



Mike Montrey Weaving Success In Multiple Directions

Mike Montrey is back with a new concept and a CD that was inspired by the thinking of Henry David Thoreau. That's right Thoreau's *Walden* is mentioned as the guideline here when explaining the creation of art for art's sake. Everything in the entertainment industry is labeled with expectations that disfigure any semblance of real expressive freedom. Just look at the charts and you know what I mean. The music has been processed, packaged and slapped into a form-fitted widget that has been proven profitable through corporate marketing and cultural brain washing. Like much of our very existence, it's about constant sales. As the novelist Lewis Hyde said in his 1979 classic, *The Gift: Creativity And The Modern World*: "A work of art is a gift, not a commodity." Thoreau said, "The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of others?"

Mike Montrey utilizes these very words when showcasing his latest two-disc set, *Weaving The Basket*. Recorded live last January at John Noll's Retromedia Studios in Red Bank, the double album features one side full electric and one side more of a mostly acoustic nature. Special guests such as Brett Deptula, Adam Alexander, Jen Nay and harp maniac James Dalton don't hurt the over all feel of this organically grown project either.

Mike is part of a small group that are wising up to economically stressed listeners that pass on more CDs than they buy due to basic survival purchases being first on the list, or just plain saturation in a scene where merch tables call out to passers-by with the same urgent pleas of any third world bazaar. So, Montrey has gone with the "give whatever you can" motto, a system

of operations that seems to be working with many artists now due to putting the decision in the hands of the buyer. Ask a person for \$15 and they might walk away, but give THEM the power to give what they actually want, and you might be surprised how high they will go when they're in control of the bottom line.

Weaving The Basket is spontaneous and dynamic. The standard perfection associated with the recording studio and its unending overdubs are gone and replaced by passionate human interaction and performance. The live audience in the studio probably lent quite a bit of inspiration for this lively and colorful splash of musical celebration but Mike and the crew came up with the means to an end, *Weaving The Basket* rocks.

Selections from the electric set such as "I'm So Confused" feature stone cold grooves ala Chicago and awesome horn arrangements from the days of Tower Of Power or Blood, Sweat and Tears. Building layers and riffs, Montrey sets up the disc in complex musical steps, dodging convention and taking his passages to the next level. "Shadow Of Doubt" mixes old school visions of The Band and The James Gang as the jam plays on. Montrey interjects lyrical Bob Weir/Neil Young shots throughout, stepping in to steer the band into the next odyssey before moving on.

None of the tracks on this disk sound anything alike and it's a refreshing listen to an artists color outside the lines when they feel like it. The organic organ sounds on "Atticus" bring back old Woodstock afternoons at the Pink house and the sing-song beauty of Jen Nays (Juggling Suns) vocals sooth the stress-laden soul. Other cool tunes on this are the arabesque "My Shell,"

a song that features a melodic intro hook that sticks to the listener's brain like crazy glue on that guy's helmet in the commercial.

Kicking with in the pocket drum and sax work, the funky guitars bounce and pop all day long here. This song breathes jam band grand slam. Never boring the listener with unnecessary filler, Montrey spends his arrangements wisely. The horns of Hayden Wright and Adam Garnys follow the old-time religion of Levon Helm's boys. Montrey's voice is gravel good, not too raspy and filled with harmonic choice and inflection. He's in top form here and he knows it.

The band takes it way down for "Wait And See" as Mike cleans up for this mellow sub-ballad. The sounds on this disk are amazing. Noll has his shit together at Retromedia and this live recording is a perfect example of a guy that's put all his eggs in one basket and ain't gonna go hungry. The band bounces along softly, making way for a smooth sax solo, standout sparse and full as the band walks down the riff underneath Montrey's pristine vocal. I also dug the classy launch of "Red" a song that utilizes sweet, offbeat rhythms and dissonant chordal arrangements. The band moves, launching jazz tinged horns that move in and out like a wave on the beach. The middle features the guitar work of Montrey, who resembles the gritty, real style of my favorite axemen, Terry Kath from Chicago. Gone but not forgotten, this brought me back to the glorious '70s.

The acoustic disc offers just as much from a different perspective. To me, Montrey excels in both sides and is able to switch without sounding forced or Americana hokey. And while this acoustic side still features a band, the instrumentation for the most part is accurate and non-electric.

"Rocketships And Basketballs" leads off with its Van Morrison breezy feel. Horns rise in surges as Montrey and crew trip out ala verse inspired by the Boss. The intricate percussion work of Brett Deptula and Adam Alexander pop in and out with class throughout this side.

I'm running short of space but other standouts are "Pull Out The Matches," a song that features an old-time Grateful Dead meets Randy Newman revivalist vibe. Horns bleat above jangling, acoustic guitar runs while pianos blow ragtime fast throughout. Think fast pianos, like on *Family Guy* when the ragtime guy tells a joke and says, "Play me out Johnny!" Seriously, Montrey has a great original vision with his music and it doesn't sound like anything else here.

"Skeleton Key" comes out of the 1970s left side and moving fast. Double time train track rhythms run the metro as Montrey and the rest of the group steam ahead briskly. Horns are mellow and rich and sort of remind me of that cozy Carol King "Jazz Man" phase. The arrangements throughout this two-disc set are well thought out and melodic. Hooks abound and I can't say a negative thing about this.

"The Little Things" features the harmonica work of James Dalton. Dalton's style really brings you back, recreating the mood and feel of a country long gone from this modern world. Together with Montrey, he transports us to the folk-tinged style of a simpler life.

Weaving The Basket has succeeded where many other projects get confused and drop the ball. As Mike says, "We chose this route because we felt it was the best way to convey the true feelings we had about these songs." And I would have to agree with him; these songs are as described with the Thoreau example, intangible items worth more than monetary figures or sales quotas. They are true works of art, gems in the rough that have been presented to the listener for their own individual interpretation of value. Go find out for yourself.

Catch Mike Montrey at the official CD release live at **The Old Bay** in New Brunswick on **April 30**. For more info, head over to the website at mikemontrey.com.

