

Chuck Brodsky's Tulips for Lunch

Tony Peyser's "Blue State Jukebox" Review -- February, 2006 Edition

I was deleting some old emails recently and found the one I wrote last year to the big enchiladas at BuzzFlash about launching this column. I gave them some music reviewing clips and I'm pleased to say

I've made good on my central promise: sharing with readers musical artists who have real talent, singular perspectives on what's going on in the world and are currently flying under the pop music radar.

Chuck Brodsky meets all those requirements.

Tulips For Lunch is the seventh album by this singer-songwriter who's based in Asheville, North Carolina. He's made quite a reputation for writing songs about baseball, so much so that some of his CDs are enshrined at the Hall Of Fame in Cooperstown. While there are tracks here on that topic, Brodsky covers a lot of other ground as well in a manner that's dependably comical, touching and unforgettable. There's a sweet rasp in his voice that recalls the pre-Fatwah Cat Stevens. It's a cliché to say someone's songs are like short stories but these truly are and Brodsky has a quiet knack for getting every iota of your undivided attention.

"Curse Of The Billy Goat" is Brodsky's breezy account of how The Chicago Cubs (allegedly) wound up being cursed. After loyal fan "Billy Goat" Bill Sianus got thrown of the 1945 World Series for bringing in his pet goat, he stood out on Waveland Avenue, raised his hands and vowed evil things on his now formerly beloved Cubbies. There's a lightness to the narrative up to this point but Brodsky becomes appropriately ominous and the chords suddenly sound a little darker: "Just then a cloud passed over/From the lake a chilly wind/Anybody within earshot/Woulda had goosebumps on their skin/The skeptics say baloney/The poets make up

verse/60 some years later/They still blame it on the curse." Until the Cubs turn things around like the once cursed Red Sox did, this song will never go out of fashion. (Far be it from me to suggest song topics to someone of Brodsky's stature but maybe a tune about "The Seinfeld Curse" is in order. George, Elaine and Kramer will dismiss it as non-existent but all their solo TV sitcom efforts seem as blighted as a certain baseball team from The Windy City.)

The other baseball song here is far more somber but in keeping with Brodsky's penchant for finding unusual --- damn near unbelievable --- tales related to our great American pastime. Some previous compositions include ones about catcher Moe Berg who was a spy, Eddie Klepp, the only white guy who played in The Negro Leagues and the day Dock Ellis pitched a no-hitter on LSD. Anyway, the title alone here gives you plenty of hints: "Death Row All-Stars." Almost a 100 years ago, there were prison inmates awaiting execution who became a team. Brodsky digs deep into the infield dirt and fields some real gems about what must have been going on in these fellow's minds: "Practice in the prison yard/Concrete diamond, pocked and scarred/I only lived to crush that ball/Somewhere far beyond the walls/To places I won't ever see/Go on ball, you go for me/Give those lawmen all the drop/Keep on rolling, never stop." Every home run for those teammates who called prison home was like a message in a bottle that they hoped someone someday would notice and remember. Lucky for them, they have a sympathetic chronicler in Brodsky.

Many women (including my wife) often wonder why men wind up all weepy at movies like "Field Of Dreams" when sons play catch with their dads. I've always argued that sports movies are guy versions of chick flicks. Brodsky will surely receive a similar teary response here from a heap of guys with "The Point." It maps the growth of a dad and son's relationship over years of playing ping-pong. The lesson is that life --- and sports --- is ultimately about playing, not winning. This realization is rendered with such sweetness and clarity that I think this track alone will help sell a bunch of Brodsky's CDs in June in time for Father's Day.

The 2003 Cuba Gooding movie "Radio" was based on a magazine article about a mentally disabled man who became a mascot for a high school football team. The producers of the film knew Brodsky had written a song about this same fellow and liked it so much that a) they used part of the song in the movie and b) gave Brodsky a walk-on. A like-minded individual is also front and center in "The Man Who Blew Kisses" and a line from it gives the album its title. You don't have to have a child with a disability to be moved by this song. Because I do, it moved me that much more. One of the hardest things about raising children who are different is always going out in the world knowing (as my friend Josh eloquently put it) that you're "the other."

Brodsky taps into this and his song about this gentle soul is his way of letting people who are different know they're welcome out in the world: "The man who blew kisses, blew them at me/It tickled my heart & it buckled my knee/It made my voice crack & it righted all wrongs/I blew kisses back at the end of the songs."

At this point, the songs I've mentioned have more than enough power and substance to make anybody go out and purchase this album. But I have to mention two other tracks.

While most of the CD has a folk feel to it, "Two Left Feet" definitely steps a foot forward with a country flair. As the fiddle plays, the song seems to have a life of its own as it spins around the dance floor with grace and ease. The late, great writer and radio show host Jean Shepherd would have appreciated this saga of a man at a dance with one very specific objective, only to find that he was destined to literally stumble upon another. "Two Left Feet" is about finding what you're not looking for and is as endearing a description of love blossoming that I can remember hearing in ages. As Brodsky does on several songs here, the last lines provide a new perspective on everything that's taken place. But I wouldn't dream of telling you and spoiling the surprise.

Finally, when Brodsky got in touch with me and asked me to listen to his album, all he said was he thought I'd like a song called "Liar, Liar, Pants On Fire." (He is, by the way, a self-avowed BuzzFlash fan.) Well, I really can't review anything that doesn't have something political on it and this is a sing-along corker: "Liar liar, pants on fire/Preaching only to the choir/Photo op in front of the steeple/How did you manage to fool these people?" Brodsky never lets his anger get in the way of his message and sneaks in a wonderful concluding visual with these lines: "Talk the lingo, dress the part/Even put your hand on your heart/Bomber jacket, emperor's clothes/You can't even reach the end of your nose." That dancer may have had two left feet but Brodsky here gets everything right.

One last thing: when I was trying to sell The Blue State Jukebox to BuzzFlash, one of the clips I provided was about a 2004 release called Color Came One Day . And that album just happens to have been made by a fellow named Chuck Brodsky.

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Tony Peyser writes political poems every day for BuzzFlash and draws editorial cartoons twice weekly. His new music column, The Blue State Jukebox, is now a monthly feature for BuzzFlash. Mr. Peyser (who loves referring to himself in the third person) is shamelessly using BuzzFlash as a springboard to help him land his dream job: becoming the new Washington Bureau Chief for Talon News.