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Hey Hey, Woody Guthrie

Parker Millsap and John Fullbright Keep Okie Folk Alive



Parker Millsap plays Ram's Head on stage Sept. 14 (Courtesy of the Artist / October 5, 2013)

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In March, when I drove from Austin to Baltimore, I visited Oklahoma for the first time. Even compared to North Texas, the Oklahoma landscape seemed empty of vegetation and buildings. The huge sky over the brown-grass hills seemed to contain little but cows, church steeples, Indian ghosts, and loneliness.

I stopped off in Okemah, the town where Woody Guthrie was born and lived until age 16. It was a thriving oil-boom town when he was young, but it was abandoned by the big-money boys when the oil ran out. Today it's a testament to the fickle affections of capitalism: a row of stores closed up or barely hanging on, hunkered down below that big sky.

Guthrie often sang about the predations of corporations and banks, and for a long time his hometown tried to disown him for such songs. Now, however, when Okemah's most bankable asset is an association with the man who influenced Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and hundreds of others, the town has embraced its prodigal son. So there is a statue and two murals on Broadway, the town's main street, and an annual Woody Guthrie Folk Festival every July. However, the best way to honor Guthrie these days is by listening to a pair of young Okies armed with acoustic guitars and sharpened tongues: Parker Millsap and John Fullbright.

I realized this when I was in Austin to attend the South by Southwest Music Conference, and those two delivered two of the week's most impressive sets. Now they're coming our way: Millsap plays Rams Head On Stage on Sunday, and Fullbright plays the 9:30 Club Sept. 21.

Parker Millsap (no relation to Ronnie Milsap) had just turned 21 when he performed on the rooftop stage at Austin's Avenue on Congress. Short and wiry in a dark-green plaid shirt with an unruly shock of sandy hair combed up and back, he was accompanied only by acoustic bassist Michael Rose and fiddler Dan Foulks. Despite a twangy rasp, his tenor was strong and sweet on the songs taken from his first nationally distributed album, this year's "Parker Millsap" (Okrahoma Records).

His songs don't shy away from the Protestant religion that dominates Oklahoma these days, but Millsap is clearly torn, like Guthrie before him, between a love for the music and camaraderie of those churches and an antipathy for the cruelties committed in the church's name. When he introduced the new album's opening track, 'Old Time Religion,' in Austin, Millsap said, "This is about murder in the name of the Old Testament." What followed was a evocative character sketch of a father who refused to spare the rod and a son who grew up to strangle his wife with a banjo string.

He followed that up with 'Truck Stop Gospel,' a hard-swinging string-band romp about a preacher taking the holy word to the pill poppers and prostitutes of interstate parking lots. On 'Forgive Me,' a 6/8 ballad, he begs his family to grant a Christian pardon for his irreligious waywardness. On another song from the album, he reminds his listeners that 'Oklahoma' is the Choctaw word for "Land of the Red Man," a territory so hot that the devil has found a new home there. Millsap sings that he decided to leave his home state when the devil got elected governor. On another song, 'When I Leave,' he declares that he "can't be found without getting lost."

Leaving is a perennial theme for Oklahoma musicians, with Guthrie the prime example. John Fullbright, who is from Okemah, explored the price of all those departures when he performed during South by Southwest at St. David's Church. Standing in front of the altar in his shiny brown cowboy boots, faded jeans, and sideburns snaking down his baby cheeks, he picked out an arresting tune on his acoustic guitar and confessed, "I didn't know I was in love with you until you were gone." At the end of that song, 'Until You Were Gone,' he's alone in a room with a record left behind by his ex-lover, appreciating the melody for the first time.

Fullbright's 2014 release "Songs" (Blue Dirt Records) is one of the year's best. Fullbright is a fine lyricist ("In my heart stands a scarecrow; if he's hurt he doesn't say so," he sings on 'When You're Here'), but it's his mastery of melody and harmony that distinguishes him from just about everyone else in the Americana field. When he played his guitar at the Austin church, you could hear the connection to his homie Guthrie, but when he switched to his primary instrument, piano, you heard the link to two other Oklahomans: Jimmy Webb and Leon Russell.

'She Knows,' a stunning romantic ballad, gathered its power not only from the verbal catalog of all the astonishing things she knows, but even more so from the melody that ascended in bewilderment and descended in gratitude over the Randy Newman-like changes. He introduced 'Very First Time' by declaring, "I've always wanted to sing this song in a church," and he summarized his complicated feelings about Oklahoma's churches by singing, "I don't believe in Jesus; I'm told he believes in me, and I think that's good." And on "The One That Lives Too Far," a merciless examination of a long-distance relationship, there was something about his fatalistic vocal and churchy chords that allowed all the emptiness of Oklahoma to enter the song between the singer and the far-off lover. The desire to fill that emptiness with music and means has compelled Oklahomans from Guthrie onward to write songs that defy the negation of conformity and dust. By writing such songs on their own, Millsap and Fulbright pay better tribute to Guthrie than a statue ever could.

Parker Millsap plays Rams Head On Stage on Sept. 14. For more information, visit

ramsheadonstage.com. John Fullbright plays The 9:30 Club on Sept. 21. For more information visit 930.com.