

DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE.... 31 MAY 2014

Low banked clouds and cool mornings beg a sweatshirt or long-sleeved pullover. By afternoon a t-shirt will do. Back home a week now since Edith picked me up, jet-lag in retreat, each new day brings sharper focus, and I feel more like getting on with the tasks at hand, with the summer. With a new CD to promote, a book to write, a garden to weed and water, a fabled river to swim in, once again I've returned with a head full of ideas.

Once I thought of my travels as some sort of investment that would pay off down the road. And I suppose it has, though there's many a slip between youthful assumptions and how a life tends to play out over the years. We have our narratives, each and every one of us, and we cling to them and keep them around, like clothes that no longer quite fit: the romantic exceptional-ism and entitlements we have come to expect from the artistic life. Poor coin, but boosted to an elevated status we assign to ourselves—if only to justify empty pockets.

Is it because in our hearts we know and believe that art broadly conceived—the work of poets, painters, potters, performers, playwrights, novelists, architects, Etc.—to be equally important to human life as religion? As bread on the table? Is this not a thankless pursuit? “Ain't no money in poverty, that's what makes the poet free,” wrote Guy Clark, adding “I've had all the freedom I can stand.”

Wrecks Bell, who runs the Old Quarter Acoustic Café down in Galveston, has seen a lot of singers and guitar-slingers come through his door the past seventeen years. He tells me that of all these people, the only one getting by without a day job is Ray Wylie Hubbard. One might think that Texas, a state known, and partly defined by its music, would provide better. Austin, the capitol city, is touted as the “Live Music Capitol of the World.” That's a sweeping statement for a town where paying gigs are scarce as rain. But Texans are known for hyperbole, which they generally call by another name: Bullshit.

While the particulars may differ, the situation is much the same in Tennessee, where the state capitol, Nashville is known as it has been for years, as “Music City USA.” You never could get a decent-paying gig there, where master quality musicians routinely work for fifty-bucks a night. One thing you could do once, back when I first went to Nashville, was avail yourself of the open doors. There weren't so many gate keepers around, and newcomers were welcomed. You could get an appointment with almost anyone to pitch your songs. Not only is this not true anymore, but since the advent of the Internet revolution, the whole market system has collapsed. What's left is closely guarded. Still, hopeful songwriters move there every day.

I wouldn't care to weigh in on—let alone wade into—any Austin-versus-Nashville controversy. One appears to be hipper than thou; the other doesn't appear to care. The hip element in Nashville seems to have found a home across the Cumberland River in East Nashville, where people profess to scorn Music Row and all that it stands for. While I see a lot of foolishness in all this, one thing I think is worth remarking: I believe the work ethic is stronger in Tennessee, at least as pertains to the music business. I don't know if Texans have more fun, but they certainly devote more time to the pursuit of it.

A few artists manage to work Texas and Tennessee with equal aplomb. Given to understatement, Gary Nicholson is Texan to the bone, but has crafted a string of Nashville hits over the years that would do any songwriter proud. My neighbor Hans-Ruedi and I went down to catch his show at the Dolder 2 in Feuerthalen last Wednesday. Gary played songs covered by artists from George Jones to George Strait, the Judds, and more. For his second set he reappeared as his alter ego, Whitey Johnson, a dapper bluesman in a white suit with red tie and three-pointed red kerchief in the lapel pocket. Whitey began his set, and then feigning a coughing attack, called for a drink of whiskey. Tom Luley the proprietor came forth with a bottle and a glass. He poured Whitey a drink. "You can just leave it here," he said, indicating the bottle. Whitey rocked the house, finishing up with three encores.

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Over two years in the making, *Gulf Coast Tales*, the new CD is out now. Recorded and produced in Elgin with Lew Andre Mathews and my Texas band-mates, this is a collection of songs, evocations of the people and the land from Biloxi to Corpus Christi, with the epicenter at Galveston. If you happen to have grown up along the Gulf Coast, it will never leave you. And even if you leave and make your home far from the sea, you may come to suspect—as I have—that you will forever carry a salty imprint on your soul. Available through My Texas Music.com, it features a lovely cover, a hand carved linoleum print of a ship by Nashville artist, Julie Sola. I am looking to arrange European distribution through Brambus Records, Switzerland.

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