

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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LEISURE & ARTS

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2004

## Honoring and Aiding an Ailing Rocker

By Luke Torn

While tribute albums have become a commonplace record-industry prop in the past decade, seldom do they add up to much more than a footnote for those involved. Occasionally, though, the musical community joins forces in ways unexpected and intense to produce a work of enduring stature. One such was 1993's "Sweet Relief," a set of Victoria Williams songs by myriad prominent artists, which revealed the hidden allure in her dark, enigmatic songs. The new double CD "Por Vida: A Tribute to the Songs of Alejandro Escovedo" (Or Music) strikes a similar vein. A rich, diverse collection, it's both an artistic and humanitarian triumph.

While the ailing 53-year-old Texas songwriter has always openly displayed affection for his musical heroes, contributions from peers, protégés, and elder statesmen alike—from blood kinfolk Pete Escovedo and Sheila E. to enormously influential rock 'n' rollers like John Cale (ex-Velvet Underground) and Ian Hunter (ex-Mott the Hoople)—make "Por Vida" a rarity indeed, a compilation crossing cultural and generational barriers.

"You know how much Mott the Hoople meant to me, the Velvet Underground meant to me," says Mr. Escovedo. "We've been trying to spread the word about those bands since I picked up a guitar. I tried to emulate them in a way, just hoping to kind of brush against that greatness, hoping it would rub off. Then to have all that come back to you, through their voice, is overwhelming."

Mr. Escovedo, previously diagnosed with Hepatitis C, collapsed during a performance in Tucson in April 2003 and has been undergoing treatment for the liver disease off and on since. For a man whose life and livelihood have been on the road, the hospitalization and subsequent convalescence have not been easy.

"It really is a devastating thing to have something taken away from you that's become such a large part of your life. But," he muses, "it's made me realize I don't have to go out there and kill myself."

Using "Sweet Relief" as a model, Mr. Escovedo's manager, Heinz Geisler, and Or Music's CEO, Larry Miller, conceived of a similar project for Hepatitis C awareness and treatment, as well as to contribute to Mr. Escovedo's medical and living expenses. Given the depth and breadth of his songwriting over his more than 20-year career, and a wellspring of devotion built up over endless touring, the musical community rose to the challenge, organizing benefit concerts nationwide, donating discount studio time, and contributing some 30 tracks to "Por Vida."

With its kaleidoscope of artists, from bluesman Charlie Musselwhite to indie-rock staples Giant Sand and the Minus 5, the collection testifies to the elasticity and influence of Mr. Escovedo's work. But it's the presence of musical legends, like Patti Smith Group guitarist Lenny Kaye, onetime Dylan sidekick Bob Neuwirth, and Faces alumni Ian McLagan that lend "Por Vida" a rare kind of authority.



Ismael Rodden

"All of these guys were so sweet," says Mr. Escovedo. "They were so amazing. That version by Bobby Neuwirth of 'Rosalie' is so beautiful. I mean these are people with busy lives, active and creative, and they don't need to be doing some benefit for some guy in Texas."

Born in San Antonio, but raised in California, Mr. Escovedo is part of a musical family that includes brothers Pete and Coke Escovedo, esteemed players in salsa and Latin music, pop-star niece Sheila E., as well as younger brothers Javier and Mario, both hard-boiled rockers.

Though his career began as guitarist for the Nuns, a promising San Francisco punk band that fizzled after one album, by late 1979 Mr. Escovedo relocated to New York. Hooking up with neo-Marxist brothers Chip and Tony Kinman, whose group the Dils was the most politically radical of the American punk bands, they hatched Rank and File. With fiery punk energy and iconoclastic reverence for old George Jones and Johnny Cash records, Rank and File was an anomaly on the early 1980s punk/new wave club circuit. Long after its demise, though, as the populist alternative country genre took hold, it became clear that the group was extraordinarily ahead of its time.

By 1982, Mr. Escovedo jumped ship again, and with brother Javier as well as (now highly respected songwriter) Jon Dee Graham formed the True Believers. Among the fiercest guitar bands of its era, the band combined many influences—from honky-tonk to heavy metal, from Mr. Escovedo's beloved glam and proto-punk impulses to mythological songwriting of the first order. The band teetered on the precipice of fame, signing to EMI in 1985. But label shakeups and an inability to capture on tape the intensity of their three-pronged guitar attack did them in.

Still, it's Mr. Escovedo's string of solo records beginning in 1992 that most calls attention to his talents. The trilogy comprising 1992's "Gravity" (virtually all of which is interpreted on "Por Vida"), 1994's "Thirteen Years," and 1996's "With These Hands" cemented his reputation. The emotional complexity of his songwriting—combining a poetic grace, eloquent expressions of pain verging on agony, and a musical approach ranging from country-rock to ragged Faces-like rockers to exquisite experimentalism—casts a wide net.

Through a prism of grief (his wife, Bobbie, committed suicide in 1991), cultural and personal alienation, and good old rock 'n' roll angst, songs like "She Doesn't Live Here Anymore," "Pyramid of Tears" and "One More Time" synthesized Mr. Escovedo's influences even as his musical palette expanded to include improvisation, chamber music, Latin and Mexican textures, and an army of stringed instruments.

The haunting "She Doesn't Live Here Anymore," the musical equivalent of electroshock, appears in a heart-stopping version on "Por Vida" by John Cale, who describes it as "a love song to a ghost."

"The first two solo records were so much about a tragic personal experience," says Mr. Escovedo, "that I think people thought I was taking advantage of the situation in a way. In later records, I tried to distance myself, tried to write about family more. I involved myself in trying to keep those stories alive that my father had told me. I think now there's got to be a way to combine both angles."

The most successful track on "Por Vida," and one that demonstrates the odd generational symmetry at its core, is Ian Hunter's "One More Time." Mr. Hunter sings this serpentine anthem as the great rock 'n' roll holy grail. Perhaps as much a metaphor for the transcendence of three-chord rock 'n' roll as a plea for redemption, this song, with smears of slide guitar, plenty of barrelhouse piano, and an ebullient vocal, is Mr. Hunter imitating Mr. Escovedo imitating Mott the Hoople, but its deliberate irony renders the song just that much more irresistible.

While his future is murky, Mr. Escovedo has returned to the stage this year for a handful of shows, and may revisit sessions cut with North Carolina producer Chris Stamey for a new album. For now he's happy to be free of Inteferon, the intense medication that was proving to be almost as detrimental as the disease it was treating.

"Since I'm clearing out this foggy phase of my life, I'm now looking at a lot of things differently. The songwriting will come in due time, but I'm not rushing it. I carry this thing around with me—I think Lou Reed said it—that says '90% of songwriting is thinking about it.' For me, it's been a lot of thinking about it right now."

Mr. Torn, an author from Austin, Texas, writes about music for the Journal.

