

IN THE WOODS AND OFF THE GRID

BORIS McCUTCHEON

by Ross Burns

As a child, Boris McCutcheon used to disappear into the woods. The time among the trees helped him find order and a reason to exist. It was his refuge. Considering McCutcheon's existential curiosity, it comes as no surprise he went off to college in Vermont to be a writer. Like many students, he didn't stay on his chosen path, but he is an extraordinary writer – of songs. McCutcheon's narrative songs are as intriguing and compelling as the best prose.

In a way, McCutcheon never came out of the woods. The connection he made with nature at a young age always works its way into his music. "I can't ignore the earth when I write songs. I can't help it. It's not planned. It's something that just happens," says McCutcheon.

One of his greatest skills is his ability to use that connection as inspiration, but without sounding earthy. His songs are genuine, never contrived, and damn good – every one of them. McCutcheon's recordings couldn't get a bad review. Even if his style of roots-rock isn't your thing, you couldn't argue the integrity and consistency of his songwriting.

In 2000, McCutcheon released his debut, *Mother Ditch*, and no one can describe the record better than the man who made it – "eclectic roots music with tuba, circus sounding waltzes and scratch 'n' sniff lyrics." *When We Were Big*, which he recorded with his band, The Salt Licks, followed in 2003. Frogville Records, the independent label in Santa Fe, released Boris and the Saltlicks' *Cactusman Versus the Blue Demon* in 2006.

Whether he's rocking on songs like "Clumsy Kiss" and "Fine Suede" from *When We Were Big*, or spinning a soulful yarn on *Cactusman's* "Pilgrim," all his songs have rich instrumental arrangements and McCutcheon's throaty voice, which somehow manages to be gruff and soothing at the same time. His music is frequently described as rootsy, but his sound is unique and original. McCutcheon refers to it as country blues, New Mexican hillbilly and desert folkcore.

Yes, McCutcheon writes rich, wonderful songs, is a skilled musician and has a voice like no one else, but the music business doesn't always value talent like it should.

McCutcheon bounced around the map for years trying to make things happen in big-market cities.

"I moved back to Boston for four years and played the music game. I had a manager and tried knocking on all the doors you're supposed to knock on. I played in Nashville a bit. Other musicians would always fill my shows. I earned a lot of respect in the scene there, but it never really blossomed until I sent my music over to Europe," says McCutcheon.

Isn't that always the case – big in Europe, but underappreciated this side of the pond.

Odd jobs have always been part and parcel for musicians, but some of the gigs McCutcheon has had are great fodder for songs. In Boston he was responsible for turning on and maintaining the irrigation systems on the Boston Common and Commonwealth Avenue. "It was a terrible job. A lot of homeless people hated me because I got them wet."

He has baled hay and swept chimneys. He's been a carpenter and a deckhand. And he's always been a farmer. He even went to the University of California in Santa Cruz to be a better farmer. To avoid spending



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most of his time writing songs instead of studying – like he did in Vermont – McCutcheon left his guitar at home when he moved to Santa Cruz. The ploy didn't work. He ended up borrowing guitars from friends until he sent for his own. For McCutcheon, music and working the land go hand-in-hand, and he says his time in California had a profound effect on his music.

McCutcheon moved back to New Mexico in 2004, and it suits him. He's happy living off the grid in the tiny town of Ojo Sarco. "My wife, daughter and I live in a house that resembles Yoda's house, except with a lot more windows. We have an orchard and some turkeys and chickens."

Living off the grid in a small town that few people have ever heard of isn't a sign that McCutcheon's career as a musician is winding down. He's still skeptical of the industry in general, but he's working on a new record and he has caught the attention of some movie executives who would like to use some of his new songs in a film.

McCutcheon's life-long affinity for the earth would wind up in his songs no matter where he lived, but now that he's found his place here in New Mexico, he'll likely improve on perfection. ♥

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