

And the Circle Goes 'Round & 'Round

*New Album by singer-songwriter David Olney contemplates life's circularity
by Paul Griffith*

There's no symbol as basic or as complex as the wheel. Across ages and cultures, the wheel has represented life's circularity in so many ways that its meanings can seem opposed: time and eternity, progress and stasis, life and death, providence and chance. It's fitting, then, that David Olney, a songwriter known for his multivalent analysis, should choose the wheel as the title and theme of his new album.

Singers Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris have recorded Olney's songs, and peers such as Guy Clark and the late Townes Van Zandt have sung his praises, but it's a cliché to call the longtime Nashville resident a songwriter's songwriter. Olney belongs instead to the great tradition of writers, musical or otherwise, who wrestle life's disorder into small manageable chunks called stories. Like Faulkner and T.S. Elliot, his tales frequently use multiple narrative voices to address complex themes within comparatively simple structures.

Olney's characters are often historically based and have included actor John Barrymore, Omar Khayyam, the donkey

iceberg that sunk the Titanic. "Another Place, Another Time," from 1995's *High, Wide & Lonesome*, would be just another tale of the suicide of a rich man's wife as told by her commoner lover, if not for "My Family Owns This Town," the track that follows it. There the perspective shifts to that of the husband, hinting that the woman's death was not self-inflicted but rather a murder.

The *Wheel* likewise uses multiple vantage points to enlighten its overriding theme. The "god-shaped hole" in the title song is, alternately, the space left in the soul of a born-again atheist, a dive bar, an impression on a pillow left by a discarded lover, a fatal bullet wound and an open grave. The idea is that change often gives way to emptiness and the search for something sacred, however elusive, that might fill it.

"Revolution," another track from Olney's record, employs the seasons and military insurrection as interchangeable metaphors: "Winter's reign was long and cruel / We grew hard each day she ruled / Each frozen night seemed to last forever / She grew barren in her ancient age / And bitter in her twisted rage / Too blind to see the seeds of revolution." Notions of progress, political or otherwise, Olney reminds us, are cyclical, with periods of order and contentment followed routinely by those of upheaval and unrest. This theme isn't lost on Olney's backing band, who gently support the song's circular medieval melody with a gradually intensifying martial cadence.

"One of the things I had in the back of my mind was to see human beings in relationship the earth going around the sun or the stars moving around the sky," Olney says of the material on the album. "When you look at it that way, it kind of dwarfs human beings. You can't stand it; you have to fight against the feeling of insignificance. How do you keep from feeling so small when in fact we are small?"

Whether they're regular Joes or larger-than-life figures from history, Olney's characters identify with this struggle for worth. The narrator in "Chained and Bound to the Wheel," for example, pleads for freedom from the hollow routines that make his life seem transparent: "Chained and Bound / Going up and coming down / Are you a dream? / Are you real? / If you can free me from this wheel / Do it now!" Routines, however, are a source of comfort in "Now and Forever," where Olney equates love's timelessness with the movement of mountains, the eternal rotation of the stars and the running of a river.

As with some recordings by songwriters Clark and Van Zandt, production choices occasionally have interfered with Olney's storytelling. His impassioned vocals, steady guitar accompaniment and the songs themselves are more than enough to carry the load; they tend to suffer when novelty or instrumental heroics creep into the mix. Recorded at Sound Vortex in Nashville, and co-produced by Olney and studio owner Rob Earls, *The Wheel*, for the most part avoids these pitfalls. The backing tracks -- which feature drummer Pat McInerney, bassist Mike Fleming and guitarists Mike Henderson and Tommy Goldsmith -- serve the song, even if Deanie Richardson's fiddling is at times a little too prominent.

The Wheel is broken up by five short, a capella rounds -- it's spokes, as it were. On "Round," the album's final track, these simple themes are stacked contrapuntally, as if to remind the listener that the earth's cycles are actually part of something more richly layered and intricate. Both grand and mundane, these repetitions bind us to the earth and to each other, giving us.