



PLAYING TAG WITH THE DEVIL

An Interview With Robert Earl Reed

It would be considerably easier to describe the music of Robert Earl Reed in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is. For instance, it is not overproduced or ostentatious in a 'music industry' way. Nor does it aspire to appear sophisticated or hip. Despite its candour, it does not feign 'authenticity' in the way that much self-pronounced folk culture does. That kind of 'authenticity' has become another marketable commodity that can be bought and sold alongside

other genres. Reed's music not only defies facile categorisation, but makes one question the need to attempt the same.

Watching the music video for 'Boone County Thunder' ¹, a face peers out of the screen, guileless and uncurious, like a character from a Beckett novel. The eyes gaze out with an apparent lack of

1

(<http://www.paraphiliamagazine.com/dugeon.html>)

interest, and no trace of introspection. The eyes look out plainly and simply, seeing what is in front of them without agenda or any attempt to appropriate the visible world to any predetermined cultural scheme. The man's body is stringy and lean with a suggestion of sinewy strength, neither poised nor in repose. It simply *is*. More like a gnarled tree or a rock formation that has grown in place a vast amount of time.

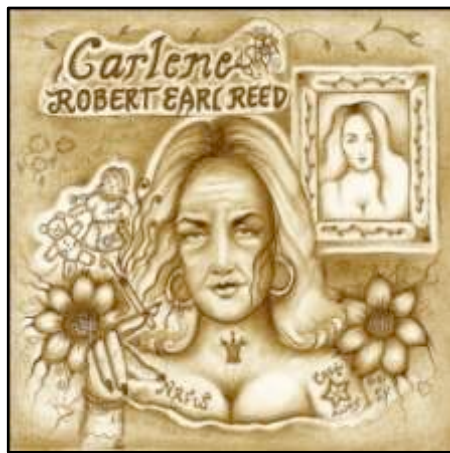
Accompanying these opening images is the sound of a thunderstorm, providing the 'backing' for the song itself - a natural orchestra that blends into the music without drama or bombast. Like the face of Mr. Brock, it simply *is*. A guitar starts up, playing simple, understated chords, E minor, A - a standard blues progression, strummed lightly, almost hesitantly. And then Robert Earl Reed starts singing. The voice is natural, rugged and square, not that of a trained singer. It creaks like a tree in the wind, and the words drop into the framework of the song itself, like pebbles into a pond, chosen more for their weight than for their superficial polish.

The song winds its unassuming way through your consciousness, and by the time it's finished, you find yourself wondering what you just heard.

It was not flashy or overbearing. If anything, you may feel nonplussed at its naivety, and bewildered by the way the singer made no effort to convince you of his beliefs or opinions, or to make claims for his significance. The song just *is*. You find yourself listening to it again, trying to recapture what you just experienced, and pin down what it was about the song that was so haunting. After the second listening you are none the wiser... but you're hooked.



Robert Earl Reed is an emerging artist of the Americana music genre. Hailing from Little Rock, Arkansas, he currently resides and creates his unique brand of music in the North Mississippi Hill Country. His debut album entitled *Carlene* will be released in January 2011.



Listening through the songs on this album, the most striking impression you get is one of familiarity - the kind of familiarity you feel when striking up a conversation with a stranger, and finding you somehow 'know' the person. It's an experience reminiscent of discovering an old family album in a junk shop or an abandoned house. Photos of people who may have given up the ghost ages ago, telling vignettes, whose small and incidental details reveal layers of intimate facts

about the lives of the subjects - lives that simultaneously intersect, yet tragically remain fixed on their own personal paths with their joys and tragedies.

The songs' characters and their backgrounds blend into each other inseparably and inevitably. The ravaging passage of time is shown modestly and compassionately, but without angst. There is nothing of Faulkner here. No pacts with, or duels with the devil, no Old Testament style prophecies, and yet one feels nonetheless a great sense of spirituality at work. A spirituality (God, if you like) that isn't set apart from our world, but that moves through everything natural, shapes it and changes it and imbues it with its quiet power and dignity.

Paraphilia Magazine conducted the following interview with Mr. Reed, who we have found to be a very gracious and forthcoming person...

Paraphilia Magazine: *You haven't been playing long, is that right? Tell us how it came about.*

Robert Earl Reed: In the Summer of 2005 I lost a dear friend, Sgt.

Daron Audrey Lunsford, to the War in Iraq. Daron and I had a mutual friend here at home, Jason "Taters" Evans who is a fine Guitarist. While hanging around one another, Taters taught me some chords on the guitar. For some odd reason those simple chords awoke something in my mind. I began to write. Poems came at a brisk pace. Thoughts long sequestered in my mind began to bleed out of me. The addition of music just seemed natural.



I was forty, and was living in a manner that, as I look back on now, was ridiculous. The music suddenly became a tangible endeavor that filled a void in my life. Abstract thought had always

been in my mind, but now I had an outlet so that I could share what I was thinking and living with others. As luck would have it, I was introduced to the Grammy Winning Artist, Jimbo Mathus (Squirrel Nut Zippers and much more). Jimbo has a studio (Delta Recording Services) here not far from my home. Initially I hired Jimbo to produce and sing three songs that I had written. I loved being in the studio. After the first session, Jimbo said, "You know you should really sing your own songs." I scoffed at the notion. I had never sang a note in front of anyone, but Jimbo was insistent. Jimbo and my co-producer Justin Showah (Afrissippi) patiently helped me "find" my voice over these last few years. There was no master plan to produce and release an album, but the songs kept coming.

PM: *In the themes of your songs, you don't go for the big overblown dramas so popular of Nashville, and yet they are incredibly gripping and moving.*

RER: The songs on *Carlene* are a mixture of personal experiences and observations I have of the human condition. They are my simple reflections on times and

people that I think we all know at a point in our lives. I write what comes to me. I don't set about to write a song about a particular subject. I either see something that moves me, or I contemplate a time or episode in my life and the words come forth. Each line writing the next until I've said what I want to say.

PM: *How much of a time span do those songs cover in terms of drawing on characters and experiences from your life?*

RER: I suspect that they are from the very beginning of my life to now. There are many metaphors wrapped in to the songs that represent many different times, people, or emotions that I have. My thoughts about these subjects began taking shape I suspect when I was a child, and the environment in which I was raised.

I've seen some of these characters many times in my life, both in myself my family, or in others ...random strangers who exhibit the same wants desires needs. I've lived, unfortunately, some of these experiences over and over as well and they've taken their toll.

PM: *Listening to the album, everything is recorded very professionally but the production job is quite simple. You've not used masses of studio effects, only minimal reverb. Tell us a bit about that.*

RER: The Brilliance that is Delta Recording lies in Jimbo and Justin. I am the writer who comes with the lyrics and the chord progression. They are ones who craft my raw materials into the songs. Together we create the textures. The studio has a soul of its own that is ever present in the songs. Jimbo uses vintage equipment like 1947 ribbon microphones, and vintage guitars and amps to turn out a very different sound. Each song on the album was recorded one night at a time. Most of them have few if any overdubs and were laid down in just a two or three takes. The emphasis being on capturing the feel and personality of the piece and not on the perfect placement of notes. Additionally I am blessed to have access to fine local musicians who would lend their talent to the work. Much like my writing, we would begin a session with no preconceived notion of what form the song would take. It was creation on the fly. We are influenced greatly by

the late Jim Dickinson the legendary Producer a dear friend and mentor to Jimbo, who believed in that magical way of creating. We didn't want to sound like anyone. We wanted to craft our own sound and I do believe we succeeded.

PM: *Are you really a reverend?*

RER: (Laughing) Yes, in a sense. An Internet reverend I am. The journey to become "ordained" came as an act of protest. For roughly \$39.00 U.S. ANYONE may become a Reverend or Doctor or whatever religious title they want. My point being that man is fallible, and just because someone has a title in front of his/her name doesn't make them any different than you or me. I look at history and see the destruction wrought in the name of religious ideology and it makes me sick. I have no problem with people believing what they want, just don't be violent, judgmental, or prejudicial in said practice. Peace and Harmony, that's what I wish for all. Unfortunately that will never come to pass I fear.

PM: *How much of your spiritual leanings come across into the music?*

RER: I suspect a great deal of my leanings are there. I do not shun others of faith, unless I find them to be hypocritical or dangerous. We all look into the void that will come for us all and each have to deal with it in our own way. I wish sometimes that I hadn't peeked in Pandora's Box.

PM: *The people you sing about, are they all real people you know or have known? Like Mr. Brock?*

RER: Yes those are all real people that I know or have known. Sometimes that person is myself. I am drawn to people who are different. I am drawn to pointing out the realities of life. Some say, "Wow, you are dark!" to which I answer, no, I'm a realist. I am pointing out the cold hard underbelly of life. I'm not being dark. I am merely trying to say, "Hey it's good to deal in reality and it's fine to be different." They are... I am... a person and there is meaning in our existence. Mr. Brock is a prime example. He didn't read or write very well. He was what people around here would call "touched". His speech was like that of some turn of the century back woodsman... he bathed very infrequently... in his home he had only electricity...

no running water, no television. He lived a very austere existence. However, sitting and speaking with him you would find that at his core he only wanted what everyone wants... acceptance, love, a family, etc. But because he was so outwardly different and had such odd behavioral tendencies he was ostracized within his community. The cruelty of life weeded him out of the gene pool and he never married nor bore children.



PM: *You've written about Mr. Brock on your blog spot <http://reverendrobertearreed.blogspot.com>*

RER: Well, I have many other stories in my head about that

soul. He was a very interesting fellow. His eyes were so clear. He couldn't write very well, and when he did, it was all Caps with dots in between and in a type of old English like "YE. SONS.OF.GAWD. SHOULD. NOT. BE. RESPECTER. OF. PERSONS." and he would write messages on cardboard and affix it to trees in the woods where I walked and hunted. You would be walking along and come upon four trees with Bible Versus and words written about his desire for love. He had a special way speaking that was much like his written word. He had a piano that he used two fingers to play for anyone who would listen. He wore "Walkin' Shorts" as he called them... this, I found out in my older years was actually his underwear. He would not find it odd to walk the property in those Walkin' Shorts.

PM: *How connected is your music with the place you live?*

RER: The music is reflective of the many places I have lived. I have lived in Chicago, Charlotte, and Los Angeles and small towns of Arkansas and Mississippi. In a nut shell, you experience much of the same wherever you go. There

are people all trying to survive. There are the "upper crust" and the "lower class"...there are just people, breeding, consuming, fighting, loving, dying, living out addictions, just being people. I know that having lived in many places and having seen many different ways of life that this has contributed to my desire to communicate about the human condition. I personally am a chameleon with respect to where or whom I am with. My music is influenced by my channeling (if that's the right word) the very personal feelings that I get when I encounter a human being in a certain way. I am a very empathetic person... I hurt when others around me hurt... that trait was directly from my mother... I do not like to see anyone in pain and it haunts me. Most people do not understand why I would even care... they think it's a waste of time. Perhaps it is, but it is there and I can't look away.

PM: *We won't ask who your 'influences' are because that's always odious. Who would you say taught you the most - in life and with regards to your music?*

RER: In life that would be my Mother and Father. They

divorced when I was three. My Mother worked and provided for me as best she could. I really didn't know my father until I was sixteen. However by this time they each had remarried and actually were close friends until he died. They both were empathetic people. Neither of them was tolerant of individuals who were not real at heart, and each of them encouraged me to do whatever it was in life that I wanted to do. They taught me that if I put mind to it I could accomplish whatever I wanted. They were each free-spirited and volatile. They were creative in many ways and encouraged the same in me. Musically it would start with the belief that Jimbo and Justin had in me that I could create something special. The sound and the philosophy behind the sound comes from living here in North Mississippi. There is a certain vibe that one gets by being around the Hill Country Blues music of R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, Otha Turner, Sid Hemphill and their sons and daughters, and grandsons and granddaughters. People like Jessie Mae Hemphill, and R.L. Boyce who are as real as you can get. An artist can't help but be touched by the area and local

talent that it offers. I have been fortunate to be privy to sessions at Delta Recording that featured Luther Dickinson, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Davis Coen, Eric Deaton, Shannon McNally (who lends her fantastic voice to "Castaway Star") and many others.



John Prin, the songs from the Book *North American Folk Songs*, John Lomax, and Darrell Scott, Johnny Cash, many artists... it's hard to name them really. I try very hard not to pattern or copy. I realize that much of what I have heard influences me. I love all music from Beethoven to Suicidal Tendencies to Sinatra, on and

on... so really it's just music in general. When I write, I write the words first and the music comes from the words and some place in my mind. They all have left indelible marks in my mind whether they hear it or not.

PM: *How did the album come about?*

RER: The album itself came out of the cosmic ether. One song led to another and so on. It was a labor of love for me and my two dear friends. It is my totem. One day I hope that my children will listen back to it and say, "Hey Pops was a unique guy, with some unique thoughts and he made a piece of Art that we are proud of." Earlier this year, some of my music was chosen to be in the score for *Where I Begin*, an independent film by Thomas Phillips and Melanie Addington. This exposure brought about the right time to release *Carlene*.

PM: *Can you tell us about the collaboration with Kim Dallesandro?*

RER: I found Kim through MySpace, and really enjoyed her writings and lyrics that she posted. I would share some of my music with her and she was

one of the people that gave me confidence to keep creating. Her song "Splash Me" struck a chord with me. Here is an excerpt from my Blog about this:

'The Featured song on my page is "Splash Me" by Ms. Kim Banks Dallesandro. This song came I would say by way of the fates and the supernatural oceans of thought and ideas that traverse the ether in the dark of the night. Through my admiration of Kim's visual work on her MySpace and Kim finding interest in my music we began to trade poems and quips back and forth.

I found that Kim is also quite an accomplished lyricist. When she posted "Splash Me" as a comment to other's sites, I knew in an instant that I FELT! that song. Kim was kind enough to invite me to interpret the song. This song was written by Kim in the 70s and recorded by Kimmie Rhodes in Austin back then. Unfortunately, Kim had lost the track and no one seemed to have a copy of it. So here were these profound words who had become separated from their music. I appreciate Kim letting us interpret the song. It is actually the first song that I have recorded

outside of my own writings. It is that special to me.'

PM: *Do you play live very often?*

RER: I don't play my own music live all that much. This type of music needs a certain kind of audience. I'm looking for them. (laughs) In February I'll be performing at Music in the Hall in Oxford, MS in support of the release of the *Where I Begin* movie. I hope that by building awareness of my music that I can find audiences that would like to hear it live, and I can plan economically feasible trips to perform it.

Currently I play in Jimbo Mathus' *Mosquitoville, Mississippi Songs and Stories*, which is a theatrical production that chronicles the 1880s and the Birth of the Timber Industry here in Mississippi to the Westward Expansion. I play tenor banjo and the part of "Mr. Chorley". It is a 10 to 12 piece Folk Orchestra that Jimbo has assembled to rave reviews. I am cutting my live teeth there, and what better teacher than Jimbo Mathus?

PM: *There's a weird irony in the way your music and words have found their way into the world via*

the internet. A strange marriage of the simple and minimal with high-tech. What do you think about that?

RER: I know that without the internet we'd have all never met. I have met so many fine artists of all disciplines. Lana Gentry, the surrealist, who is illustrating the artwork for *Carlene* is a fantastic find. Her style and vision fit perfectly with the rough hewn edges of my art. Also a long list of people who over the past five years gave me healthy criticism or pats on the back that emboldened me to continue honing my art. There is a bigger sea of voices than ever now, and to be heard by people like yourselves is such a great honor. It is allowing me to achieve that goal of leaving this totem and knowing that I did do something that was considered "good", and that feels GREAT!

PM: *And what next? What would you like to happen?*

RER: I would like to continue to write and record. I write a song every few days. I feel like I got started so late that I have so much more to say but in a limited time. I feel a real sense of urgency about that. I want to find my audience and then perhaps play

these songs live and tell the stories that are so important to me.



**Photos © Kaolin Bass, *Carlene*
Cover Art © Lana Gentry**

Carlene is available on pre-order special at:

www.hillcountryrecords.com

All pre-orders will be shipped by January 1st. For more information on the album, please visit:

www.carlenethecd.com

For booking, please contact Justin Showah at 662.816.4000.