



Beau Jennings

The Verdigris

Beau Jennings wanted to make a record about New York. Originally from Oklahoma, Jennings had made a name for himself as a songwriter with a gift for making records that married lush, brooding music with honest and insightful lyrics. Jennings was living in Brooklyn when he sat down to write his second record, with every honest intention to make an album that fully encapsulated his experience in Gotham.

Yet despite his best effort to stay on topic, Jennings found himself drawn to memories of growing up in the small town of Inola, OK; not far from Oologah, OK, the birthplace of the world famous Oklahoman (and Jennings' boyhood hero) Will Rogers. "I've always loved Will Rogers and he always just seemed like the patron saint of where I'm from. You grow up with God and the Bible in Oklahoma but Will is kinda mixed up in there too," Jennings notes. "The Verdigris River flows from his hometown to mine, and I couldn't help but see that as a kind of opportunity to grab whatever he sent floating downstream".

Once Jennings succumbed to the undeniable pull of the muses the songs came quickly; as did ideas for ways to properly document them. Inspired by the field recordings Alan Lomax made for the Library of Congress in the 1930's, Jennings decided to travel to places Will Rogers had been during his life. There he would record on site the songs as they pertained to each location. There was Rogers' birthplace in Oklahoma (now covered by Oologah Lake); there was Times Square in New York City where Rogers first became famous; there was the North Slope of Alaska, where Rogers died in a plane crash. From abandoned radio stations in Los Angeles to demolished homes in Arkansas, Jennings chased Rogers's ghost across the country.

Jennings and his guitar rode planes, trains, cars, and ATV's to the locations. He also brought along a film crew to document the journey. Director and friend Bradley Beesley had already made several critically acclaimed Oklahoma-centric documentary films (*Okie Noodling* and *The Flaming Lips - The Fearless Freaks*) and was the natural choice to help capture Jennings' quest for Will Rogers on film.

With Beesley's guidance, Jennings created the feature length documentary film *The Verdigris: In Search of Will Rogers*. With the field recordings providing the soundtrack for the film, Jennings wanted also to create a studio album simply called *The Verdigris*, allowing him to explore the sonic space that the spirit of Will Rogers seemed to be creating in his mind. At Blackwatch Studios in Oklahoma, Jennings teamed with trusted producer and friend Jarod Evans (*The Flaming Lips, Broncho*) to oversee the process, which took place concurrent with filming.

(over)



Arriving at the various locations, Jennings noticed the environment would have an effect on what he felt a given song needed in terms of structure, lyrics, or just feeling. "A few times along the way - and this would often be the night before we were to shoot a scene - something told me I needed to rewrite the song. I would write weeks beforehand, trying to imagine how they would play out on site," says Jennings. "Yet when I would arrive I would feel a strong pull to rework them."

Once a scene was shot and the song shape was finalized, it would be then brought back to the studio to be tracked. "The constant back and forth got frustrating sometimes, I really wanted to knock out one then the other. But there was no way to do that and have the film and album be as coherent as they needed to be without that process".

Most songs performed in the film itself are solo affairs on the acoustic guitar or piano. Yet the studio provided an opportunity for exploration, and while most of the basic tracking was performed by Jennings and Evans a few friends stopped by to lend a hand. Sufjan Stevens provided backing vocals and banjo to the haunting "First Line of a Dream" and "Scattered Lights". Composer/songwriter Alan Vest (*Starlight Mints*) brought an Aaron Copland-esque string score to the tender "I'm Not Askin" as well as epic album closer "Me & Wiley".

The resultant songs are cloaked in heavy atmosphere, conjuring a world part remembered and part imagined. *The Verdigris* is an album about trying to understand, process, and ultimately connect with a long lost source of inspiration. It's the only true album completely based on the life of Will Rogers, and yet it stretches beyond that as love letter to Jennings' home state and ultimately to the idea of embracing one's roots as a way of growing up.

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