

Pop Talk: Put your hands together for the hardest working man in show business

by *George_Varga*

Few musicians in (or out of) rock 'n' roll have inspired as much praise, frustration and derision as has Ryan Adams.

HARD-WORKING - The career of Ryan Adams has been an up-and-down affair, with praise for some work, but criticism for his willingness to release album after album. CNS Photo courtesy of Jon Graboff. When he's in top form, this versatile singer, songwriter and bandleader is capable of inspired performances that can rise to magical levels, live and on record.

When he's not, which is more often the case, he's been responsible for some of the most erratic, unfocused and sometimes god-awful performances this side of Pete Doherty, the pre-sobriety Cat Power and the Keith Richards-led X-Pensive Winos.

It's not that Adams is lazy; he's anything but. His latest album, last year's "Easy Tiger," is his fourth since 2005 and ninth since his 2000 solo debut, the alternately inspired and annoying "Heartbreaker." More recently, he released an EP last November, "Follow the Lights," that features two new songs, some bonus tracks from previous Adams' albums and, um, an Alice In Chains cover.

In 2006, he used his Web site (ryanadams.com) to give away more than a dozen additional albums' worth of songs, primarily punk and hip-hop (the latter in the guise of his musical alter-ego, "DJ Reggie"). The quality of those songs ranged from very good to beyond terrible. Due soon is a boxed set that will include up to five CDs and feature two previously unreleased albums, along with demos and live bootlegs.

But that's just a fraction of what Adams has up his (very long and very roomy) sleeves. Lost Highway, his now former record label, still has more than 170 other tracks by him, all thus far unreleased, sitting in its vaults.

One album that has yet to see the light of day in its entirety is titled "48 Hours" ("because," he told an interviewer in 2003, "that's how long it took to record it"). Another album, also unreleased, reportedly has a "jazz-blues" focus and features cameos by Beth Orton, an unidentified Scandinavian cellist and Per Gessle, the guitarist in the Swedish pop-rock duo Roxette.

To hear Adams tell it, Lost Highway repeatedly refused to put out albums he submitted to the label. This resulted in extended battles and at one point prompted him to record an album, covertly, which he paid for with his credit card. His frustration prompted him to compile some of his unreleased songs for his uneven 2002 album, "Demolition," the title of which takes on greater resonance in hindsight.

Alas, being so prolific can be a blessing or a curse. For the hyper-productive Adams, who counts actresses Parkey Posey and Wynona Ryder among his former girlfriends, it's both.

Yes, he's written and recorded more songs than almost anyone not named Prince, Neil Young, Willie Nelson or former Guided By Voices singer Robert Pollard. But Adams is also consistently inconsistent, as evidenced by how many of his so-so (or worse) songs surround the gems he has crafted, such as "Oh My Sweet Carolina," "16 Days" and "Dear Chicago."

Then again, given how hard it is for even the most gifted musicians to write more than a handful of classics, the law of averages dictates that anyone who churns out hundreds and hundreds of songs will have many more misses than hits.

To his credit, Adams is - at 33 - one of the more eclectic troubadours of his generation. He's as comfortable playing earthy alt-country, a style he first explored in the 1990s with his band Whiskeytown, as he is bashing out raw, punk-fueled rave-ups, glam-rock homages, mope-rock dirges or noodling, Grateful Dead-styled jams (his concert repertoire has been known to include a lengthy version of the Dead's 1971 chestnut, "Wharf Rat").

Unfortunately, Adams' seemingly insatiable urge to create and his apparently chronic case of attention-deficit disorder have run neck-and-neck with the self-destructive habits that have nearly cost him his career - and his life.

Or, as Adams puts it himself in "Off Broadway," a bittersweet ballad that is one of "Easy Tiger's" more gently fetching songs: I just can't stop it / It hasn't killed me yet / But give me time / Shuffle down to the watering hole / I'm getting tired and I want to go home.

Just how harrowing an existence Adams led was detailed in an interview he did last summer with the New York Times, in which he acknowledged it was a "miracle" he was alive.

"I snorted heroin a lot - with (cocaine)," he said at the time. "I did speedballs (heroin and cocaine) every day for years. And took pills. And then drank. And I don't mean a little bit. I always outdid everybody."

The reason for such debilitating behavior, he disclosed, was "intense loneliness, end-of-the-world stuff going on in my mind, bottomless depression."

That may explain his periodic sniping at audiences and mid-song meltdowns, as well as his sometimes notorious behavior offstage.

By 2006, even Adams came to realize he was closer to dying than any human should willingly want to be, so he got clean and sober, in a manner.

"I got some Valium, which sounds like cheating, but it wasn't," Adams, who began attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in 2006 (although not regularly), told the Times.

His harrowing travails now apparently behind him, he can focus even more on his music (if that's possible), or at least focus on it more clearly. By doing so, Adams may be able to overcome the chameleon-like qualities that too often have made even some of his best songs sound like homages to his favorite musicians at best and shameless rip-offs at worst.

Country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons is clearly one of Adams' biggest influences - they also share the same birthday - but he's hardly the only one. Adams' 2001 album, the hard-rocking "Gold," owed such a debt to the music of The Rolling Stones, The Band, Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen and other legendary artists that at times it was easy to forget the album was by Adams, not them.

Conversely, his 2003 solo album, "Rock 'n' Roll," has more of a 1980s and 1990s emphasis with songs that sound very much like U2, The Cure and Oasis (in 2005 Adams earned a Grammy Award nomination for Best Solo Rock Vocal Performance for his version of Oasis' "Wonderwall").

None of his solo albums has been as consistently strong or appealing as 1997's "Stranger's Almanac," Whiskeytown's third album. And Adams now faces another challenge - major hearing loss - as he acknowledged on his Web site last November.

"I lost so much on this tour, too," he wrote at the time. "It was humbling. I lost most of my hearing in my left ear and possibly some now on the right. It is rather dramatic and something I am going to have to learn to live with and work around. But it is a huge challenge."

Then again, Adams seems to thrive on challenges more than almost any other rock artist of his generation. Here's hoping his future musical exploits will see him finally realize his considerable potential. After a decade of false starts and hits and misses, he and his fans deserve no less.

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