

Review: *At My Age* by Nick Lowe

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At My Age is the latest album from British singer-songwriter Nick Lowe (born 1949) and his first studio album since 2001's *The Convincer*. The new work finds Lowe, 40 years into his career, a bit raspier in voice than usual, but still an expressive singer and still crafting excellent songs, rich in emotion and drawing inspiration from the best traditions of pop, country and rock music.

At My Age, like *The Convincer*, is an understated album with acoustic instruments and warm horn arrangements playing a major role. These days Lowe typically likes to write from a character's point of view, and the character-narrators of *At My Age* are especially frank. Their stories alternate between hopefulness, sorrow, forgiveness and contempt. There is a depth and range of human emotion found on the album and throughout Lowe's work that is mostly lacking in today's vapid pop music scene.

The album opens with "A Better Man," bringing to mind the somber and elegant country music of Bobby Bare's recent album *The Moon Is Blue*. Here Lowe takes on the character of a man who first claims there are "no new leaves left for me to turn over," but after falling in love, changes his mind: "I don't know much, but one thing's for certain, you make me want to be a better man." The redemption of lonely and isolated characters through a reconnecting with their fellow human beings is a theme that will reoccur through the album.

"Long Limbed Girl," one of the album's very best songs, is set to a loping, almost reggae rhythm. Lowe tells the story of a man who discovers a picture of an old flame from many years ago and begins to wonder whatever became of her. He sings, "I want to know what happened after me/did you find love eventually/and was it everything you hoped it would be/or has it been a long and bitter road?" Finally, he hopes the girl in the picture has indeed found happiness: "Wherever you are, follow your star." There's something incredibly warm and generous about the song.

"I Trained Her To Love Me" is a sly number that finds Lowe demonstrating some of his famous wit, albeit with a very straight face. In a recent interview with NPR's Terry Gross, Lowe described "I Trained Her To Love Me" as "a funny song about misogyny." Lowe, who assumes a male chauvinist character for the track, sings "If you think it's depraved and I should be ashamed, so what!" He told Gross in the same interview he was very amused by the "unrepentant" attitude of

such characters as well as the enthusiastic response to the song by a few male audience members at concerts who hadn't gotten the joke.

"Hope For Us All" is another song in which a despairing and lonesome narrator finds hope in his connection to people. "I must admit," sings Lowe, "there were times when all I ever did was climb the wall, but if even I, a feckless man, who's thrown away every single chance he's ever had can find someone to check his fall, there must be hope for us all."

These are just a few highlights in an album of excellent original compositions and remarkable new readings of some classics, such as the 1960s' pop tune "Not Too Long Ago." At times the rapid shifts in points of view among characters from one song to another can be a bit jarring; the album isn't much more than 30 minutes long and it goes fast, but Lowe's sincerity and talents are never in doubt. *At My Age* is a fine addition to this singer-songwriter's catalogue.

Nick Lowe began making music in the late 1960s with the band Brinsley Schwarz, emerging from a "pub rock" music scene in England where bar bands, at odds with the mainstream music environment of the time, played music influenced by early American rock-n-roll and R&B. It was during his years with Brinsley Schwarz that Lowe wrote his best known song "What's So Funny 'Bout Peace Love And Understanding."

The song, as recorded by Brinsley Schwarz, was only half-serious, with Lowe saying in a brief and ridiculous voiceover during the track, "We must have peace, more peace and love, if just for the children of a new generation." In more recent years—and especially since the war in Iraq—both Lowe and Elvis Costello, whose recording of the song (produced by Lowe) is better known, have performed the composition with much greater sincerity.

The 1970s would prove to be a busy decade for the performer. Lowe began a solo career, creating a number of recordings in an eclectic, often tongue-in-cheek style drawing inspiration from several musical genres. During this time Lowe began to taunt the dreadful pop band Bay City Rollers with intentionally naive and ridiculous songs in their honor. He also recorded one of his best songs, "I Love My Label," an ironic tribute to his record label, which he despised (the feeling was apparently mutual). In it he sings: "We're one big happy family. I guess you could say I'm the poor relation of the parent company."

Lowe's peculiar sense of humor made its way into all facets of his recorded work, even the titles of his albums. He once named an EP *Bowi* in response to David Bowie's having titled an album *Low*.

Jesus of Cool, released in the US as *Pure Pop For Now People*, was Lowe's first solo album and along with his album *Labour of Lust* gave us the songs on which Lowe's reputation, even today, rests. "So It Goes" and "I Love The Sound Of Breaking Glass" from *Jesus of Cool* and "Cruel To Be Kind" from *Labour Of Lust* are probably the best remembered tracks from these sessions and all are outstanding songs in the so-called "Power Pop" style.

"Marie Provost," also from *Jesus of Cool*, deserves a special mention. The song (with misspelled name) is based on the life of silent film actress Marie Prevost, whose most notable role was perhaps in Ernst Lubitsch's *The Marriage Circle*. In spite of some early promise, Prevost's career, particularly when the sound era came in, faltered. She struggled with substance abuse and found less and less meaningful work. She would die alone in her apartment at age 38. Her body, which was not found immediately, was eventually discovered by police to have been chewed on by her pet dachshund.

With its refrain of "She was a winner that became the doggie's dinner," Lowe's "Marie Provost" may not be in the best taste, but it communicates something memorable about the cruelties of the entertainment industry.

In the 1970s Lowe also gained notoriety as a producer for other musicians. His rough and direct style of production earned him the nickname "The Basher." Lowe produced several albums for Elvis Costello including *My Aim Is True*, *This Year's Model* and *Armed Forces* as well as the first single by The Pretenders and the debut album by punk rock group The Damned.

Around this same time, Lowe formed the group Rockpile with Dave Edmunds, Billy Bremner, and Terry Williams. Because Lowe and Edmunds, the principal songwriters and vocalists of the group, had recording contracts with different record labels, this talented group effectively became a studio "house band" for Lowe and Edmunds' solo projects. Only one album was released under the Rockpile name, 1980's *Seconds Of Pleasure*, featuring Lowe's excellent composition "When I Write The Book."

While Lowe did some outstanding work during this hectic period, it does not, in this author's opinion, represent the very best work of his career. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Lowe's work would mature, and while wit and humor has not disappeared from his music, he's become less flippant and more serious over the years. And where Lowe's genre hopping works of the 1970s were eclectic, if not manic, his later work has blended musical styles more seamlessly.

The Impossible Bird (1994) is Lowe at his very best. This is the album that featured "The Beast In Me" which country icon Johnny Cash, Lowe's friend and onetime father-in-law, would

record as part of his *American Recordings*. Along with the extraordinary love song "Shelley My Love" and several more highlights, it also featured the song "Where's My Everything?" in which the narrator, finding his life at odds with the promise of success and security commonly called "the American dream," asks "Where is the beautiful family home that I was promised on the news at 10? Like my personal place in the sun, it never happened along."

Dig My Mood (1998) featured a version of Henry McCullough's "Failed Christian" in which Lowe revealed a distaste for organized religion. Here the narrator of the song begins by singing the words "I'm a failed Christian" with sorrow and regret, but when he takes a long, hard look at his religion and realizes how little use he had for it in the first place, he ends by singing the same words again, this time defiantly.

"You Inspire Me," from the same album, is a lilting piano blues and as lovely a love song as one could hope to hear. Lowe sings "You inspire me/When my well is almost dry/You inspire me/and in the twinkling of an eye/I'm back on my feet/You're so inspiring to me."

It's interesting to note that in Lowe's work, love is never a romanticized, at-first-sight occurrence; it requires the greatest effort. In contrast to the pip squeaks playing at machismo in pop music today, Lowe doesn't always get the girl in his music, and more importantly, he doesn't believe he always *deserves* to get the girl.

Lowe's career has continued to move in a number of exciting directions over the years. He's a rare figure in pop music today. He's a musician well versed in the history and traditions of his art form, and when choices between the concerns of the market and the interests of the artistic process have come into play, he has consistently chosen art over commercial interests. As he told *The A.V. Club* in another recent interview, "I don't really belong in the mainstream, and I quite like that." He went on to say, "I wanted to be, you know, a bit more of a mischief-maker." This is certainly not the least healthy attitude to have. The world could use a few more artists like Nick Lowe.



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