

mercury

change your temperature

features

full frontal

off the lip

features

Winning isn't everything

SUN., AUG 7, Strings Stage: Woody Russell

By Lisa Utman Randall

Woody Russell inspires heavy usage of adjectives and other highly charged descriptors. "Gut emanating pipes," "vocal growls," "pounding rhythms," "whispers to falsetto screams," "dark cinematic feel" and "whoop-ass grit," to name a few.

In Russell you'll find a rare musician with the versatility to wail in a true falsetto and then burst forth with a resonating purr that makes you want to hang your head and shuffle your feet in the dust as you walk alone down a long, gritty dirt road to nowhere. Russell writes his own songs, sings, plays the guitar among other instruments and even produces; the sound you hear is pure Woody, and that's a really good thing.

Currently living and making music in Austin, Texas, this Montana native really did grow up on a dirt road, and perhaps that's why the occasional country twang threads its way through his music. His mother always told him he started singing the minute he found his voice; it was a natural and direct extension of his ability to make sounds. He had an immediate and deep connection with the guitar his big sister got for her birthday when he was just 6. Fortunately, his sister didn't seem to mind when he usurped the instrument and made it his own.

"My mom used to drop me off down at Fred's Music for lessons. It was a little place in town. The guitar fell into my hands and I fell in love with it," he said. Russell's dad has long been a huge music fan, so naturally the stereo was always on at home, creating a rich, textural soup for his son's natural abilities to rise out of.

"'Hot August Night' by Neil Diamond was probably the pinnacle record of my youth, we had two copies on vinyl and played it on the eight track in the car, too. My dad saw him in concert and brought me back a T-shirt," he recalled. "I just loved the whole idea of it."



Russell spent his high school years "banging around, listening to rock 'n' roll," playing the guitar and writing his own tunes. A local musician, an older Greek man named Kostos who wrote for people like Vince Gill, helped the teen learn to form songs. They would hang out listening to Cat Stevens and other records from Kostos' huge collection for hours, Russell absorbing the building blocks of a great song and Kostos pointing out the hallmarks of solid craftsmanship. At the time Russell, also was sneaking into bars to soak up the ambiance of live performance and to set the stage for his own musical career.

Russell already has a few CDs under his belt including "Time To Go" and "As Simple as That," and he's an audience favorite just about everywhere he goes. There's something extraordinarily compelling about the combination of his highly tuned and versatile voice and the way he fingers his one-of-a-kind Resolectric guitar. He has been a featured artist at highly regarded venues such as the Northwest Folklife Festival, the Nashville New Music Conference, Winterfolk and the Kerrville Folk Festival. Despite his many successes, Russell is extremely excited about playing the Newport Folk Festival - he calls it a huge honor. He didn't exactly fall into the gig in the usual way either.

"I feel a little weird repeating the story, but kind of proud, too. I entered the Apple and Eve talent search last year. I don't even usually do contests, but I did this one," he explained. "I didn't win, which seemed to surprise the audience and some of the judges, too. After the winner was announced, Melanie Jones (daughter of concert organizer Bob Jones) pulled me aside and said the five judges practically got into a tiff trying to decide the winner, and then she invited me to come back and play the festival this year. I was the only one out of the five musicians to be invited back. It was such a weird thing that I'm totally grateful for."

Not only will Russell be performing at the festival, alongside bandmate, lap steel guitarist Danny Bennett, this gig will mark the release of his latest CD from Cats Up The Street Music, "Salt." This promises to be his biggest CD release party ever; the folk festival will be the first time the CD is made available to the public. He's thrilled to be part of what he considers an impressive lineup of incredible artists that includes a few of his personal heroes and thrilled too that his father will be flying in to catch this huge accomplishment.

The thread of this album is simple, simple tales of love and loss, basic stuff. The title song is a love song to his wife.

"'She's the salt in my sea and the roots to my tree and I won't let her down.' It's my very simple way of saying 'I love you' without saying 'I love you.'"