

“There’s something magical about music”

Singer-songwriter Marshall Crenshaw speaks with the World Socialist Web Site

Richard Phillips
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Marshall Crenshaw is one of the few singer-songwriters to have maintained his artistic integrity and sanity after more than two and a half decades in the fickle world of the American rock recording industry. Crenshaw’s music is characterised by beguiling tunes and simple but evocative lyrics. Whether love songs or poignant homages to an innocent past, Crenshaw’s work is drawn from the classics of American popular music—rockabilly, rock and roll, country, gospel and rhythm and blues.

Born and raised in the Detroit area, Crenshaw took up the guitar at an early age and was involved in a variety of local bands before securing a part in the touring Broadway musical *Beatlemania* in the late 1970s, in which he played the role of John Lennon. When the show began to wind up after 12 months he started making demonstration tapes of his own compositions and developed a following for his band in the New York rock club scene.

His first single, the Buddy Holly-influenced “Something’s Gonna Happen”, led to a self-titled LP in 1982 and a steady output of albums since. These include: *Field Day* (1983), *Downtown* (1985), *Mary Jean & 9 others* (1987), *Good Evening* (1989), *Life’s Too Short* (1991), *Live...My Truck Is My Home* (1994), *Miracle of Science* (1996) *The 9-Volt Years* (1998), *#447* (1999), *I’ve Suffered For My Art... Now It’s Your Turn* (2001), and his most recent album, *What’s in the Bag?* (2003).

During this time Crenshaw also appeared in Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Peggy Sue Got Married* and played Buddy Holly in *La Bamba*, the movie about rock and roller Ritchie Valens. He has written on pop music history, jointly authored a cinema reference book entitled *Hollywood Rock & Roll*, composed songs for film and television, and collaborated in the production of the new remastered version of Marvin Gaye’s beautiful 1971 *What’s Going On* album.

Perhaps the best introduction to Crenshaw’s 1982-96 recordings is *This Is Easy: The Best of Marshall Crenshaw*. Some of the songs on the album are “Someday Someway”, “Cynical Girl”, “Mary Anne”, “Our Town,” “Whenever You’re On My Mind”, “What Do You Dream Of?” and “Starless Summer Night”. A diverse range of musicians have recorded Crenshaw’s songs, including Bette Midler, Robert Gordon, Kelly Willis, Marti Jones, the Gin Blossoms and the Bellamy Brothers.

He recently concluded a brief two-city tour of Australia. In Sydney he performed at The Basement and later spoke with Richard Phillips about his musical background and other influences on his work.

Richard Phillips: Could you give me a rough outline of your main artistic influences?

Marshall Crenshaw: I’m originally from the Detroit area, I’m 50 years old and have been driven to try and make music for most of my life. I was interested in music and musical instruments as a young child and now have a five-year-old son who is exactly the same.

My father’s family was from the South—Tennessee and Missouri. There

were a lot of transplanted hillbillies in the Detroit area and a lot of transplanted Southern culture and Southern social tensions.

RP: Your father worked in the auto industry?

MC: No, he worked for the city that we lived in for a while. He was like an assistant city manager but kind of drifted around a bit in his working life and finally ended up in a hospital as a white-collar guy. My mother was a junior high school teacher. Her father was French Canadian and her mother German and she lived in the Detroit area all her life.

I grew up during the 1950s and 60s and was drawn to what was on the radio at the time. There was a lot of local material—r&b, country music and gospel. We weren’t religious at all but I have always loved gospel music. During the sixties garage bands began to become popular in my town and instrumental rock was big. I started playing guitar when I was 10 years old, in 1963, just before the Beatles came on the scene, and the first music I tried to learn was The Ventures and Duane Eddy and that kind of stuff.

RP: You mentioned Southern musical influences. What were they?

MC: The songs that grabbed me when I was a kid were “Black Slacks” by the Sparkletones and “Suzie Darlin’”, and I loved material by Buddy Holly and of course the Everly Brothers. All that rockabilly pop stuff with electric guitars nailed me to the wall so to speak. I don’t know why it affected me so much but it really did.

But back in those days it wasn’t just rock and roll on the radio, there was a wide range of material, including post-war big band music and in the late 60s FM rock stations began to appear. The FM rock station in Detroit was kind of geared to stoned people and college students and so there would be lots of jazz and blues, and they’d even play Stravinsky once in a while. I have a wide-range of tastes partly because of the music I heard on the radio at that time.

RP: Is this station still operating?

MC: No, American radio is far different now. Today there are about six or seven conglomerates that own all the radio stations. The music they play is totally regimented and structured, and it’s getting worse, so I don’t even listen to commercial radio anymore. I won’t subject myself to even five minutes of it.

RP: What part of Detroit are you from?

MC: We lived about three miles outside the city limits, in a town called Berkley.

year-old daughter. We had our kids late in life so I'm determined to get out in the world and hustle up as much work as I can. I have to admit that there was a period in the late 80s and early 90s where I was apathetic and kind of gloomy and could lay around on my ass for a long time. I'm glad to say that I don't want to do that anymore.

RP: And artistically?

MC: I still have the same enthusiasm for music that I've always had. There are a lot of good artists out there and there is always great old stuff to discover. There's something magical about music—it's one of god's gifts to humanity—and I constantly draw energy from it. Although I'm not the wild consumer of music that I used to be, I try to keep my ears open and keep learning—I don't want to become a fossil.

RP: What was your response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks?

MC: I was shocked and dominated by a sense of unadulterated sadness. We were living in Brooklyn at that time and very close to the killing fields. There was death and horror in the air—you could see it, feel it and smell it—and because I'd been recently flying quite a bit I thought a lot about the people on the planes and their fear. It raised a lot of issues for me.

RP: At the concert last night you made an oblique reference to the Bush administration and called him a liar. Could you elaborate?

MC: I was mortified when Bush got into the White House in 2000. It floored me the way he came in. Then when 9/11 happened and Bush decided to use the attack as a propaganda device, I thought it was the coldest thing I'd ever seen in my life. I'll never get over the fact that they've played on people's emotions to sell the war in Iraq. This is a crime as far as I'm concerned. When you think about those desperate people leaping off the World Trade Center and splattering on the sidewalk and realize how the Bush administration used this. It's too much.

I've been eager for the next election, and have been ever since the last one, and I'm praying that Bush gets run out onto the street. He is the most unworthy and unqualified person to ever serve as president of the United States. There's no doubt in my mind about that.

RP: But there's no real difference between the Republicans and the Democrats—they both speak for big business and the rich.

MC: Obviously Kerry's not going to be perfect and you're never going to get unanimity of opinion in a country like the US. I guess the first thing they want to do restore is some sense of honor to the presidency and that's not such a bad goal.

RP: What do you think about the fact that the Democrats have said they'll not be withdrawing troops from Iraq?

MC: I was hoping there'd be an antiwar candidate on the ticket and was disappointed when Kerry picked Edwards. I don't know why, I guess he's got to get elected. The other problem is a lot of Americans are not politically engaged, for the most part. They are allowed to go through life thinking that it's irrelevant, which is very foolish.

There are also a lot of people who dig Bush. I don't understand this, his quote unquote charisma never worked on me. The whole thing is such a mess—a real horror show—but all political eras must come to an end and I'm just hoping that this one will end sooner rather than later.

RP: What was the Detroit music scene *Motown*, the movie, shows a really vibrant place.

MC: Allan Slutsky contacted me when he was putting together his book on James Jamerson [Motown bass player] and I sang with the Funk Brothers in the Apollo Theatre when the film premiered in New York so I know this movie backwards and forwards.

Motown was huge in the sixties, Detroit had a real positive self-image and the city was the energy centre for the whole community. It gave everybody that cared about popular music and their community a sense of pride. Then I saw it all vanish, which was very sad. It began to happen when I was getting old enough to start to think about the future and finding a place in the world.

I still think about Detroit a lot and I don't want to say anything bad about it because it's part of me. But the city just seemed to be imploding and so by the time I was about 22 or 23 I just wanted to get out. I've heard it's slowly starting to pick itself back up and I hope that's true. There are some interesting things musically starting to come from the city so it seems to have found its musical voice again.

RP: How did all this impact on you?

MC: It was a heavy burden and I had a really sad outlook on things for quite a while. I've been on the east coast for almost 30 years and know people from Newark, New Jersey, where there have been big job losses, and they have similar kind of haunted memories.

RP: A number of your songs seem to be references to Detroit. "Where Home Used To Be" comes to mind.

MC: I don't go round saying this but yes they are. "Where Home Used To Be" was inspired by a great web site called The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit. An artist called Lowell Boileau puts it together and you should take a look at it.

Although it was written in the wake of September 11, when I was in a sad and introspective frame of mind, I was looking at the site and discovered that the hospital where my father worked had been demolished. Everybody needs and desires a sense of place and so the song is about what it feels like to revisit where you came from and find that it has been tragically changed.

RP: Could you comment on music scene in the 1980s and 90s?

MC: To generalize I'd have to say that I'm not crazy about music from the 80s. At the beginning it seemed it was going to be a good decade but then drum machines and other things came along which screwed things up.

The music I love best is where you hear people in some sort of a musical discourse. That element, and a sense of immediacy, is absent in a lot of the material produced in the last 20 years.

The record producers I worked with during that time insisted on musicians doing all their parts separately. If you made an album you'd spend the first three days recording the drums, then the bass player would do his thing, and finally I'd come in and do the guitar parts and vocals.

Somebody along the way got the idea that recording rock and roll music was supposed to be like brain surgery—nit-picky, anal-retentive and all that stuff. Of course I still do recordings where I play everything—I'm enough of a narcissist to enjoy that—but the material I love must have some spontaneity to it. I want to hear people with real personas and blood in their veins.

RP: What sustained you emotionally and artistically during these times?

MC: I'm pretty busy and play about 50 gigs a year. What keeps me motivated is that I have two young kids—a five-year-old son and a seven-



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