



JAMES LEE STANLEY: The Apocaloptimist

By Frank Kocher, January 2015

Veteran folk singer/songwriter James Lee Stanley has released over two dozen albums over a four-decade-long career, including solo discs and collaborations with John Batdorf, Cliff Eberhardt, former Monkee Peter Tork, and Michael Smith. The music varies from reworked acoustic covers (*All Wood and Stones*, *All Wood and Doors*) to well-crafted soft harmony rock, often with a protest-song spin, like his excellent 2011 *Backstage at the Resurrection*. He is back with more of the same in *The Apocaloptimist*.

For this project, Stanley wrote all of the 11 originals – produced, arranged, and did all of the lead singing as well as playing guitars, keyboards, and percussion. Also contributing on the disc are guitarists Laurence Juber (Wings), Paul Barrere (Little Feat), harp master Corky Seigel, and Stephen Bishop on backing vocals, among others. It is set up as a chronicle with Stanley as the title character, broken into three acts with an intermission and epilogue, and lyrics on Stanley’s website-but fortunately, this disc isn’t weighed down by its concept.

The opener, “Living the Party Life,” finds Stanley with his protest pencil out, with hard-to-disagree lines like “Borders disappear/ No one reads the printed page/ Talking heads all day/ Kim and Kourtney everywhere.” Built on a verse guitar hook originally heard in Fleetwood Mac’s single “Seven Wonders,” the tune establishes out of the gate that Stanley is going to carve up the status quo that is failing society so miserably. “Last Call” is a memorable folk ballad with tasty acoustic guitar figures and echoing background vocals for an ethereal vibe that leads into a cover of the Beatles’ “Drive My Car,” which is another winner. This highlight melds an acoustic treatment of the familiar song with a 12-string lick from “Daytripper,” a nice Seigel harp solo, snare shots, and harmonies, all arranged beautifully.

Stanley makes an autobiographical statement with “Here We Have My Father,” a touching song about his family, captured in lyrics like “Here we have my mother, in Texas plains somewhere/ Gone but not forgotten, she’s here in every prayer.” “Highway 23” is infectious and catchy, a breezy soft rocker that floats on 12-string licks and some ace playing by Juber. Stanley does a good job on the lighthearted “When You Get Right Down to It,” singing from the viewpoint of an unworried stoner who isn’t inclined to sweat the existential details, written on the occasion of former Monkee Davy Jones’ 2012 passing, “Life’s a Halloween party, it’s some kind of costume ball.”

Toward the end of the album’s musical and lyrical look at a life, “Any Other Way” is a simple, close-harmony love song that works well, and “The Twinkle in Your Eye” follows through with a timely message about a life-long love connection that even Alzheimer’s disease can’t entirely extinguish. Stanley’s songs are deeply personal and observational with sharp insight; they deliver their ideas on the wings of smooth, comfortable, organic melodies. On *The Apocaloptimist*, it is clearly a winning formula.