

## RICKY BYRD

Singer-songwriter-guitarist Ricky Byrd's new CD – which he describes as “one part acoustic soul, one part rock & roll” -- marks quite a departure from his days with Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. Byrd is still rail-thin, still has the haystack of hair and a truckload of attitude, but maturity has served to deepen and expand his talent. Byrd says that the work on his latest project with producer Ray Kennedy “is a natural progression. I went back to the college of musical knowledge, listening to the songs that still, to this day, raise the hair on my arms. Digging deep, trying to find the secret ingredient, studying the craft of songwriting. Now I feel like I've got a pretty cool batch of my own songs and I'm ready to show them to the world.”

*Billboard* described Byrd's last effort, a limited edition live CD called, with typical Byrd-esque humor, “Tough Room...This World”: “For many, Ricky Byrd needs no introduction. For others, a brief step back in time may be needed. After...Byrd parted ways with the Blackhearts (he) found himself collaborating with the likes of Roger Daltrey (and) Ian Hunter. Apparently, others discovered what Jett had known all along: Byrd is one accomplished musician, singer and songwriter.” In fact, Jett and Daltrey (on his solo release “Rocks In The Head”) are among the many artists who have cut covers of Byrd's material – he's had over 45 of his songs recorded by others -- and his music has also been featured on television and in films.

“Tough Room...” was intentionally low-fi (“Our motto was no fixin', little mixin'”), recorded at New York's Bitter End nightclub mainly to satisfy the fans who were asking “Where's the CD?” Accompanied by drummer Simon Kirke (formerly of Bad Company and Free) and Meat Loaf/Utopia bassist Kasim Sulton, Byrd referred to “TRTW” as “hard acoustic...simple and raw,” whereas ASCAP's *Performing Songwriter* column called the result “a fine, rocking performance.”

Byrd honed that performance by taking his act solo for several years on his “No Band, No Headaches” tour. He found “a love of being Acoustic Boy. I have no fear of playing in front of five people, a thousand people, 80,000 people...I've done it. I've played in front of 10,000 people solo acoustic at a racetrack, opening up for an old-school rock & roll band. I put on my purple (expletive deleted) suit and went out there like ‘Here I am! Love me or leave me!’” And, despite the odds, they didn't leave. It helps that Byrd is something of a throwback to the days when performers considered themselves full-on entertainers. His fun-loving personality and between-song patter, combined with killer musicianship, could win over the toughest audience. If Byrd (“The only thing that's chemically dependent about me now is my hair – thank you very much!”) ever detoured from music, he could make a nice living just from his Rat Pack-hits-the-Borscht-Belt stand-up routine.

That's why Byrd isn't concerned about what he calls “the record companies' view that you get to a certain age and you aren't valid anymore. I feel no pressure, because I'm not competing. The freedom of where I am is where it's all about the work; I'm not chasing a carrot any more. I get to do exactly what I want now, and I'm totally psyched.”

Another reason for Byrd's exuberance is his collaboration with producer Ray Kennedy (whose credits include Steve Earle, Lucinda Williams, Nancy Griffith and Ron Sexsmith). Byrd, a big fan of Earle, read the liner notes on “I Feel Alright” to discover who was responsible for the tracks that he loved. “And now,” he recalls, “I'm on a mission!” In Nashville, Byrd tracked down Kennedy, who is partners with Earle in the Twangtrust and the Room & Board recording studio, “and I was on him like a cheap suit, as we say here in New Yawk.” For his part, Kennedy, who “gets approached (by musicians) all the time; I'm used to being bombarded”, thought that Byrd “should be on *The Sopranos*.” They began a correspondence, with the musician sending the producer rough tapes recorded in a friend's bedroom studio. Kennedy liked what he heard, although various projects delayed their getting into the studio. Now, three years after that initial contact, Byrd and Kennedy have finished their labor of love. Kennedy notes that “Ricky has rock & roll pumping through his veins, mixed with Memphis soul. That breeds a fresh, exciting sound, gushing with style. He's one of the greatest singer-songwriters I've ever worked with” – high praise, indeed.

The sessions with Kennedy spawned the masterful product Byrd was looking to create. His soulful “Wide Open” is planned as the centerpiece. The song, which has been covered by British blue-eyed-soul legend Chris Farlowe, has long been a staple pin-drop showstopper in Byrd’s live set. While in the studio, Byrd was joined by Dane Clark, drummer for John Mellencamp; bassist Brad Jones (Marshall Crenshaw, Jill Sobule, Ron Sexsmith) and, on “As Easy as That,” the Memphis Horns. “Wayne Jackson!” Byrd exclaims. “This guy played on everything from (*Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay* to *Respect!*” He adds, “I kept telling Ray that I wanted to wear my influences on my sleeve and say, ‘this is where I come from’. That’s important to me. I wanted this album to have roots without being retro. It’s my slant on all that stuff.” ‘All that stuff’ would have to include Otis Redding, Al Green, Sam Cooke, Rod Stewart and the Faces, the Stones, John Hiatt and Steve Earle, among many others.

Byrd, who grew up in the Bronx and is a New Yorker down to his DNA (“Make sure you mention I’m a diehard Yankee fan!”), also took the opportunity to pay tribute to his hometown with “The Turnstile,” written in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Wondering how he could “express my love for this city without sounding trite”, he sat down on the studio floor in Nashville as the song spilled out. “I combined love for a woman with my love for the city. I couldn’t write a song about 9/11, there are no words to say what I’m thinking. When I sat down and read Ray the lyrics and I got to ‘where can a skyline at sunset look so pretty,’ I totally went to pieces. It was the first time since it happened that I did that, a month later. And when I broke down, I knew that I had told my truth. What more can a songwriter ask for?”

Just as his enduring affection for his birthplace culminated in “The Turnstile”, Byrd believes that his entire career has led up to the making of this album. “I savored every moment, every guitar overdub, every take, every vocal nuance, every little thing that happened,” he says. “I’ve finally learned to embrace the process and let go of the results. It’s like I’m having a big party: I send out the invites, blow up the balloons and crank up the music. We’re gonna wreck the place whether 10 people or 1,000 show up!”

Party’s on, as of now!