

Mike Reid & Joe Henry

Life & Time



photo credit: Michael Wilson

Testing... Testing... Testing... Joe Henry has always staked a claim against his own generation of songwriting peers: where they confess, he disappears. He is perhaps the only songwriter of his generation who so devotedly approaches it not as a practice of mining personal experience, but as a practice of exploring the infinite potentiality of language in sound. Henry's songs glow green while Henry the author remains a bit of an enigma: for all the critical acclaim he's received in 16 albums as a solo artist, he's much more visible as a Grammy-winning producer (Solomon Burke, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Bonnie Raitt). Add his penchant to layer-how-he-likes regardless of the weather, and he just might be the odd-teacher-out at a summer songwriting camp.

No wonder, then, that Henry was singled out in such a setting by hit songwriter Mike Reid, from his birds-eye of six-foot-five. That certainly came in handy for the five years he spent playing defensive tackle in the NFL, and when you've gone on to make your bones in Nashville ("I Can't Make You Love Me", "Forever As Far As I'll Go", "Stranger In My House"), it's likely a blessing to be able to see what's just out-of-view.

Remarkable as it may seem that these two began writing together —remotely, to boot— without any discussion of roles or goals or process, it might not have been possible any other way. For Henry, there's rarely an available subtitle to translate what a song might be about other than the words he

already found in writing it, so to discuss much in advance would have been antithetical to the place he protects for mystery-in-process. When he sent Reid the lyric for what became their first song, “Room” (track 3), it was inadvertently both an offering and a test. It was either going to work or it wasn’t. No doubt Henry’s lyrics had to pass through something as well, to inspire Reid with chords and melody as quickly as they did.

The twelve songs are moody and lush, rich in imagery, with prismatic chords to call forth their colors, yet neither so dense or dripping as to weigh down the plaintive tuneful melodies. When it came to record-making, theirs was a strong collective faith in the specific atmosphere they had already crafted into the songwriting itself. From there, it was a matter of delicate restraint in expanding that atmosphere enough to fill a room without changing the scene.

Though Henry formally produced the record, Reid was very protective over the clarity of Henry’s language, granting him carte blanche with production choices in exchange for a promise that they “...not obscure one word of your poetry!”, of which Reid remained referee. Upright bass, pastoral orchestral flourishes in the distance, pied pipes on the periphery, and pedal steel twinkling above...

These are among the recurrent set dressings through a set of vignettes that wheel about an ever-unfamiliar solitary narrative voice. Is it Reid’s or is it Henry’s? Together, they’re

a bit like holding up a mirror to a mirror: it’s beside the point to parse each of their distinctive contributions, and much more interesting to simply feel what it’s like to stand between them, here, through *Life & Time*.

When and how did this collaboration first spark?

JH: Mike and I met at Rodney Crowell’s songwriting camp in Nashville that was hosted at Vanderbilt. It was a very fortunate day, when we met. We found ourselves walking together to the dining hall, and then getting in line for food together and sharing a table as a result. Mike started asking me about poets that mattered to me, and we found out that we had a number of them in common – people that have contributed to our evolution as thinkers, readers and writers. I looked for Mike as much as I could as the camp went on –anytime there was a coffee break– I was so enjoying the conversations that ensued. But once we broke camp, we didn’t communicate for a couple of months. And for some reason, on an October day, I just heard a couplet in my head and stopped what I was doing and reached out to Mike, reminded him who I was, and asked if he might want to try writing something together. And he uttered a phrase that we’ve repeated to each other since: “Let’s push off the dock and into the fog and we’ll see what we find.” I wound up sending him an entire lyric, not just a fragment. and the first I heard back from him was in the form of a finished and recorded song, that, once I heard it, I

couldn’t imagine going any other way. And that happened with no conversation between us, no back and forth, just “here are the words” and then Mike said “here’s a finished song”. And I was deeply affected by it. My wife Melanie was deeply affected by it, and she really encouraged, “Whatever happened between you guys, you should try it again” And we did, and it repeated exactly the same way. And we’ve just pressed on, ever since.

MR: I remember specifically that first lunch. Usually we meet strangers, but then occasionally we meet someone and think “My God, I’ve known this person for decades.” And that was the case with Joe and I. The collaboration is not the collaboration on what we do, but the willingness to collaborate on what we might discover. I try not to have any preconceived ideas of what a song should sound like when I read Joe’s words. I usually take them out for a walk around the yard, and try to listen for an atmosphere, you know... what atmosphere might these words, might the idea that is trying to find its way, live in? And so Joe’s willingness to discover is what I think the real spirit of the collaboration is.

How did you come to the delegation of roles where, in large part, Joe writes the lyrics and Mike writes the music?

MR: For me, it’s just the power of Joe’s words. There’s something very mysterious that happens to me emotionally, whatever that is... physically...

when I sing Joe's words, I just... believe them, and more than my mind, my body believes them. I feel physically a belief in this stuff. More than my mind, my body knows... feels these words, and I like that because ultimately, when I do something that isn't working, I feel it physically in my body.

JH: I was gonna say that I think it happened simply because I get up earlier. And I'm caffeinated. I'm an hour earlier in the time zone, and I frequently have landed a complete lyric in his inbox asking him to deal with it before anything else could have happened to the contrary.

So even though on your own you write lyrics and music, lyric just happens to be the branch that you naturally extend in collaboration?

JH: That is true, and maybe that's been a shift in my creative life as I've gotten older. I realize that a lot of *All The Eye Can See*, which is the most recent record I've made of my own, started with melody first, and that was uncommon for me. Now my preferred place to enter the stream is lyrically, and it has been where I start in regard to this particular collaborative relationship. I don't know that

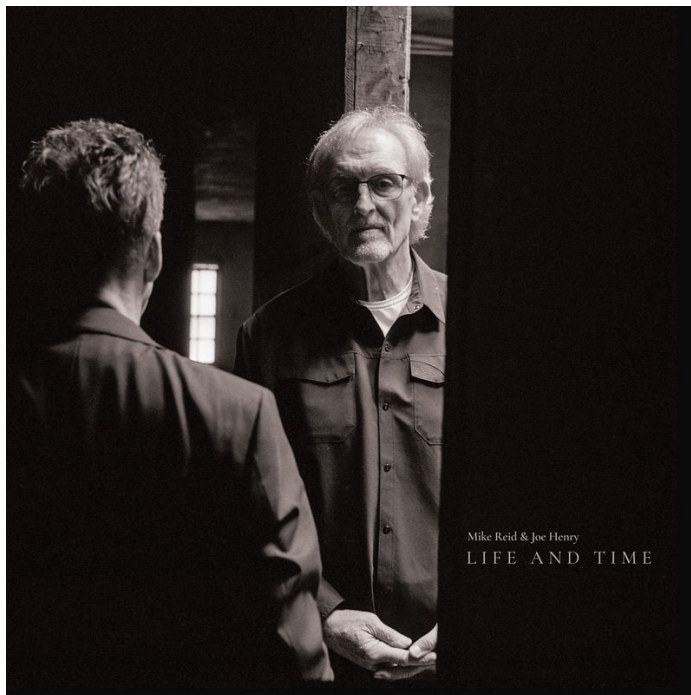
I've ever had more fun writing than I have now writing with Mike. I'm so thrilled as I'm waiting for something to come back that I can't imagine. And then I get to sit and listen to it completely unencumbered by my own ideas about my own performance if it was

than I've been able to reach on my own. So, that's a primary influence that Mike has had on my writing, because even when I'm writing without him now, I'm trying to listen beyond what I feel my default position had so long been.

MR: Joe's words influenced me in the same way that Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, Bob Dylan... the words pitch you into a place of wonder. Whatever meaning people find in them, it's not necessarily right directly on the surface, but they're trying to indicate to something, for me anyway, something larger than what I'm capable of coming up with. What I find interesting and somewhat ironic about what Joe said, is I find his harmonic ideas and his melodic ideas more interesting than my own. I

struggle with what I pray is not predictable. What I hope is the feeling of inevitability. Something proceeding logically towards the next thing.

JH: But I would say that's how we recognized each other as kindred, what he just ascribed to me. I think this works, and worked initially because we were both interested in going somewhere where we hadn't already been, and we were both listening all the time for what will ultimately feel inevitable.



album artwork

me singing it, for instance. I just get to hear it as a finished piece of music, potentially, and see what it does to my body and mind. And it's a gift to be able to do that. It's new to me to be able to do that, and it's intensely satisfying to do it.

How do you think you've influenced each other through this process?

JH: I'm able to hear songs evolve toward a much more sophisticated harmonic palette

MR: It's a fine line of trying to not go down roads you've gone before, and not drawing attention to yourself. I don't want anything to obscure Joe's words. They are the ultimate for me and they deserve to ride on a clear, precise, and passionate set of notes. So I question that in myself. I rely on Joe's opinion about that more than my own, I think.

JH: This very day, I expressed to Mike that same bit of anxiety for my end of it: asking him to check me if, in this set of words that we're messing around with right now, am I in danger of over-mining the same vein? Am I continuing to hammer away at the same ideas, the same concerns? I struggle with the balance of wanting to be always in discovery and also not becoming self-conscious about the fact that that's what I intend to do. I don't want to find myself falling into the familiar, even if those same things continue to concern me.

How do you both deal with the tension between those themes?

MR: You know, maybe it's this... when can we go off into the deepest part of the forest and yet still be home?

JH: Yeah, that's beautifully said. How far can we venture out and still feel like we're being our authentic selves?

MR: Exactly. Authentic selves, and not just because you can happen to imitate some composer or because it's a good imitation. The authenticity eventually will have its way,

I think, or lack of authenticity will have its way.

JH: And what I recognize as an evolving difference is that we've now been working long enough together, I think we've just learned to trust each other more in the process, and we're just less apologetic and less careful about challenging things with each other. I mean, right now, as an example: with our record finished, we are writing for another project, for another singer altogether, yet our body of work. And as we look at a group of songs that we hope will serve this artist, it's become more natural, and thankfully so, that we challenge, if not each other, we just challenge the song in process out loud to each other. You know... if this is working how is it working? And in this body of songs that's coming together, is there a recognizable arc? Is there the right balance of the familiar versus the challenging; of motion and stillness; of simplicity and provocative, nuanced thought? These are all things that I think we're always keeping in balance. I just happen to be more aware in this moment as we're doing it for another artist how fluid we've gotten between us in being able to do it.

Before you met, did either of you find yourself wanting to have a collaborative relationship such as this?

JH: Oh, it surprised me completely. I had not one idea that I was desirous of an ongoing and very consistent collaborative partnership. You

know, I used to say, "Oh, I don't really co-write." I used to say, "That's not what I do." to my publisher who pushed it on me all the time, asking me to co-write. And then I would see myself doing it once in a while when something I was producing just asked for it, or the rare time when somebody came to me and said, "Would you write a song with so-and-so for this film?", but a very circumstantially specific opportunity. I wasn't looking for anything else. I always felt my real work was very solitary as far as the writing. Not the record making, but the writing part of it. But when things started happening with Mike — when we were three, five,

seven, twelve songs in— I really cherished what was happening both in regard to the songs that emerged, and I have to say, what for me is a profound friendship that emerged. I found myself devoted to both, and I didn't want them to stop. That doesn't mean I don't still write things completely alone, but in this moment, if I have a new idea lyrically or even melodically that might push forward, my first thought is, "Is this something that might interest Mike?" It still feels new to me, because I worked the other way for so long and I heard myself proclaim such a dedication to a solitary writing voice. I remain still surprised, delighted and grateful that something happened to me otherwise.

MR: So, my songwriting life, after the other life, is in Nashville. Publishers here, for

the most part, are not interested in how you feel. They're more interested in what you are able to do. Are you able to craft together something that will generate income? Period. That's all well and good, but the intent here is different. I think at this point, it'd be fair to say, Joe, that we never intended to make a record. At this stage of life, I certainly didn't intend my mug to be on a record and my name saying "Here." It just, you know... became.

JH: Early on, I was just thinking about, "Is there another song to be had between us?" I didn't understand for a while that there was a possible album to be made. But in that regard, the album is like any one of the songs that make it up. I pushed in a really different direction first, because Mike has not made an album as an artist in a while. I had tried on these songs for myself as repertoire for my next

solo album. I flew to Nashville to do it. I recorded a dozen or more of these songs in a key that suited me with Mike at the piano to see how they might fit coming out of my mouth, off of my tongue. I got back home with them, and when I started to play some of these songs for my brother, who has been one of my closest listeners since I began, and I had versions of me singing the songs and Mike singing the songs, I didn't play Dave my versions of the songs. Without understanding that I was about to discover it, I said "Well, for you to really understand where these songs are and what they are, you have to hear Mike sing them." And I understood perfectly well in that moment that that was the mission. It wasn't anything that I pre-imagined.

How many songs have you written together, so far?

MR: It's got to be in the 30s, isn't it, Joe?

JH: I would say 35, 37, something like that.

Is there anything else that feels important to share but hasn't been said?

MR: There's always for the creator, he or her, whatever you think that silent part of you is —some people call it a soul, some people call it a silent knowing— that part that makes you you and no one else. I think, often, whether creating or not, or planting a rose or making a good lasagna, that part of you is always attempting to recognize itself. And the delight for me in this whole time with Joe is I got to recognize something in me that I only suspected was there. Granted, I did suspect it, but I got to recognize it before I moved on from here.

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