

Pop Talk: Triple play for DeLuca and band

by *George_Varga*

With its fatalistic title and bleak lyrics, Rocco DeLuca's song "I Trust You to Kill Me" seems ideally suited to accompany a graphic torture scene in the hit TV series "24." And that's doubly fitting, since DeLuca credits "24" star Kiefer Sutherland (aka anti-terrorist agent supreme Jack Bauer) as the prime influence for "I Trust You to Kill Me."

TRIPLE PLAY - Rocco DeLuca has been compared to Jeff Buckley and Radiohead, but his earthy blues roots give his music a distinctive sheen. CNS Photo courtesy of Ted Newsome. "I was inspired to write the song by a discussion I had with Kiefer, who is a really talented, smart and generous individual," said DeLuca, the first artist signed to Sutherland's record label, Ironworks.

"We were at a bar and kind of talking about moving forward and putting my album out. Up until then, I loved to play live by myself because it was over (so quickly). Doing an album was a big step for me that said 'this is me and what I represent,' and it freaked me out."

Hardened by his two decades in the entertainment industry, Sutherland didn't mince any words. The veteran actor candidly told the Long Beach, Calif.-based singer-songwriter exactly what risks artists face when they pour their heart and soul into a work made for public and media consumption.

DeLuca, who in 2003 earned a degree in literature at Long Beach State University in California, listened carefully.

"Kiefer said: 'If you're going to jump into this game, you've got to know what's at stake and be willing to take the hits you'll get,'" DeLuca, 31, recalled. "Then he said: 'Listen, if you don't break your own heart, we'll do it for you.' And I said: 'I trust you to do that. And I trust you to kill me.'"

The result of that barroom chat was the blues-drenched title track of the very promising 2006 debut album by Rocco DeLuca & The Burden. The dozen-song release features a series of tortured but tender songs that draw from rock, folk, country, vintage blues and the hypnotic drones featured in the classical music of India.

But "I Trust You to Kill Me" is a title track in name only, since it doesn't appear on the album that bears its name. The song, featured on DeLuca's MySpace Web page (www.myspace.com/roccodeluca), can also be heard on the "I Trust You to Kill Me" DVD. Filmed on tour in England, it features a sometimes drunken Sutherland acting - with varying degrees of success - as DeLuca's one-man road manager and band promoter.

Despite not being on the album, the song has become a fan favorite at concerts by DeLuca and his four-man backing band, The Burden. DeLuca and his band play venues large and small and are comfortable in both as they strive to simply engage listeners with their earthy yet eloquent music.

"This is what excites me about the band," DeLuca said. "We carry the same intimacy and energy in a small venue as we do in a big place. You have to have both - intimacy and the power to explode - and I think we do."

His confidence is justified.

On record and especially in concert, he and his band expertly create an absorbing range of musical moods and textures perfectly suited to his atmospheric music.

Then again, The Burden may be the only rock-related band anywhere whose members perform on such exotic instruments as harmonium (a hand-pumped organ that originated in India) and cajon (a boxlike Peruvian hand drum).

DeLuca himself plays mostly on a Dobro and a National Steel. Each of these six-stringed acoustic guitars has a built-in metal resonator. The resulting increase in volume made both instruments popular with the pioneering Delta blues pioneers of the early 20th century, including such haunting (and haunted) DeLuca favorites as Son House, Mississippi Fred McDowell and Bukka White.

"The Dobro is vulnerable and aggressive at the same time," said DeLuca, whose love of Delta blues serves as a launching pad for his own music, not a final destination. "I kind of shunned the electric blues stuff. I felt like the storytelling going on with the early blues and folk musicians had a deeper element to it. I know one is not better than the other, but the early acoustic blues seemed closer to the source.

"Honestly, it was more evil; a darker, more haunted thing. It wasn't just about good times and turning up the volume. It was these powerful lyrics with simple accompaniment. And that, to me, is still the most powerful thing in music.

"When I say 'evil' or 'dark,' I just believe it's a part of our landscape as human beings and that you have to go to those places to find the real beauty in life. So, for me, it's a conduit to get to some optimism."

DeLuca's best songs make a powerful impact even in their most understated moments. A skilled instrumentalist and a gifted singer and songwriter, he draws from the past, not to slavishly mimic, but as both a steppingstone to the future and a way to salute his musical forefathers.

"There's definitely some kind of bridge between what inspired me and what I'm putting out," DeLuca said. "It's more fun and interesting the further back you go and dip into the well than it is to take from the latest thing that you like. So if I'm a conduit in anyway, shape or form for a kid to buy a Fred McDowell record, that's pretty cool."

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