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cd reviews

Cowboy Music By A Guitar Girl

Steph Pappas Grants "3 Wishes" with Intense Vocals, Driving Guitar, and Seamless Sides

BY TANIA KUPCZAK

As a long-time dyke musician in Burlington and around the region, Steph Pappas is the stuff of legends. So I was eager to get a chance to review her newest album, *3 Wishes* (on her own Guitar Girl label). I have to confess that I'm a sucker for packaging. *3 Wishes* fell into my hands and I was immediately enchanted. I appreciate the printed lyrics and well-chosen photos. And there's nothing like spurs to get my attention.

Any brief conversation with Steph will let you in on the intense conviction with which she lives her life. Hearing 34 minutes of it, when you pop the CD into your player, will convert you to the Steph Pappas Experience if nothing else ever has. It's a ride on the ferris wheel, a drive on a back road, a trip across the lake, a climb up a mountain. Familiar and intimate, the album speaks to some dusty memories we forgot we had.

This is definitely cowboy music, and any brief glance at Steph will tell you she's got a cowboy soul. As I read through the liner notes, I was a little leery of how often the trumpet was featured on many of the songs. However, this album and the talents of trumpeter Jennifer Larsen make one of the best cases that I've ever heard for the horn as a solo instrument with subtlety.

I play this game called "Instant Radio Hit" when I get a new album. I try to pick out the track most

likely to get airplay on the radio. Nearly always, this is an obvious choice. *3 Wishes* had me stumped.

I couldn't decide which one would get the nod because the intelligent arrangement of tunes - beginning with a five-minute instrumental intro on "Somerville Maria" and winding up with the final sweet moments of "Crescent" - speaks of a concept rather than a simple collection of songs. The undeniable thread that moves from track to track is a combination of Steph's remarkable vocals and her deliberate choices of accompanying musicians.

Steph's press package acknowledges the close ties she felt with her collaborators, but I really didn't need to read it to know. There's cohesiveness in the recordings that can only come from the kind of musical relationships that move beyond the studio. The movement from melancholy ballads to rockin' guitar-driven songs is effortless, because everyone seems to understand Steph's vision and subtle story-telling.

It's this particular feeling of personal investment that drew me to put to *3 Wishes* on endless repeat on my stereo. My personal highlights include "Ferris Wheel," a piece about a watershed realization at the Tunbridge Fair. It's a bittersweet song about release, and as Steph croons her way through a couple of refrains of "Man, what letting go feels like..." I feel like I've been let on the universal carnival ride of moving on.

I found myself stomping my

feet at my desk during "Vintage Pappas," while Steph displayed her mean harmonica skills. Then there's "Val," the tale of a girl who knew exactly who she wanted to be. Accompanied by some of the best guitar and violin playing on the album, we witness a woman who's living out her fantasy of driving a garbage truck and dancing with girls. I can't help nodding my head in agreement when Val says, "I feel like the grandest, coolest boy in this man's world." She's a hard-won success story, like Steph herself.

I'm left wondering, though, exactly what Steph's 3 wishes are. Knowing her solid politics, I'm guessing they're something noble. But if she hoped for a beautifully crafted album, she's received her wish. Having spent some time with *3 Wishes*, it's absolutely clear Steph Pappas is far more worthy of sporting a cowboy hat than Madonna.

If you want to hear Steph Pappas play some tunes from *3 Wishes*, come to the release party at 135 Pearl, Saturday July 13th at 7:30 p.m. It's \$5 to get in but Steph promises no one will be turned away. ▼

Tania Kupczak plays banjo - and listens to cowboy music - in Jericho.

Men in Love and Loss

Mark Weigle Plays Out and Proud Country-Folk Music

BY TIM EVANS

It is rare to find a gay male musician who is open and forthright about who he is. Sadly, so many musicians and actors feel they must dodge, hide and hint at their sexuality when they could do much more of a service by being honest.

Californian singer/songwriter Mark Weigle is one of the courageous few to sing about same-sex love, loss and joy among men. His three CDs, including the most recent release, *Out of the Loop* are testimony to all the emotions that two men in love go through. Add to that commentary on coming out of the closet, body image and making a difference and you have a good idea of what Weigle is all about.

Mark started playing music early. At the age of five he played piano and later sang in school choruses. The influence of country music was all around; his parents and brothers listened to Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson. His sisters turned him on to the early 70's country rock of Dan Fogelberg and Jackson Browne. After high school Mark lived in Montana, and not having a piano available bought a guitar and taught himself to play and write his own songs. Those early musical influences spill over to his music today and his CD's, while not being strictly country music, are a happy mix of folk, rock,

and country.

"Have I Told You in the last 5 Minutes..." Opens *Out of the Loop* with a bouncy, country, acoustic guitar hook that would be at home on a Jerry Garcia album. It is a straightforward declaration of love from one man to another. "I Remember" may be the CD's most beautiful and bittersweet song. Russ Gautier's violin playing on this cut is outstanding, adding to it a haunting Appalachian Mountain sound. Its lyrics deal with the loss of friends and loved ones and the inevitability of change:

Gramma's the only one back home / Who really understands / We've both lost a husband now / And so many friends / But it's looking like I might have a lifetime / Still ahead of me / A life I never dreamed I'd see.

"Bears" is a rollicking country tune driven by banjo and tongue-in-cheek lyrics about bears. Lyle Lovett also covered this tune, written by Steven Fromholz, although not with same slyness that Weigle does.

This is a CD of mostly country-folk tunes, but one standout tune "Love Your Body" is a major departure from the rest. Mark explains the title "Out of the Loop" comes from being "fed up with the hype and who's hipper." "The 'gaystream' seems particularly to hinge their identity on being the latest fashion. I am

so happy to just be doing my thing, being real with myself." "Love Your Body" deals directly with this subject and has a trance-like, electronic sound. The lyrics deal with loving yourself the way you are and not falling into the trap of plastic surgery, drugs, or body enhancement to find happiness: "My brother you are not your muscles, tattoos, piercings, liposuction or collagen injection." Mark's friend, singer Lonnie Tuck from San Francisco, lends a distinct R&B vocal to the track. "Love your body like it is" goes the refrain over and over, sending forth a good positive message backed by a funky dance beat.

Anyone looking for folksy, country music by an out, gay male singer this CD is for you. "I'm inspired by stories that are new, that haven't been told in a song before," says Mark. "There are a lot of gay experiences that haven't been told."

Mark Weigle has made three very consistent CDs of gay affirming, thoughtful and melodic songs. He tours mostly in the west and southwest region of the country, playing bars, Bear events, pride and folk festivals. *Out of the Loop* is available at Burlington's Peace and Justice store or get it through Mark's website: www.markweigle.com. ▼

Tim Evans listens to "Bears" and other countrified folk in Burlington.