

JUNO WORTHY

“Just A Songwriter” – Kenny Butterill

Album Review by Mike Westerfield

Over the past year, Sisyphus Tracks - the community-style web radio operation for which I serve as Program Director - has played many outstanding 2003 roots/folk releases from some of Canada's biggest names, including Neil Young, Fred Eaglesmith, Kathleen Edwards, and the Be Good Tanyas, as well as the excellent Gordon Lightfoot tribute from Borealis/Northern Blues that includes covers by the Cowboy Junkies, Jesse Winchester, Bruce Cockburn and Ron Sexsmith. However, a lesser-known artist from the Great White North - Kenny Butterill - picked up a lot of new fans in 2003 with his Just A Songwriter CD, and deserves consideration along with his more famous countrymen when awards time rolls around.

In the title track of Butterill's second release, the roots/alt-country/folk songwriter/producer eschews the "Nashville machine" that chews up artists and spits out "product." "I like being just a songwriter," he sings, "Don't fit the showbiz scene." The tone is thus set for the rest of the record, a musically diverse collection of unpretentious, honest and laid-back tunes from an unpretentious, honest and laid-back songwriter.

Just A Songwriter has substantive virtues beyond just an anti-Nashville/showbiz stance, of course. There are, first of all, the songs - 14 of them plus two extended tracks. As a group, they demonstrate Butterill's skill penning insightful lyrics that understate rather than bang you over the head; the music does much the same, anchored by gently rocking hybrid grooves that coax rather than hammer. Standout tunes include a tribute to the late, great songwriter Townes Van Zandt, "The Townes You Left Behind," the existential "Is There More?", the seductive "My Austin Angel" and the infectious boogie-blues of "Canadian Road Trip."

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Just A Songwriter, however, is how good it sounds. Despite Butterill's limited range as a singer, there's a relaxed charm and sweetness that comes through in his vocals. Also noteworthy is the stellar cast of 16 musicians that Butterill, wearing his producer's hat, carefully assembled for the project, among them fellow Canadians Ray Bonneville and Willie P. Bennett, and ex-Commander Cody harmonica wizard Norton Buffalo.

Kenny Butterill is something of an internet phenomenon, an "outsider" who has used the power and relative democracy of the Web to market his music in North America and Europe. Without showbiz hype or even the obligatory tour, he's enjoyed some significant success with this new approach, landing in the Americana Top 40 and charting globally, including two #1 hits in Europe. How appropriate it would be if this outsider were invited in from the Canadian cold, so to speak, by receiving further validation of his work via the prestigious Juno route.

-- Mike Westerfield, SisyphusTracks.com (Nashville, TN USA)

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