

Folks:

I know that only a few of you have ever been involved with the week-to-week on the road grind that many of our favored musicians live in pursuit of their lives in music.

This month I'm passing on some a few of Dana Robinson's "Road Essays." As some of you will recall, Dana played a gig at the 3RFS Coffee house on October 10th. Although coffee house attendance is always lower than I'd like, Dana's performance - to say the least - bowled me over. I've thoroughly enjoyed his albums as well as one featuring Dana and his wife Susan - CDs that are a favored part of my folk music collection. [Check out the web site at <http://www.robinsongs.com/>]

One of the essays I'm reprinting talks about his "Native Soil" Album, A New Guitar And A Broke Down Fiddle and the last about his tour through the Palouse and Columbia Plateaus. In the traditions of Heidi Muller's "Good Roads" and Bob Gibson's "Come for to Sing" songs. Songs, essays and poems are in the tradition of the troubadour in these modern times as they were in days of Olde. Check out the rest of these essays on Dana and Susan's web page.

I've not found a detailed BIO on the Internet, but the following is the 50 words I did find. "West coast raised - Appalachian transplant, Dana Robinson brings roots and tradition to contemporary songwriting. With an eye for vivid detail, Dana sings stories of the American landscape. A raconteur/road warrior with a rich voice, hot guitar and fiddle playing,

Dana's living example sums up the American troubadours experience." So, read on and enjoy!

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Available next month, for sure, the real John and Micki Perry Story - It seems the folks at Victory Review 'sorta' mixed thing up, so John said he give us all the straight scoop.

Also, checkout a fine traditional bluegrass album called "Kentucky Towns" by Tim Flannery [<http://timflannery.com/www.timflannery.com/index.html>]. More about Tim and his music in the coming months.

In coming months you can look forward to a review of Full Fontal Folks albums by me, doc Babad and with a little bit of luck, some tales from PK Dyer on why he switched to being a bluesman.

Feed back folks would be nice - it's all too quiet on the North Richland front.

Send comments, errata, articles or reviews to hbabad@owt.com.

November 2003 - A New Guitar And A Broke Down Fiddle
Saturday, November 22

Today, the Iowa fog hovers from horizon to horizon. Barn roofs disappear into the grey sky, and distant water towers seem to float like hot air balloons. Hawks hunt from their perch on barbed wire fence between the road and fields. It's November and the corn stubble is newly turned under the earth, soon to be covered with a predicted first snow. Tonight we play the

last gig of our fall tour, after which, we begin the drive fourteen hours home in a southeast line to Asheville.

One enduring image of this tour were the couple of days spent holed up in [Lava Hot Springs](#), Idaho. Lava Hot Springs is a ramshackle resort town past its 1920's heyday where people came for cures in the mineral waters. The town closes up for the winter leaving only a skeleton of businesses offering the basics. When our hotel clerk found out we were musicians she became excited and suggested a CD swap for two passes to the hot springs. It was a good swap as we soon found that the springs were in fact, incredible: five deep, gravel bottomed pools, and hot as the dickens. That night, a freight train screeched through the cold, thin mountain air above, the moon was faintly visible through the shifting steam rising from the hot springs pool. This was Idaho.

A couple of days later in Laramie I had an accident with my handmade Richard Varnes guitar. While unpacking it from the van, it slipped and hit the sidewalk within its soft-shell case. My old friend of 22 years; companion to Carnegie Hall, hitchhiking trips across the country and busking in Europe in my twenties, and origin of all of my songs, shattered. The past two weeks of dry cold had made the wood vulnerable and brittle, so when it hit, it was as if a button was pressed and the wood cellulose simply let go.



Strangely enough, three days earlier at the [Old Boise Guitar Company](#), I had been perusing through, and casually playing Johnny's superb selection of guitars. That afternoon in Laramie, I remembered a Martin I liked. I never thought I'd actually buy it, but before I knew it, I was on the phone telling Johnny to ship it overnight to meet me in Omaha. So there - I never thought I'd own a Martin. The sound of a mahogany body after listening to rosewood for so many years is taking some getting used to. But she's roadworthy, stands up well under my fingers, and cuts a fine chord.

The next couple of days we spent near Winona, Minnesota visiting friends. Arriving in this corner of southeast Minnesota, we made the transition out of the vast west and into the east. We were still west of the Mississippi, but this area, which also encompasses part of Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin, is known as the "[driftless](#)" region. It is the most westerly finger of eastern hardwood forest, full of steep hills and lush valleys that escaped the advance and retreat of the many glaciers throughout the ages. We felt like we had walked through the mirror; that we had blinked our eyes and had traveled from

Idaho to Vermont in one breath.

Our last week of the tour was spent wholly in Iowa, which was welcome, as there was not as much driving required. We got to know Cedar Rapids. I had my first IMAX experience (Lewis & Clark), spent time in the public library working, found a great walking path, and I picked up an old broken down fiddle that needs rehabilitation and a home.

During this final week, the magnet in our bellies began tugging us homeward. Images of the front porch, kitchen sink, the music room, or my desk began to appear like premonitions. It's always my desire to return home a changed person in one-way or another. I rely upon my observations to move me. I store up images, and I hope that writing about it later will release them. I like to remember what the sunset looked like driving to Davenport that Thursday. We were driving east, and viewing only the effects of the sunset upon the stubble fields on either side of I-80. Lemony light, we agreed, and marveled at it. Minutes later, when the sun had shifted lower, we said, "strawberry light." So it was. - Dana

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Notes From The Road - October 2004

The Palouse and Columbia Plateau

After packing my things in the motel cabin, I filled my travel mug and said farewell to the folks at Escalante Outfitters. I figured it would take two full days drive from southern Utah to central Oregon with an overnight in Idaho. First stop was a visit with my brother and sister who live near Bend on the high desert eastern slope of the

Cascade Mountains.

I remembered a public [hot spring](#) that Sue and I visited last year near Twin Falls and thought that would be the perfect place to end the day. Twelve hours and 730 miles later, I arrived as the sun was going down. To my dismay a sign at the gate said, "Closed on Sunday." Not wanting to accept this reality, and seeing that the gate was open, I cautiously drove in. It appeared that Sunday was their day to clean out the tubs and the large hot spring-fed swimming pool. When I told the proprietor of my drive and my anticipation of a hot soak, he pointed to a tub that was newly clean and filling up and said, "go ahead, be our guest." I emerged a half hour later in a profoundly mellow and satisfied state of mind. I traded them a CD, and everyone was satisfied. I drove an hour further to Mountain Home where I found a Wal-Mart parking lot to camp for the night.

Over the next two weeks I spent more time in the inland Northwest than I ever had previously. I made a circuit through the towns of Kennewick, Spokane, Leavenworth in Washington, and Moscow and McCall in Idaho. The Columbia Plateau is the country that Woody Guthrie wrote about when hired by the Bonneville Power Administration in 1941. His job was to write 30 songs in 30 days about the benefits of electric power being created by the newly built dams on the Columbia River. He wrote 26 songs that month, some of his most famous among them, "Roll on Columbia" (now Washington's state song), "Hard Travelin'" and "Pastures of Plenty," to name a few.

One day, driving from Spokane

west to Leavenworth, I took a detour to see the Grand Coulee Dam. The Grand Coulee was not like I imagined. I had visions of something tall like the Hoover Dam. Rather, it was very broad, and fit perfectly into the landscape spanning the breadth of some ancient flood. Everywhere I went in eastern Washington I beheld the contradiction of desert and orchard. Irrigation is everything here. Think of what a relatively modest river the Colorado is and how many people it feeds throughout the entire southwest. The Columbia is many times larger and seems to offer a limitless supply of water to whoever will exploit it. Slopes of the most barren desert imaginable become a paradise of apple, pear, and prune orchards. Lombardy Poplars sway in the wind and protect their borders like shepherds watch over their precious flocks. Where there is water, there are people growing food.

Near Kennewick where grape vineyards abound, the Snake and Yakima Rivers join the Columbia. On two occasions I drove a lonely route east through the Palouse between Kennewick and Lewiston, Idaho. Through the villages of Waitsburg, Starbuck, Dodge, and Pomeroy I drove, each with its own grain elevator, shut down gas station, farm supply, and greasy spoon diner. This is some of the richest farmland in the world, created by two and a half million years worth of fertile dust blown in from the southwest that settled a hundred feet deep in places to create what is now the Palouse. Makes you want to grow food and milk a cow just looking at it.

After my concert in Moscow, Idaho, the pull of driving east toward home began to take a

grip. Next came concerts in Helena, then a long drive across Montana and south through Wyoming to Laramie, and a final house concert in Lyons, Colorado. With the Lyons gig behind me there was nothing keeping me from home but distance. I didn't even spend the night, just got in the van and drove east toward Kansas. My companion all the way to North Carolina was the world-series games on the AM radio. I'd scan the dial and while one signal faded there was always another ESPN broadcast to take its place. Hearing those games, I revisited my childhood of holding the transistor radio to my ear and listening to Giants games under the covers at night when I should have been sleeping. Baseball is the perfect game to drive long distance with - inning by inning, the miles melted away.

The Palouse

hills of dust
dunes of ancient loam
heave like the ocean

wind and sun break
over serpentine furrows
where tractors plant wheat, lentils,
peas

in Waitsburg I stop for gas
no one's here
use a bank card

behind the store front
a bleak hill rises
of tawny stubble

swayback barn
faded pine from a distant forest
pasted with political slogans

pressed tin and metal roofing
peel off the grain elevator
five stories tall

vineyards of grapes
where King Columbia flows
the Snake, the Yakima

upon the plateau
high desert made lush
with orchards of pear, and apple

lombardy poplars slow the wind
dams every fifty miles
slow the water

Thanks for reading, everybody!
See you! - Dana

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The Songs of Native Soil {Album}

Native Soil is my fifth album in

ten years, and my first full-length recording as a duo with Susan. I have always wanted to make a traditional album, and it is due to the enthusiasm Susan and I have playing together that really made *Native Soil* happen. We had been over to England and Scotland for tours in 2003 and 2004, and the audiences kept asking if we had a recording with our fiddle tunes and traditional songs. So, anticipating our return in 2005 for two tours, audience demand and inner desire conspired to create this new recording. The content of *Native Soil* is a blend of tunes I've known for years, and some that have just recently come to us. Here's a run-down of the songs.



Near everyone has heard **The Cuckoo** in some version or another. Sue had been taking banjo lessons with John Herrmann, and brought this one home one day. Hearing Sue practice it, slow and deliberate, I found potential for a deep groove. I discovered that if I mostly imitated her banjo part with my fiddle there would be more spaces left in-between the beats, creating a better foundation to build the song upon. In order to create some kind of story out of the many verses of lyric available, I chose the ones that in some way deal with the volatile

nature of love and relationships. For the recording, I had wanted to use the West African instruments kora and balaphon on *The Cuckoo*, but found that the Asheville musicians who would have played the parts were studying in Africa. On the eve of our session I picked up my electric guitar and discovered how well it synced right in with the groove and complemented the angst of the lyrics. Add to that River Guerguerian's brilliant cajon box part and we had ourselves a track beyond my expectations!

A fiddler uses three things when learning a tune: the source (be it from printed music, a lesson, or a recording), memory, and the technical ability he possesses. All these things conspire to alter the tune in its transition from one player to another. This version of *Lost Girl* is the casualty of all three. I learned this tune from no particular source (it probably stuck in my head after a session or a festival), and have adjusted my playing as I've heard other versions. As with *Say Darlin' Say*, and *Ernie Carpenter's / Horney Ewe*, this track was recorded live sitting in a circle with John Herrmann on banjo, Meredith McIntosh on bass, Sue on guitar and me on fiddle.

I've been a fan of Eliza Carthy for years, and my favorite recording of hers is her two CD set *Red Rice*. Her version of *Miller & The Lass* I played over and over, delighting in her huge energy and bawdy delivery. This song is meant for a woman's voice and perfect for Sue to sing. The arrangement was the product of much experimenting in rehearsal to find what sounded fun and interesting. Pat Madsen

with brushes on a snare drum and Mike Alexander on acoustic bass created the perfect backdrop for Sue's voice, and it was refreshing to have a track without guitar on it for a change! *Vern's Reel* follows *Miller & the Lass* and was named after Vern Crawford, a delight of a man who lives in Carbondale, Illinois. Vern runs Cousin Andy's Coffeehouse, a concert venue for itinerant songwriters. Sue and I were sitting in his living room casually playing the morning after a show when I made up this reel on the mandolin. We would have forgotten it if Vern had not taken a one-minute video clip of us playing the tune. A few months later Sue played the video clips Vern had downloaded into her computer, and we both went, "hey, that's good, we should play it!"

Originally, a song from Texas, *When First Unto This Country* is an immigrant's tale of unrequited love, horse thievery, jail time, and redemption. It caught my ear years ago when I heard it on a New Lost City Ramblers recording, but I really latched onto it after hearing Jerry Garcia sing it with David Grisman on their *Not For Kids Only* recording. This song was recorded simply with just guitar, vocals, and banjo. Sue's understated banjo playing makes for the perfect accompaniment.

One night during my first UK tour in 2001, at the Davy Lamp Folk Club, I played *East Virginia Blues* near the end of my second set. To my surprise, everybody knew it and started singing along. It was one of those "ah-ha!" moments where I knew I had connected with something. *East Virginia Blues* is one of those archetypal songs about unrequited love that

transcends cultures and generations. Pat Madsen and Mike Alexander provide a steady drive with their drum and bass parts here.

Soon after moving to Massachusetts in 1984, I befriended a trio of old-time musicians, Karen Simon, Carolyn Hooks, and Bob Lovell, and began learning their repertoire. Karen, the fiddle player, insisted that I accompany them on their annual trips to Mt. Airy, North Carolina for the fiddler's convention. On the way down and sometimes on the way back up, we'd stop in at the home of the Hammonds family outside of Marlinton, West Virginia. By that time, Maggie and Sherman had passed on, yet I had the honor of meeting Alene who would fix us all wild greens and beans for supper outside her shack. We would camp in a rickety cabin down the road, and there we'd learn tunes from tapes we had made at the festival. **Red Rocking Chair** was one of those tunes, and I'm transported to that time and place most times I sing this song.

Sue made up *Cider's Dream* while sitting at her office desk with our dog Cider lying by her feet. Old Cider was twitching in his sleep, dreaming like he was chasing something. Sue suggested calling it "Chasing Squirrels." The tune as she wrote it was in the key of G, and with its laid back tempo I thought it sounded more like going for a walk somewhere, perhaps to our favorite pub in town, Jack of the Wood. So for awhile we called it "A Short Walk to the Pub...and Back." It seemed to fit, and we played it out at concerts like that for a while. When it came time to record "Short Walk", we found we had

too many tunes in the key of G, and wondered what this one would sound like in A. We moved it up to A and experimented with putting masking tape across the strings by the bridge to give the banjo and guitar a muted sound. We sped the tempo up a bit, and when it was finished, we found that it had come full circle: it now actually sounded like "Cider's Dream (Chasing Squirrels)."

I was introduced to Dirk Powell's music several years ago, and am always on the lookout for new recordings of his. Dirk is, in a word, brilliant. He is master of many instruments, has a deep understanding of America's musical heritage, and is a vital force in keeping traditional music relevant in today's music scene. His original song **Waterbound** from his 2004 CD *Time Again* is a perfect example of how traditional motifs and timeless images are reinvented into something wholly new. Sue fell so in love with the song that she couldn't listen to the rest of the CD until she learned the song for herself.

Say Darlin' Say I learned from the repertoire of Tommy Jarrell, and has been a standard in my concert sets for years. It's a wonderful song that takes the "Hush Little Darling" song out of the nursery and into everyday, family life. This song also taught me how to sing and fiddle at the same time!

Some folks might recognize **Ain't No Cane** from my 2002 *Avenue of the Saints* CD. *Ain't No Cane* was reinvented from the prison work song, *Ain't No Cane On The Brazos*, that was sung while cutting sugar cane along the Brazos River in Texas. The song has been done by many people

through the years - Bob Dylan, The Band, The Limelighters. The definitive version of it is probably Huddie 'Ledbelly' Leadbetter's, but I picked it up from Harvey Reid on his *Steel Driving Man* CD. My own version is altered quite a bit from the original: different melody and some different lyrics. On *Avenue Of The Saints*, the track is an up-tempo fiddle tune with a full band, but for *Native Soil* we take a slow and stripped-down approach using only two guitars and two voices in a live take. "Hannah" is the name given to the sun; "go down Hannah, don't you rise no more" for me sums up the desperation felt by the prisoners.

When I was first learning this music in the 80's, Karen Simon, Carolyn Hooks, and Bob Lovell would play **Ernie Carpenter's Grandpappy's Favorite** and **The Horney Ewe** as medley. Going to the C chord in the B section of the *Horney Ewe* and singing those "Hey-Ho's!" was always such a joyful thing to do that these tunes stuck with me through the years. I believe they are West Virginia tunes that Karen learned from the playing of Ron Mollineux. The *Horney Ewe* is ultimately Scottish in origin, and refers in fact to the making of whiskey, the "horney ewe" being none other than the whiskey still! The lyric goes, "*plant your corn all in a row, and feed it all to the horney ewe. The horney ewe ain't a very fine sheep, but the rest of the flock is hard to beat. Hey Ho John D. Hosey, Hey Ho!*" All I can surmise is that somewhere along the line, this John D. Hosey is the chap who made the whiskey, and is forevermore the recipient of this toast!

Goin To Cary - This riff came to Sue as we were driving to a gig

at the Six String Music Hall in Cary, North Carolina. She thought she'd make a real tune out of it, but the riff seemed to declare itself finished, and we couldn't get it out of our heads. This is kind of our jam-band piece and we play it with an attitude of fun and indulgence. In the event we get hired to play on some big festival stage with a band backing us, we're going for this one and everybody's gonna be dancing! See you there!