

TODD BUTLER: ROCK 'N' DROLL STAR

BY DAVID MORRISON

I'm quite an admirer of Loudon Wainwright III. He's one of those rare songwriters capable of reducing the listener to teary-eyed melancholy with one song, then hysterical laughter the next. But in either mode, the constant beyond his obvious lyrical prowess is the brilliance of his guitar playing.

Although known principally as a musical satirist, there's plenty of the Loudon about Courtenay's Todd Butler. His riotous political commentaries aside, he's more than adept at penning the odd heartbreaker and, significantly, is a guitarist of considerable adroitness. So much so, in fact, that his latest CD release *Hamburger Soup* is entirely instrumental, with nary a mirthful ditty present. That said, humour is never too far away, Butler labelling his music 'FRAZZ' – his acronym for Funky-Folk-Roots-Jazz!

The man who describes himself as "a 46-year old Canadian with the body of a 65-year old Swede" is one of this country's sharpest wits with over twenty years of acclaimed performances behind him, notably on CBC Radio's *Madly Off In All Directions*. I spoke to Butler recently to discover, amongst other things, if his brand of biting musical comedy translates universally, or if he's ever faced blank looks.

"The worst gig I ever did was for the Edmonton Oilers," he began. "Just the players and coaches and spouses. They didn't get anything. I totally bombed. I realized about fifteen minutes in that

they actually didn't get the references, so I began laughing maniacally at my own jokes in sort of a defence reaction. Poor schmucks! They wanted to punch me out!" As flat, Butler states, was a gig for the Ontario Trucking Association. "Avoid this gig at all costs," he advises.

On his website, Butler proclaims: "I believe in social justice, equality, free enterprise, corporate accountability, making fun of selfish and/or stupid people ..." and such themes permeate his sharply observed songs. I wondered, therefore, whether he considers himself a protest singer. "Yes, and proud to be," he says. "I grew up on a commune in Alberta in the sixties and honestly thought all those hippies were trying to change the world. Turns out most of them were trying to get laid and avoid working for a living. But I still believe in the power of the people to change government policy through protest."

Everyone and anyone is fair game for Butler's satire or parody if he feels they deserve it. President George W. Bush has received a particularly savage tribute in the form of the achingly funny *Bushed!* – a song built on witty plays on words and bolstered by extraordinary flat-picking guitar wizardry. Butler is currently busying himself composing new songs about Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John McCain et al, but claims his favourite ever target is ex-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. "He was in power for so long that he became a guaranteed source of amusement!" cracks Butler.

I was intrigued as to Butler's chief comedic influences, thinking the more politically inclined like the late Bill Hicks might be high on the list. "Steve Martin,

Richard Prior and Monty Python. I also love the humour of Woody Allen," he reveals.

Musically, Butler's cast of heroes includes guitarists known for dazzle and dexterity, like bluegrass maestro Tony Rice and the genre-mashing Steve Morse, resident in rock legends Deep Purple since 1994. Both are touchstones for the *Hamburger Soup* material.

His preferred songwriters seem to straddle those who, like him, write from the heart with a social conscience or underpin their music with a degree of humour. But top of the pile for Butler is a revered, controversial artist who (including compilations and live releases) issued a staggering sixty-two albums during his lifetime and has been the subject of thirty-odd more from the vaults since his death in 1993. "Frank Zappa is my favourite musical comedian," Butler affirms. "(He is) the greatest genius of our century, both musically and humorously. The fact that he's so underrated and misunderstood speaks volumes about the 'dummed down' culture that we've created."

Like Butler, Zappa was a phenomenal guitar player and wrote howlingly funny songs. The rock icon understood the potency of music combined with humour as a device to get a serious message across. He expressed this perfectly, in fact, when saying: "You can't always write a chord ugly enough to say what you want to say, so sometimes you have to rely on the giraffe filled with whipped cream." Todd Butler understands that mentality implicitly – but look out world, he's onto you! ~

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