



BIO

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“Back in the old days,” muses resilient troubadour Chris Smither, “writing new songs and making new albums were just chores. My priority was, and still is, performing live. I guess I still write the songs and make the records so that I can go out and play – except that now I actually look forward to it. I’ve learned how to do it, and I’m very eager to get stuff recorded once I’ve written it.”

Recorded in only three days, **Time Stands Still** is just the eleventh studio album of a career that now spans over four decades. *Time Stands Still* (Signature Sounds/Mighty Albert) is both pensive and visceral – an album whose songs alternately ponder life’s mysteries in some moments, and let them lie undisturbed in others. Featuring eight new original compositions and a song apiece from Bob Dylan, Mark Knopfler, and 1920s country-blues songster Frank Hutchison, *Time Stands Still*’s immediate, intimate sound is the direct result of one gig, and the challenge it presented.

“This is the most stripped-down record I’ve made in a long time,” Smither explains. “That came about thanks to a trip to the Netherlands.” Invited to perform at the Americana-centric Blue Highways Festival in Utrecht, Smither was told he had to bring a band over with him. “I usually perform solo,” he continues, “but they said ‘We don’t hire solo acts.’” He reached out to producer and guitarist David “Goody” Goodrich, who produced Smither’s last two studio albums. “Goody said, ‘Let’s get you, me, and a drummer,’” Smither says. “So I called and asked if a trio would be okay, and the festival agreed. So Goody, the drummer Zak Trojano, and I went there, and we killed them!”

“Playing with just the three of us was a lot of fun,” Smither reflects. “At first it scared me, but we did a few rehearsal dates before we left. We booked them under a pseudonym, so there was no pressure. Right after our set at the festival, the soundman gave me a CD he made off the board. I put it away for a while, then listened to it one day. It sounded so good to me, I called Goody up and said ‘I’m sending you a CD. This is how we should do the next record.’ And that’s what we did...”

For Smither, going into the studio is preceded by an intensive period of songwriting and road-testing new material. “I’m not one of these writers who write all the time,” he says. “I write for a project. If you want me to finish a song, give me a date that we’re going into the studio.” His process insures that the songs hang together as a group – forming a snapshot of Smither’s experience and perception in a given time. “They all relate to each other,” he says of the songs on *Time Stands Still*. “In a way, it’s a case of realizing after the fact how they fit together, not whether they fit together.”

“Writing songs is like exercising,” he adds. “There are certain muscles that have to get toned up. You work for a while, and eventually they get strong again. Eventually, once you’ve written five or six songs, songs number seven, eight, and nine come a lot quicker. You know what you’re doing. I learn a little bit more every time I write a new batch of songs.”

The songs on *Time Stands Still* are somehow both vivid and mysterious, evoking contemporary culture and circumstance while remaining touchingly timeless. Smither’s concerns – personal and political – are wed to music that, while stripped down in terms of arrangement and presentation, is among his most intricate, melodic, and challenging. The stark settings only serve to throw the album’s themes into higher relief. “I’m still talking about what I think of as nitty-gritty questions...” Smither says, “...essential questions, existential questions.”

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These questions can be examined on a grand level – “Surprise, Surprise” aims a raised eyebrow at how society is coping with (or not coping with) the current economic slowdown – or can be evoked in the smallest gestures between people. The title track, to a brisk pulse propelled by Smither’s percussive feet and Trojano’s brushes, is a potent meditation on love and vulnerability – the paradox that in order to be strong and complete, one must lower one’s defenses and trust in something that you cannot see or explain. “I thought in my heart it would tear me apart,” Smither sings in his inimitably soulful growl, “but it made me whole.” The playfully exasperated “I Don’t Know” is Smither’s first song about parenthood, set as a dialog between an inquisitive youngster and a parent who finally concedes that he may not know it all. “When my wife and I adopted our daughter,” he says, “people thought I would write a billion songs about her, or about children – but so far, this is the only one. It came to me in a flash, very quickly.”

“The leadoff song was like that too,” Smither says of the ominous, enticing “Don’t Call Me Stranger.” “I think of it as a straight up seduction song,” he continues, “that is interesting because it doesn’t make any specific promises or claims or suggestions. It just says ‘Come. Trust me on this.’ There’s no hint of what’s coming...that’s all in your imagination.”

In keeping with his long-standing tradition of performing other writers’ work, Smither includes a trio of cover songs, including a version of Dylan’s “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry,” which is curiously severed from the original version’s bluesy shuffle, to better reveal the aimless sadness of the lyric. “I refused to go back and listen to the original before I recorded it,” Smither says, smiling. Closing with Mark Knopfler’s “Madame Geneva’s” will surprise more than a few, but Smither sees it as perfectly natural. “People think of him as Mr. Rock’n’Roll,” Smither says of Knopfler, “but the last couple of albums he’s done have been songwriter expeditions. He writes these beautiful biographical expositions, and this song is a shining example of that kind of work. It concerns itself with a period in British history when there wasn’t much entertainment for the lower classes except for gin and public executions...”

The songs are met with a studio sound that is loose yet clear, highlighting the natural empathy of Goody on array of guitars, Smither’s intricate finger-picking, and Trojano’s wide-ranging percussion. “It doesn’t sound over-worked or labored,” Smither says. “We’re the only three guys on this record, and most of the songs only have three parts going on. We had a freewheeling feeling at that festival gig, and we managed to make a lot of that same feeling happen in this record.”

Already, the material on Time Stands Still has been met with enthusiastic approval from Smither’s concert audiences. “If I had my way,” he says, “I wouldn’t record a song until I’ve played it for a couple of years...but I’ve gotten better at getting it ready faster. Still, before I actually get out there and introduce new songs, there’s always a part of me that says, ‘Is anyone going to like this? Is anyone going to get it?’ Usually those fears are exaggerated. I do tend to go out on a limb more these days. I take more risks...but I’ve gotten to a point with my audience where they give me a lot of slack. They work at it with me. You can’t overestimate how much that’s worth. It frees you up to do your work.

“I love it when people say at the record table after the show, ‘Do you have such-and-such song on a CD?’” Smither concludes, “and I say ‘No – that’s a new one!’ It’s great when they start asking about it right away, which is what’s happening now with these songs.”

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