

“Where Do Songs Come From?”

Or

“Why These Songs?”

I've never been one to analyze or talk much about the songs I write. So much of it remains a mystery to me even now, as I complete “The Coronavirus Sessions,” my seventh solo CD since working with Julius Margolin for ten years producing labor and anti-Bush folk music and CDs. But I will try here to give you some info about where they came from, and how.

I can tell you that like any writer, I struggle all the time while writing and producing songs. And I go months without writing or even trying to write. But when it happens, the hardest part is getting one to the “starting line”— to that point where you know you are ready to commit it “to tape,” or, in today’s parlance, “to computer,” for “the record.” And over the last few albums, especially on this one, there are songs that have appeared literally in the 24 hours or so before they were committed to computer. Among them are “The Fish Always Rots From the Head,” “Donnie Took A Dump All Over Twitter,” and the final song on the album, “One Day You Just Wake Up and You’re Old.” And when I say “appeared,” I mean it. Sometimes they just come out of nowhere, and when that happens, it is always a special experience. Most of the songs I write, and most of the songs on this album, are “one-sitting” efforts... whether it’s two hours, four hours, or more of work, they eventually emerge and other than minor changes, are complete when I walk away from the writing desk and home studio. This is folk music, it ain’t Beethoven.

I am lucky to have always found musicians and singers who understand what I am trying to say and present in my songs, then take my often-unclear and vague direction and add not just their ample abilities, but their hearts, to what they put down. From the core “band” on these songs to my old friends and special guests, I couldn’t be happier with what they have brought to the album. And steering the ship, especially through these uncharted waters, were the steady hands and discriminating ears of Will Russell at Electric Wilburland Studios. Every album has its issues, periods of frustration and hard decisions, but this one seemed smoother to me, even with a four-month break because of the coronavirus shutdown. It gave me the time to write four more songs and complete the album. I don’t have much “in reserve,” though this time, we did leave two songs behind that didn’t seem to fit as well with this collection. Curiously, they were the first two songs I wrote “for” this album, so consider this the best of what I thought I could present. I also chose four songs from other writers that I love and wanted to record, and I’ll tell you more about them below. I include dates just so you can follow, if you want, the path of songs that came to me for this record.

1. **A Song in My Heart (7/11/20)**: When the coronavirus shutdown hit in mid-March, we were making good progress on the album, but were only working on seven songs, and three of them were covers! Like many other people, I was in a bit of shock as the magnitude of the pandemic sunk in, and virtually all my work got cancelled (including two tours of the west coast, May Day and other gigs on the east coast, and a four-week-tour of Australia in October). When we finally were able to resume recording at the end of June, I realized I was a few songs short of an album.... And this one just came one morning. By then, I was doing a few online concerts/musical visits each week with nursing homes, and seeing some of my old friends on TV screens, and it wasn't always easy. What do you do when someone starts crying on a computer screen and you are 50 miles away? We recorded it the next day, and then added Rich DePaolo's and Mary Brett Lorson's harmonies, and it was done.
2. **The Fish Always Rots From the Head (11/2/18)**: My memory of this song is hazy, but I was coming back from five weeks on the road, a month in Australia and then gigs in California on the way home... and the mid-term elections were looming. We had just released my CD "One at a Time," and my disgust at the state of things, and the continued misrule of Donald Trump, bubbled up into this song. I got home on Wednesday night, and sent the guys a demo on Friday night. We were in the studio on Saturday and recorded this all in one day—then added Mary's harmonies and remixed it for the album. Some ominous tones in this song, it sets the stage perfectly for the rest of the CD. This was the first time Doug Robinson, Michael Wellen, Rich DePaolo and I had tracked together in the studio, and it set the standard for the other six songs they play on for the album.
3. **All Used Up (Utah Phillips)**: He remains, twelve years after his death, such a presence in my world and life. His songs speak such basic, universal truths to us about struggle, union, love, and resistance. I've sung this song for years, but a good recording of it eluded me until this album.
4. **My Name is George (7/3/20)**: The protests had been going on for more than a month since George Floyd was killed on camera in broad daylight by police officers. This song is about realizing the difference one's skin color can make, and how little things have changed, even as we can acknowledge the progress we have made. This song features the full ensemble, and they all sound beautiful.
5. **The Lynyrd Skynyrd Band (2/8/20)**: I was chosen for an artist's residency at the author Stetson Kennedy's home/retreat just outside of Jacksonville, Florida, and spent a week there in February, before the pandemic was spreading or even being acknowledged for what it was. I knew I wanted to write two songs, one about Woody Guthrie's time at Stetson's home (see "At Beluthahatchee" below), and a song that would pay tribute to this band. I felt such a kinship with Lynyrd Skynyrd and their music as a teenager, and got to see them twice, in 1976 and 1977, before the plane crash that destroyed the original band. I did my research.... spent hours reading about and watching videos of the band's history, and when I got to Jacksonville, I visited the graves of band members and Ronnie Van Zant's home, which now has landmark status. With the end of my week approaching, and feeling some pressure, I took all I had learned and wrote this story of their beginning, just a bunch of kids who loved rock and roll and dreamed of

making it big, much as I did. “SingTrece” and Mary Brett Lorson on soulful harmonies and Rich DePaolo giving us the guitar solos... and my old friend David Easton on piano!

6. **The Bottle Wins Each Time (12/29/19)**: The basis for this song is a story I watched unfold on Facebook during the Christmas holidays in 2018... a friend was trying to locate the mother of his (adopted) child... it became this song almost one year later to the day. One of the saddest songs I think I’ve written, with some beautiful vocals by Mary, Rich and Doug.
7. **Which Side Are You On? (Florence Reece)**: I’ve sung this labor classic for more than twenty years, but wanted to record a version that would rock... the band laid down a solid groove and Rich cuts loose on multiple solos. Doug and Mike are such a solid rhythm section, they end up on more songs with every album! With David on the organ and Rich on screaming leads in a wild combination, especially in the fade....
8. **Seventy Miles From the Border (Jack Mancor)**: A beautiful song from an Australian musician. I’ve never met Jack, but I know his parents and his dad is a longtime union activist and musician. This song has always grabbed me, and with Sally Taylor’s violin and Mary Brett Lorson’s harmonies, this sad story of a trapped miner emerges.
9. **At Beluthahatchee (2/4/20)**: Written at Beluthahatchee, the home of Stetson Kennedy, crusading journalist who went undercover to help expose the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia and Florida during the late 1940s, and a place Woody Guthrie visited twice, spending more than a month there on one of his last rambles round the country in 1952-53.... the KKK was always to be feared at that time, and the events did occur as depicted here, including the “mock KKK attack” highlighted in the middle section. I wrote this song and “The Lynyrd Skynyrd Band” during my week in this peaceful sanctuary, just before the Covid pandemic hit for real... and performed them for the first time at the concert that Sunday, concluding my week there.
10. **Pass It Along (Scott Cook)**: This was the first song of Scott’s I ever heard and I was instantly sold... We have crossed paths a few times at folk festivals in Australia, and I have such a strong admiration for the beauty of his words and the ease with which he seems to deliver song after great song. Rich added some sweet guitars and he and Mary help make this song “sing.”
11. **Dang Dick-a, Dang Dick-a (7/25/20)**: Some banter in the studio captured by mistake when I hit the “record” button on my phone as we were going over the song, which was still so new I didn’t have all the words written.
12. **Donnie Took A Dump All Over Twitter (7/25/20)**: What is there to say about this one? An easy target, an attempt to get through to “middle America”—and just a good laugh at the idiot boy, one more time. Featuring “The Knobby Knees” singing along with me, both Doug Robinson and Rich DePaolo got their own verses in this one, and Sally Taylor’s fiddle brings it home... we got our Bluegrass on for this one!
13. **One Day You Just Wake Up and You’re Old (9/12/20)**: With each of my last four albums, we get to the end, decisions are made, I always feel the album needs one more song, and somehow it gets written. It has either ended up being the first or last song on the album, which by then has been assembled, sequenced and in my head for months. This album needed

a softer landing than “Donnie,” as much as I love what we did with that song. In the very last week, as we were preparing the final mixes and mastering for production, this came on the morning of the final session. I’d spent hours trying to find it the night before, gone to bed discouraged, and almost ready to accept that the album was finished and good enough without the extra song I thought it needed. I don’t know or remember much of how it came out the next morning, but it’s rooted in another uncertain time, and it was easy to tell this story once it got underway. By early afternoon, in the studio, we were recording it, and it took a while to find the right voice for this one. Will Russell helped immensely in guiding it, and we both knew we were finishing up another project with something special. We finished less than 12 hours after it was created, and it was a fitting way to end the album.

Here are links to videos for four of the songs, there will be more and will all be on my website, www.georgemann.org:

CV SESSIONS VIDEOS:

A Song in My Heart:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTAgkzRibHI>

The Fish Always Rots from the Head:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-J6qKN-fAk>

My Name is George:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUKJgQPI_BM

Which Side Are You On?”:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_oXTPJpzdo&t=98s

Thanks! George Mann, October 2020