

Wheels of Change

*After years of waiting, David Olney finds his place in the room
by Peter Cooper*

David Olney won no Grammys Sunday, and perhaps that's a good thing.

"I've been here so long that if I actually got an award, I would either get up and give a vicious revenge speech or I would take two hours thanking every bartender that loaned me five bucks and every landlord that let me skate a few times," he says, sitting in his dining room and laughing at his lot.

In May, he'll celebrate (or, perhaps, not celebrate at all) 30 years of writing and performing in Nashville, a town where he remains an atypically plumed, odd duck troubadour on a deeply weird music-industry pond.

Olney often plays solo-acoustic shows with rock concert intensity, occasionally rearing back, rolling his eyes into some place far within his skull and unleashing a holler that's more about James Brown than Woody Guthrie.

Olney wears a fedora in a town of cowboy hat acts. He writes love songs about icebergs, war songs about prostitutes and Jesus songs about shysters. They're good songs, too. Great songs, actually.

Olney watches Britney Spears lip-syncing and gyrating on a television show, then ruminates, "If you really think about it, she and I are both in the entertainment industry. We have the same job description.

Olney shoots high: Once after a coffeehouse gig in Spartanburg, S.C., he threw back a couple of shots, squinched his face and grunted. "Did you ever read Shakespeare? I've been reading a lot of Shakespeare and, um...well, I suck."

He doesn't, of course. Ask most any serious Nashville songwriter and they'll tell you Olney is among the most intriguing artists around. Steve Earle, for instance, called him "one of my teachers," and "one of the best songwriters working in the world today."

The justly lauded Townes Van Zandt wrote: "A songwriter myself, I have considered David a benchmark of sorts." Emmylou Harris has recorded three of his compositions, and Johnny Cash has recorded (but not yet released) Jerusalem Tomorrow, a spoken-sung gem of which Kevin Welch said, "When I'm listening to a new song, I'll think, 'Yeah, it's good, but is it as good as Jerusalem Tomorrow? And it won't be."

All this is to say that plenty of people have plenty of reason to listen to plenty of David Olney's stuff. This week, they've had plenty of chances to do just that, as the release of Olney's new *The Wheel* album has been accompanied by a show every night since Monday. Tonight and Tomorrow, he'll complete the six-gigs, six-nights plan he's calling "David Olney's World Tour of Nashville" with shows at Bongo Java and Douglas Corner Cafe.

If that sounds like a grueling schedule, consider that Olney's early days in Nashville included a year where he played every night at Bishop's Pub (long-shuttered, that historic dive is now the Tin Angel on West End).

A Rhode Island native who went to college at the University of North Carolina, Olney spent 1971 and '72 in New York City and Atlanta. Inspired by the poetic songs of Kris Kristofferson and Van Zandt, he decided to roll the dice in Nashville, where he arrived May 1, 1973.

"On May 2, I had a job playing at Vanderbilt, at a coffeehouse they had, and I got some money for that," he remembers. On May 3, I got arrested, and that's where the money went...See, Steve Runkle and I, we'd had like an ocean of beer, and we went to this old, brick building that was an old, abandoned Catholic old-folks home. Runkle just loved this building, and we wanted to see what it was like on the inside.

Trouble was, the home hadn't been abandoned by a priest who was living there, and the man of God wasn't amused by sounds of a window crashing and two interlopers crawling around. Cops were called, musicians were apprehended, end of story.

"It was not the way I'd envisioned being welcomed to Nashville," Olney says.

Three decades later, things are different. Runkle wrote a bunch of good songs (including Love Song, a hit for the Oak Ridge Boys), told a lot of good jokes and died way too young. Olney has gone from upstart to old sage, from folkie to rock 'n' roll bandleader (with the X-Rays) to Americana act, from wild man to a married, carpool-driving Daddy who has to go out on the front porch just to have a smoke. House rules, you know.

Along the way, Olney has turned into something of a private creature. "When you first come to town, you try to catch a wave of people who are like-minded musically, and sort of hang with them," he says. "After a while, your vision of what you're supposed to sound like becomes more personal. To do it the way I want to do it now, it's pretty much a solitary deal.

"Back then, I wanted to be noticed, so I tended to be more extravagant in how I dealt with things," he continues. "Now, I don't have the energy to be larger than life. Aside from music, I spend a lot more time trying to fit in than trying to stand out. But when you hit the stage or make a CD, you kind of pull out all the stops, you know, without being a jerk about it."

Just released on Austin, Texas' Loudhouse Records, *The Wheel* indeed pulls out all the stops. The album is a song-cycle that begins with death (*Big Cadillac*), dwells in loss and mystery (*God Shaped Hole*) and ends with a soul-sustaining connection (*All the Love in the World*) and gradually reveals itself as a study in circles. As *The Wheel* turns round, Olney grapples with questions of fate, faith and hope, and offers only one answer. Except, it isn't an answer.

"No, love isn't an answer: It's more of a defense mechanism," he says. "You have no way of fighting the arbitrariness, the harshness of life, other than to find somebody to love. It sounds like old hippie stuff, but I really don't see any other way. You can get cynical and bitter, but that doesn't seem to be worth a whole lot of time."

Comparisons, apparently, are also unworthy of a lot of Olney's time. Thirty years ago, he compared himself and his songs to contemporaries including Guy Clark and Rodney Crowell, but these days he's given up on trying to better his peers.

"In the beginning, I wanted to stand out and be the one that was clearly the best or something like that, and that's totally unreasonable," he mulls. "But now, it seems to me that there's a level you can get at...like there's this room somewhere, full of all the writers you really like, and if you can just walk in the room and just be there, that would be enough."

"I kind of always pictured myself as the waiter. You know, 'Who had the gin and tonic?' "