

Sharing the Load: The Dawn, August 7 at RIBCO

Written by Jeff Ignatius
Tuesday, 20 July 2010 05:29



When Sean Ryan recorded his solo debut, *Lonesome Driver Music*, two years ago, his group the Dawn was around, but "I just wasn't ready to take the band I had into the studio," he said.

So he employed some noted local pros -- including drummer Marty Reyhons and guitarist Kerry Tucker, both from Einstein's Sister, and pedal-steel player Tom Pickett Jr. -- in the service of his songs, and the result was an excellent snapshot of a promising young writer and performer in good hands.

The Dawn has now finished *its* debut, and Ryan has clearly assembled a strong crew in the intervening period. Reyhons and Tucker still make contributions, but the self-titled record is anchored by a proper band: singer/songwriter/guitarist Ryan, Pickett, Jordan VanOpdorp on keyboards, Garrin Jost on bass, and Dave Soliz on drums. The band is an essential element, as Ryan's songs universally benefit from rigorous, full arrangements played with flair.



The group will be performing at RIBCO on August 7, and the album will be at Co-op, on iTunes, and at DigStation.com a few weeks prior to the release party, Ryan said. As a bonus at the RIBCO show, he added, the Dawn will play a few songs from Tucker's yet-to-be-released solo record -- on which Ryan performed.

To be sure, the differences between the Ryan's solo CD and the Dawn album aren't radical. As Ryan said, *The Dawn* is still comfortably Americana. "The new songs are a little bit more dense, a little bit more mature, I think," he said. "The one thing I can really tell ... is it just seemed to be

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more in focus. ... I had more of a vision of how I wanted the songs to go," largely from playing them live with the band. He added that he thought he'd improved his singing over the past two years.

All those things are true enough, and there isn't a bum among the album's eight tracks. Ryan has a sturdy, honest voice, and Pickett and VanOpdorp regularly add invaluable color.

That's important early on the record, as *The Dawn's* opening three tracks move at a sleepy pace, inviting a little too much analysis. (I would argue that sequencing is its primary flaw.) While the lovelorn "Tired & Blue" -- "I know you won't be true / When I'm tired and blue" -- is only the album's second track, its soulful horns already provide a welcome variety. Third track "Save Me" in sentiment and sound comes off as a rewrite of Neil Young's "Helpless" -- which isn't in itself a problem, except that there's too much time to note the similarities.

The Dawn picks up after that slow start. The quicker tempo and power-pop textures of "Lonesome Highway" feel natural and correct. The mandolin of "Without You" demonstrates the alchemy that can happen with an unexpected instrumental addition. The roadhouse rock of "In Between" shows the influence of Ryan's relatively new membership in the local roots outfit Jim the Mule, and it suggests it could be a fruitful marriage.

{mp3}dawn-lonesome-highway{/mp3}
The Dawn, "Lonesome Highway"

But the best song on the album might be "Back Home." The expressive tone of the simple lead guitar after the first verse leaps out, but it never returns, and instead the Dawn offers several subtle sonic surprises over the course of the song's three minutes; it never does quite what you expect it to -- right up until its abrupt ending -- and it's invigorating.

Closer "Troubled Mind" is about a friend's suicide, Ryan said, and it returns the album to a more-thoughtful pace, with fiddle from VanOpdorp and banjo from Ryan filling it with warmth and obvious affection. Ryan is a restrained enough songwriter that the song's source is obscured, but I wish I could better discern the lyrics -- a problem of both articulation and the mix.

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{mp3}dawn-troubled-mind{/mp3}

The Dawn, "Troubled Mind"

There's nothing on *The Dawn* that compares to the great, burrowing hook and arena-ready layers and polish of *Lonesome Driver Music's* "Whatever I Have to Do," but overall the new album feels more consistently strong. Ryan has surrounded himself with a stable group of able collaborators who can shoulder the load, and they ensure that the songs themselves don't need to do all the work.

The Dawn will perform on Saturday, August 7, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The show starts at 9 p.m., and the bill also includes the Premium Sellouts. Cover is \$5.

For more information on the Dawn, visit MySpace.com/thedawnmusic.