

DAVID OLNEY



BIOGRAPHY

By Tommy Womack

“I think of things in a theatrical way,” David Olney says, speaking of his new project, DAVID OLNEY PRESENTS: FILM NOIR, a five-song thematic mini-album. The first in a projected series, the EP comes out May 24th on Deadbeet Records.

“This record is kind of ‘50s/’60s detective music. There’s a certain darkness without being bleak,” says Olney. There is the smoky 3 AM jazz of “Frank is Gone” and “Blue Moon Hotel”, peopled with characters who have to disappear in a hurry, the dry-humored mugger’s anthem “\$20 Serenade” that will have your toe tapping even as the robber takes your shoes, and there is enough love lost in “The Blues Don’t Care” and “Sunset On Sunset Boulevard” to fill an all-night diner full of broken hearts.

By turns ferocious and tender, dry-witted and dead serious, with a foot placed in Townes Van Zandt and another in Hoagy Carmichael, David Olney is a showman, a spoken-word artist, a walking songbook full of characters he inhabits with zeal, and the only man who has ever written a song about the Titanic from the perspective of the iceberg.

By the time I knew who David Olney was – 7 or 8 years ago – he was already a legendary performer and getting his due, to an extent. (Emmylou Harris had just had a hit with one of his tunes.) One problem. The industry tag on his head read “singer-songwriter,” with all the delicate save-the-whales insinuations associated with having that brand on your hide. I wasn’t interested, and it was my loss.

Okay, he sings, he writes songs. You’ve got him on a technicality. Until you go see him. Until you see a man with a fedora brim pushing into the future, eschewing a stool for the sake of standing tall, gripping his guitar and, with his electric gaze, making eye contact with the entire room at once.

“I started as a folk singer,” he explains, recounting his beginnings in the ‘60s in his home state of Rhode Island, “then I started a band and found I really enjoyed front-man stuff. My model was James Brown.” (How many singer-songwriters can say that?) “I like a fast-paced show, songs coming at you fast. The first 20 minutes of a show. That’s where you get ‘em or you don’t.”

That band he started was David Olney and the X-Rays, formed after his move to Nashville and all the Yankee adjustments that go with it. Much worthwhile vinyl was made of that band and also David’s late-‘80s as a solo artist on Rounder Records. He still retains a loyal following of fans from that era who have grown with him and continue taking the journey with him to see where he goes next.

At one point, Olney found himself onstage spinning yarns into soliloquy verses that he would refine over time, until they grew into set pieces themselves. The incendiary “Kubla Khan” crashes into “Way Down Deep”, and his brilliant elegy on Socrates’ last party segues into “Sweet Poison.” My personal favorite is an authentic and rowdy World War One infantry marching song that intros into “1917”, a song of two lovers with the line “Tonight, the war is over.”

Cultivating an online community for several years, David streamcasts live and unedited every Tuesday on uStream.tv with "Hear & Now" video shorts featuring live performance, the story-behind-a-song, and some humor in addition to posting videos of his stellar interpretations of classic poetry on YouTube. His seven-part video post of the complete “Rime Of The Ancient Mariner” shines with brilliant simplicity.

And what’s next up in this series of DAVID OLNEY PRESENTS records?

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“I’m working on one that kind of revolves around both F. Scott and Zelda, and Bonnie and Clyde, people hurtling to their destruction.” David says, “That kind of stuff appeals to me. You pick up a thread and just keep following it and see where it leads you. I enjoy that kind of work.”

You can find a David Olney gig easily enough, if you want to. He spends a lot of time on the road (often in the company of ace guitarist Sergio Webb), going from coffee houses, to European festivals, to clubs and house concerts. David relishes the varied venues his job takes him to.

“To me, it’s bogus that art can only be in museums. The real art is what goes on when people don’t expect it. My idea of a good time is getting in front of an audience and giving them more than they expected. That makes it a worthwhile, fulfilling thing to me.”

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