

THE NOISE:

Interview and Review: Bird Mancini: *Hesitation & Emancipation*

By Edward Morneau

NOISE: The following is a playful tug of war between a writer who wants to explore big-ass motifs of musical history, influences, defining moments, time and endurance, philosophy and culture; and Bird Mancini— two gifted musicians and songwriters, notoriously private, devoted to each other as partners, writers and performers. The first thing I learned was how hesitant they were to bring forth the larger statements that intrigue me but make them self-conscious. True modesty always circumnavigates around those who keep their muses close and their expressions anchored to the interior drives that produce art. Even though Ruby Bird was slightly more effusive than Billy Carl, they both embrace the mystery that not knowing how some things work was central to the magic of creating music.

Trying to coordinate this piece with the release of their next album [Untitled], I had the privilege of listening to a rough mix of their new tunes. The idea was to see how this new work shapes up as they explore new territory in their musical geography but still reflects on what they have achieved in prior projects.

The longevity of Bird Mancini is something to be admired and has fascinated me for years, especially when so many musicians give up when they do not scale height of their ambitions. For Billy and Ruby, the ambition now begins and ends with the music and not the notoriety and fame, both of which they deserve, both to which they are ambivalent.

In a recent tune, "I Want My own Brian Epstein," they acknowledge how great it would be to have an advocate who not only loved them and their music, but would confront and work within the tawdry business of the music industry:

*I want my own Brian Epstein / Someone who will keep me in line / Like the tracks
on the B & M Line / To take me to my home / I want my own Brian 'Epsteen' /
Someone to look after me...*

Of course, Epstein was an anomaly, the Beatles were lucky, and management like this is rare. But devotion is not, and that is what Bird Mancini is about. Their new CD is no exception.

The opening tune, "Congratulations," explodes like popcorn, using so many progressive motifs that one marvels at the sheer audacity of this Sal Baglio-Billy Carl Mancini composition. Section after section drips with sweet, gorgeous melodies, counter melodies, and the call-and-answer sunshine-inflected chorus sung with slippery abandon by Ruby Bird. There is great reverence in this song for the Beatles, the Beach Boys, the Byrds, the Bangles, and every pop group that ventured into the higher realms of melodic majesty.

In another era, a fairer time, when great pop music was rewarded with favor and acclaim, when people looked to dance and sing to something different, but thirsted for new musical tonic, this would be the thirst-quenching hit of the year in any top forty culture that had the courage to embrace such purity. Yet, despite the jaunty grandeur of its music, the lyrics pursue the themes of disappointment and betrayal, anchoring the narrative in hard-earned adult experience. Pretty much standard fare for meaningful, adult pop.

While the music bounces with certainty and wit, Billy Carl spells out the misgivings of a relationship in tatters: *Your smile was like a miracle/ 'Cause I never saw a trace / Until you walked away from me—Congratulations!* The song's bridge reveals ambiguity: *I hope you get all the things that I wouldn't give you / I hope it's what you wanted in the end ...*, which is immediately put to rest by Ruby's last words: *I hope I never see your face again.* Ahhh—the beautiful bitterness of experience. The best love is tested by clarity, and clearly Bird Mancini takes a bit of joy in pointing out the illusion.

What is not an illusion is the longevity and blue-collar determination of Bird Mancini to remain relevant in an often-irrelevant industry that favors formula over fierce creativity and a sure thing over risk-taking.

The duo began as a blues band (Sky Blue) and was fiercely loyal to its roots and icons—Ruby infusing her impressive range with the soul and the shout of the best female soloists, and Billy often playing with a ferocity and lyricism that recalled Fleetwood Mac's Peter Green and pre-Cream, Eric Clapton. As their writing began to incorporate more musical styles and reflect a particular understanding of Anglo-shaped pop, their albums were laboratories of divergent styles, loaded with melodies, raw performances, wit and a unique drift towards a hybrid blues pop invention. Their new album stretches within this conceit and explores their considerable fascination with melody and form.

“Don't Blink” begins in quasi-blues-metal earnestness, but the jarring key changes, odd chords, and Ruby's tortured vocal is consoled by Billy Carl's shift between Beach Boys and Beatles choral invocations. Two or three listening's and any

doubt about Bird Mancini's complex musical ambitions fades. True to the title, 'don't blink' means that something new is about to shake you out of something old: *Don't blink / The world is turning 'round/ Don't blink / Relax and let it down.*

Song after song explores this dichotomy of R & B and Pop artistry—toying, partitioning, mining, twisting, and sabotaging each other's peculiar musical motifs with an ear to invention and bipartisan musical expressions. Lyrically, both Ruby and Billy Carl explore a dewy-eyed regret and uncertainty about the world around them. For many of us, these are uncertain times, especially politically. Historians have always associated civil unrest with psychological uncertainty, and if this uncertainty does not spill into artistic expression, that culture ceases to exist as a culture of self-reflection.

Some of the very song titles themselves—"Recluse," "It's an Illusion," "Fault Line," "Wake Me Up When It's Over," and, in particular, "It's Already Done"—have a fatalistic view, with some images pretty shocking:

*Big pile of bones where a house once stood/ About a half mile into the wood /
And you know that everything he said was true/ And undeserved pardon is
already waiting for you.*

Yikes! Add to that, Ruby's half snide, half helpless articulation, and one can be certain she is speaking for many of us.

It's hard to nail this band down to anything predictable. I have the bad habit of dismissing songs that begin with overly familiar traditional structures, claiming that I can predict the rest of the song's musical direction. Not these songs. Just when I hear

something familiar, there appears a shift in keys, an odd chord, sweeping harmonies layered and layered again—all in service of a narrative that is as familiar as the permanent ideas of what is great and what is not so great about living. This makes the experience still fresh, and therefore, somehow, gives hope. Or not. There's much ambiguity here, which is *thankfully* tempered by the effort of invoking love to transcend its opposite.

In a post-interview email, Ruby wanted to clarify the dark undertones of some of the tunes on the new CD, even conjuring a possible title for the record:

RUBY: I think maybe “Rusty Dreams” is a good title for this collection of songs after all. Every song has an element of disappointment or confusion in it— in some cases in response to the utterly deranged world we live in now; and in other cases, a response to our own choices. I guess I didn't really want to admit that, but there is a glimmer of hope in nearly every song, if you really think about it. “Wake Me Up When It's Over” is a rather hopeless song about our crazy lives, until you hear the last line: “I'll be around here,” which is repeated again at the end. If we have our way, we'll both still be around here to get through it together. “Wishing Well” is a song of hope, as is “It's Already Done.” “Don't Blink has it, too. But all this is just too intellectual for me. We're visceral people and we play first and foremost by our gut and fly by the seat of our pants. It's how we listen to music and it's how we write it, too.

THE INTERVIEW

NOISE: Readers of The Noise are probably already familiar with much of your origins and background, but new readers would be well-served if you could give a brief

history of your relationship to each other and how that morphed into a musical partnership, what early influences you explored individually, what influences you mutually shared, and how these developed into something that defines your own musical path.

RUBY: We met in Tucson, AZ in 1978 and were competing in a talent show, which Billy and his partner won and I placed last [*laughs all around*]. They won a trophy, 100 dollars, and a free meal, and I won a bottle of champagne...and a free meal, I think. But Billy saw my talent, and maybe the way I looked, and we became friends.

BILLY: I was really into songwriting and she was, too, so that was the real draw for both of us. The first song we wrote together was insipid, it was like a schmaltzy, band lounge pop...but let's move on.

RUBY: Yeah, at that time I was doing country on piano, Hank Williams, George Jones, Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, the Loudin Brothers...

BILLY: My influences were the same thing then as they are now: The Beatles and just about anything coming out of England at the time; also, I was really into James Taylor.

NOISE: I asked Billy if the early guitar pioneers, like the Ventures, Duane Eddy, Link Wray, or Dick Dale had been influential in his playing. He took the Fifth, admitted he was more aware of them now, but honestly couldn't account for their influences.

RUBY: We came to appreciate a lot of stuff long after it was in the public consciousness; we came late to the game. Our shared musical influences are Beatles, Stevie Wonder, Cream, Led Zeppelin and lots of 60's artists, but it just wasn't their songwriting; it was their musicianship and their performances.

NOISE: With a pedigree firmly rooted in Beatles and sixties art pop, and with Ruby's own rejection of today's country music as something not to be emulated, we moved on to how this duo wound up cultivating an interest in the Blues, to the point where they called themselves Sky Blues.

BILLY: The blues thing didn't happen until we moved to Boston. I was working in blues clubs, and we were always into second generation blues [Eric] Clapton, Cream, [Jimi] Hendrix. I worked at Harper's Ferry, which was a blues club at the time. I was hearing it every night, to the point where I hated it, but completely absorbed it and learned it by being there and running sound. [So, it also made sense] to play the blues 'cause that's what was the hot gig in Boston. The purists resented it because we were always throwing in little twists here and there to try to make it our own. We took that cue from the Allman Brothers—who were a big influence on us. The writing, the playing, the singing...

RUBY: [They were] heavily blues and jazz influenced, rock, country—they were a mix of all these things we loved.

BILLY: And they always provided a twist to what they were playing. They were not a pure blues band. I rarely play a pure blues song without twisting it into something else. I can't stay in the place [of purity]; it's too boring for me.

RUBY: And we made some good money in that band. We were playing all over, and we didn't play stuff we didn't want to play, sticking very close to the twists and turns of second-generation blues.

BILLY & RUBY: We went back and discovered Junior Wells, Sonny Boy Williamson, BB King. We were opened to all kinds of things.

NOISE: At what point did you realize that whatever incarnation of Bird Mancini was happening at the time, you were shaping a particularly unique way of expressing yourselves as musicians, performers, and songwriters? What early recordings of yours express this notion? What is unique about The Bird Mancini Sound that is divorced from Sky Blues sound?

RUBY: Well, we were sued for using the name Sky Blues, but we were ready to lose it anyway, so that wasn't a big deal [*Billy maintains that they had the name before their litigants. Another story for another time*].

BILLY: We were never writing blues songs, not in our teens, or even now. We wrote all kinds of songs. I was just writing all the time, and when we became Bird Mancini, we had no restrictions.

NOISE: When Ruby adds that they decided that the music was more important than making money, Billy raises an eyebrow: "It was?" he protests and cracks a smile that half-genuflects to Ruby's comment: "Yeah. We decided that we are writing good songs and that's what we wanted to do."

¶ I asked them to point out a particular tune, a song that defined something that came out exactly as they had planned and hoped. They both cited "Magic Flirtation," even though Billy was at first tough to pin down on this question.

¶ From their self-titled debut CD (*Bird Mancini* 2002), "Magic Flirtation" sets the tone for most of the record's multi-genre inflected invocations to restlessness, love, the familiar, the strange, and the doubts and assurances that make life interesting and

unpredictable. No big statements were forthcoming; in fact, one song is all about 'looking for a song'. For me this is the bridge album from Sky Blue to Bird Mancini. They were exploring Dixieland, St. Louis Blues, hillbilly, rock, pop, and bluegrass forms, all tinged with those twists and turnarounds mentioned earlier. Backed by Sven Larson on bass, David Roy Kulik on drums, and a Who's Who of Boston-area musicians, this is the catalyst for what was to come in terms of achieving a hard-to-pin-down style.

NOISE: As a guitarist, Billy's Sky Blue period reminds me mostly of Peter Green during his ferocious period with Fleetwood Mac's *Then Play On* period, where Green would unleash a cascade of nasty, pure, and unnerving leads and fills that defined him as one of the great soloists. When I heard Billy do the same, with the same ear for tone (which he attributes to Duane Allman), I had to eventually ask of his familiarity with Green. He drew a blank.

I persisted, so when I asked Billy to expound on his guitar prowess beyond making his guitar often behave like two guitars when they perform live, he was taken back my presumptions that he actually thinks about influences and such, but offered his affection for guitarists like George Harrison, Carlos Santana, Dickie Betts, Dwayne Allman, and the late Terry Kath from the band Chicago.

NOISE: Ruby, there's a lot of theatre in your voice, a lot of playfulness. What in your background informs this? Who are your muses, and when did you depart from them to look for your own voice?

RUBY: My favorite singers are the Beatles, and the first woman that comes to mind is Aretha Franklin, especially her ability to grab your soul. She knocks me out, but I can't approach every song like I could actually sing like her.

BILLY: Ruby doesn't do just one thing.

RUBY: I like to stretch. Bill wrote a song for this new album called "Recluse," which required me to do a 'Robert Plant', whom I love, so I did my version of that.

BILLY: And she has Robert Plant hair.

RUBY: And I do have a musical theatre background—briefly. *Bye, Bye Birdie*, *A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to the Forum*, *The Roar of the Grease Paint (the Smell of the Crowd)*, and I grew up listening to albums like *Camelot*, *West Side Story*.

NOISE: At this point the conversation broke down when I suggested that they cover all of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, a work that employs the same elements of a solid Bird Mancini masterwork: melody, jazz and pop syncopation, multi-genre tinkering, and hair-raising vocal theatrics. Billy dismissed this (such musical stoicism) and suggested Ruby join another legendary Boston journeyman, Mr. Curt, as something, for which he'd be game. Then we moved on to the narratives of their songs.

NOISE: For many writers of the modern song, words are more of a means to an end, often used to deliver the music itself, or the melody, the arrangement, or a particular performance. What lyrical narratives interest you? Cite a few examples of songs you wrote, individually or collaboratively, that struck you as themes you could continue to explore as collaborators and as individual writers.

BILLY: For me, the lyrics come after I first get the melodies, and it's kind of a chore. I'll tweak it a little bit, but they [words] only function with the music. Rarely will I deliberately write poetry.

RUBY: There's no way I'm a lyricist.

BILLY: But sometimes our lyrics can get a little political.

RUBY: Even though it kills us—the stuff going on—I don't want to bring the troubles of the world to my music; I don't want to be confrontational. More than anything, I want to create something that has beauty in it—in the melody, the chord progressions, and so on.

NOISE: We continued with this track and cited Dylan as an example of an engaged, deliberate, topical songwriter—at least early in his career—and one who opened the eyes of many to the horrors in the headlines of the day. Billy and Ruby wouldn't take the bait and remained committed to pursuing some form of beauty in their compositions, instead of being topical.

BILLY: We might hint at something political, but we don't want to get specific. We are always looking for something that is redeeming.

NOISE: Why do you feel that there is a need to redeem yourself? I think there's quite a bit of fatalism in the new album, maybe not political, but an overarching disappointment in things.

RUBY: I don't feel that way. If you think every song is fatalistic, then you are really not reading the lines carefully.

NOISE: Maybe. That said, do you write for yourself, or do you write for the listener, or both?

BILLY: I don't write for the listener. It has to make me happy...

RUBY: ... or satisfied...

BILLY: ... or I don't want to do it.

NOISE: Ruby talked a little about how some of her ideas come from dreams, how songwriting is more of a mysterious process—suggesting that mystery cannot be codified.

NOISE: I mentioned John Lennon's affinity for the blues and Billy concurred that so much of all the music today, especially theirs, springs from these forms. We talked about the tired state of pop music today and the fear of taking risks in the music industry, to which Billy summed up his approach by saying that he throws 'caution to the wind' when composing (though he and Ruby grudgingly admitted that they would gladly love to write a successful hit song, to which I maintained that "Congratulations" is the hit they are looking for).

¶ One of the driving forces behind their risk-taking in writing and the high quality of their productions is their understanding of the technical process of recording. Just as a variety of stylistic approaches inform their music, a patient knowledge of recording protocols and a familiarity with the tools of recording reveal an uncluttered appeal to their productions. As producer and engineer, Billy gives a generous ear to Ruby's ideas; and what gathers on all their CD's is a collaboration and eclecticism that underscores a devotion to craft, history, as well as the musical and creative 'chops' to push their music further with each release.

Even though “Congratulations” is not a ‘deliberate’ attempt to write the next hit wonder, songs like “Don’t Blink,” and the even more startling “Wishing Well,” are deliberate attempts to rupture predictable song forms.

“Don’t Blink,” was inspired by the songwriting attitude of James McCartney, who, in Billy’s opinion, has no desire or need to write a hit song and throws all caution to the wind. Yet, it was Ruby’s idea to harden the arrangement, toughen it up: “There’s a lot of stuff in this album that makes us laugh— in a good way,” Ruby adds, “because people will not see it coming, though it sounds perfectly natural to us.”

What comes natural to Bird Mancini is still a mystery to so many, especially if one is **not** a songwriter. I wanted to explore this further, especially with two writers that often find writing lyrics a chore and prefer, instead, writing the music and melodies to their inventions first. Ruby sometimes has fully formed tunes, she says; and the lyrics come easier because they marinate in her dreams, allowing her a certain latitude in using mystery to direct her narrative. Billy does not dismiss words out of hand but uses syllabification to volley between the melody and the assonance and consonance of words, shaping the eventuality of his lyrics.

BILLY: They might be nonsense sounds, words, but when I play crude draft recordings of myself humming nonsense syllables to a new tune, I get a sense of the words I need to use.

NOISE: The same principle applies to the actual music they concoct. So many songs in the mainstream are built around familiar I-IV-V structures and rarely deviate from this formula, making the song predictable and, to me, largely uninteresting. Many Bird Mancini songs begin with familiar forms and structures, but, as I said before, they

twist and turn away from formula, seeking something fresh. I wondered what other elements they use to “drive off main street” to make their songs unique.

RUBY: When we were writing the lyrics, I would often sing what Billy would write and sometimes he would sing my lyrics.

BILLY: We also formulate counter melodies to some of each other’s tunes. In terms of formula, I don’t like to drive straight down the street. It’s boring to me.

NOISE: If you have ever attended a Bird Mancini concert, when they do the music of other artists, they often improve upon some of the songs they cover. Their renditions of Beatle songs resonate with Beatle fans, as they are true to form, but take chances because their instrumentation is often sparse—two musicians often sounding like four or five. But it all works out because they never for a second forget that the Beatles were a vocal group. Bird Mancini is a vocal group. So even with their own tunes, concocted in all their complexity in their Second Story Studio, when they bring them to the stage, they make them work. On *Funny Day* CD (2004), they had no band; they went into the studio and did the fully orchestrated work from start to finish as a duo, multi-tracking as a full band.

As we were wrapping up our visit, I pressed them once again to tell me some of the songs they were most proud of, the songs that honored their history and their muses. Ruby mentioned “Truth,” a soul-infused tune from *Tuning In, Tuning Out* (2010), with a fetching gospel chorus. This is a song about indifference—social, personal, and political: *The truth it has a funny way of catching up with you.* Ruby’s homage to Aretha Franklin is deliberate and loving, revealing her own set of chops as something of a force of its own. But she downplays it in her typical way:

RUBY: I wanted it to sound like Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror,” with a full church choir, but we came up short.

BILLY: There are a couple of Lennonesque tunes—“Green Walls” and “December.” People have approached me noting the obvious influence, but I don’t care. It’s John Lennon. I’m stealing from the best:

I don't wanna live here / I don't wanna stay / Why did you bring me here / To the house on the hill? / I wanna go back home/ Where the steps are wide/ My secret is waiting / And the ceilings are high. /I remember the smiling lies when they who knew just who we were / A faded yellow dream of mine is all that I have now/ Lock me up inside the green walls / Let me feel your never-ending love...

NOISE: Billy takes the familiar form for the verses but upends everything by changing keys in the bridge-to-chorus, employing dramatic, unpredictable chords, underscoring all this ambivalence about loss, and remembrance, but tying it all together with a plea for love. Very Lennon. Very Bird Mancini. And a huge (for me) rejoinder regarding Billy’s slipshod attitude towards the ‘chore’ of writing lyrics as placeholders (Sorry, William. I don’t buy it). We finished our visit by talking about new artists that interest them:

RUBY: Rodrigo y Gabriela—two amazing virtuoso guitar players; The Lemon Twigs—very Beatleish. And there’s older music that somehow stayed under the radar, like Jellyfish, The Grays, Jon Brion, Porcupine Tree, Steven Wilson, XTC, Aimee Mann, Sean Lennon, and of course, the Wondermints [Brian Wilson’s Tour Band], none of whom are young anymore. If I hear any new music that I sort of like, I usually recognize

immediately where it was stolen from, and go back and listen to the original artists who did it a lot better and with a lot more chutzpah. Not always, but usually.

Bird Mancini belongs to the present, as many of their contemporaries and cohorts do. The longevity of Billy and Ruby, Mr. Curt, Tee Max, their collaborators, and the entire Low Budget Records roster (shepherded by Tim Casey), work hard to pay tribute to their muses and gather allegiance to their original and new works—all these elements giving this longevity merit and making the idea of doing music for music's sake the very essence of bringing art to the community and beyond.

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