of course, the album's keynote is "That's the News," his much-analyzed anti-Iraq War tune. A horde of journalists are eager to find the "Fightin' Side of Me" Okie jiggling to the liberal drumbeat: CNN couldn't get him on the air fast enough, resulting in a dull thrust-and-parry between sniggering anchor Anderson Cooper and a mildly amused, close-to-the-vest Hag, while the *Los Angeles Times* trotted out as a hot scoop the notion that Hag's political mind is "not at peace."

To anyone who has been paying attention, though, the perpetually cannabis-enriched iconoclast has always been such a misfit that any ideological tag is irrelevant. More about disgust with the media than "not in our name" wrath, "That's the News" should be interpreted as an attempt to adjust image and fight clear of the terminal indifference the singer faces from country radio. The most revealing aspect of all this is not the controversy or even the music, but the way Haggard still stalks the nation's unconscious mind. At any rate, the inclusion of the straight-ahead flag-waver "Yellow Ribbons" puts the lie to the mini-furor and returns renegade-patriot Hag to precisely where he started.

This album, Haggard's first since he left the punk indie Epitaph's Anti subsidiary, signals quite a bit more about his artistic and psychic condition. The mystery is why, after a long stretch in late-

'90s limbo during which he wrote and recorded hundreds of songs, it took him so long to start his own label. Meanwhile, Haggard has seen longtime muse Bonnie Owens forced into retirement by Alzheimer's, and suffered the deaths of friends Johnny Paycheck and Johnny Cash, doubtless heightening his preference for spending as much time as financially feasible in Northern California isolation — days in his recording studio, and evenings with his some 25-years-younger wife, Theresa, and his latest brood of children.

The album features fine work from guitar great Norm Stephens, Lefty Frizzell's original lead man. A duet with Willie Nelson on Woody Guthrie's "Reno Blues (Philadelphia Lawyer)" is a bit creepy, considering that Hag featured it on a 1968 live album, performed by Bonnie Owens — who forgot most of the lyric. There's an unusual New Orleans-style version of the old-time blues "Garbage Man." And perhaps the most strangely revealing song here is "Lonesome Day," the first overt articulation of Hag's increasingly paranoid UFO/federal-conspiracy/militia pathology. With a jaunty Western-swing arrangement, he lays it out clearly: "When the men in black come kickin' in your door/and guitar-playing outlaws lay spread-eagle on the floor."

It's almost as if Hag's scared of coming clean to the hardcore fans — "Lonesome Day" is passed off as a gag, a half-novelty dance number; "Yellow Ribbons" doesn't have heft enough to be more than a kiss-and-make-up in case "That's the News" seems too far out of line. The rest of the album is made up of rather unconvincing ballads fixated on Theresa. With *Haggard Like Never Before*, he's finally in complete control, but — damn it — is pulling punches for the first time.

MERLE HAGGARD | Haggard Like Never Before | (Hag Records)

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