

The Wheel

Liner notes by Dave Marsh

David Olney started out being a Yankee youth and wound up living (and I think, writing) as a Southerner. Then again, he also began as a rebel, and rebels always fit in better elsewhere.

Olney's best lyrics simultaneously achieve the dense, dark solemnities of Leonard Cohen and the laconic pensiveness of Townes Van Zandt, with the dry wit of Woody Guthrie sprinkled around for good measure. In fact, Olney writes so well, he presents himself with a problem: People overlook his impressive performances of all those finely wrought songs. They shouldn't. Olney never just wrote lyrics. From his days with the X-Rays, he played and sang his heart out, and although as a mature artist, he sings in more measured cadences, in this respect his heart never moved far from where it started out.

The musicality of his words links him to that long great chain of the very best. On *The Wheel*, this reaches its height in that majestic little drama, "Revolution," which serves as a fitting sequel to John Lennon's Beatles song of the same title, as a piece of futuristic fiction, as a modern corollary to *A Tale of Two Cities*. Placed at the exact center of the album's 15 tracks, this elusive, allusive narrative of a raging battle that engulfs all humans in its path stands as the metaphor for every song around it. "Revolution" recalls for me that brilliant moment at the very end of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Material* trilogy where humanity's prime project is defined as the creation of the Republic of Heaven.

Every song here speaks to some deep matter of the soul. The title track features Olney singing what sounds like the descendant of a Gothic chant, then opens up to a boisterous set of philosophical aphorisms in "Big Cadillac." "Voices on the Water" bespeaks gospel to its core, "Chained and Bound to the Wheel" evokes Prometheus and St. Catherine (and all the wheels already summoned up). "God Shaped Hole" speaks for itself, but who do you figure that Boss is who don't throw no dice? Might he be Einstein's God who does not shoot craps with the universe?

As with Cohen and Pullman, and for that matter Van Zandt, Lennon and Dickens, Olney's spirituality centers on a universe governed more by love than malice, in fact more by love than any other single quality. The evocative wonder produced by "The Girl I Love" and "All the Love in the World" lies in his ability to extend that spiritual vision to all he loves.

Yet while brilliantly describing the way a heavenly republic ought to work, David Olney never loses sight of the hurtful way this one operates. So the girl he loves smiles, and then she cries, and his heart quakes with the sight of the one and nearly breaks at the sight of the other. This is life not only observed but lived at the deepest level, and conveyed to everyone who hears it with commanding artistry and a vision of the biggest future there is. I feel privileged to hear it.