

Avery County, I'm Bound to You by Barton Carroll: Coming to terms with one's roots

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American folk musician Barton Carroll has released a new album, titled *Avery County, I'm Bound to You*, that takes the listener on a pensive journey through his musical heritage. Along the way, Carroll meanders through the hills and dells of North Carolina, with a misstep here and there but generally maintaining a firm footing.

This is Carroll's fourth solo album and marks a homecoming of sorts for the singer-songwriter, who began touring with the folk-rock band Crooked Fingers in 2002. Avery County, nestled in the mountains of North Carolina's western border with Tennessee, is his childhood home. He grew up around American roots music, including the renowned bluegrass musician Ralph Stanley, and the legendary folk guitarist Doc Watson, who lived in the region.

Finding inspiration in the musical styles of the past, like any art form, has always been a given, especially among younger artists coming into their own. Carroll borrows heavily from several of his predecessors.

It does not go unnoticed that many young listeners with no prior exposure to such music respond favourably to these sounds and the ideas contained therein. Some of the best popular music of the 20th century managed to capture the spirit of tumultuous periods. Where these sentiments of the past converge with current moods of unrest and upheaval, one can often find young people listening with rapt attention.

The current crop of artists do not always work through these ideas and historical experiences in a conscious manner. Thus it comes to pass that the oft-mentioned "new" folk revival repurposes the musical stylings that brought prominence to certain artists of the past, while largely omitting the subversive or popular elements that marked their finest work. On the whole, technique and vision have not yet been reconciled in

these latter-day productions.

Carroll takes a stab at it, beginning with *The Straight Mile*, an evocative account of his region's musical history and of his place within it. Here, according to Carroll, the backbreaking toil of Appalachian life, built around coal and mineral mining, was crystallized in the "high lonesome" sound that is so often associated with the region.

As the song approaches its emotional and narrative apex, Carroll rounds out the isolated sounds of the acoustic guitar and the snare drum with an electric keyboard and organ in tandem, culminating in a brief but affecting organ solo. There is an amusing discord in this brew, which allows Carroll to pay homage to the formative influence that early punk music played in his life. It is a technique that he employs a few more times over the course of the album.

The lyricism of Carroll's ballads harkens back to the rich folk traditions of both the British isles and the Blue Ridge mountains, drawing the listener into compelling yarns of the heroic, tragic, and comic. Along with this, Carroll, who studied literature, endows his verse with as much dynamism as he can muster. His attempts pay off for the most part, though there is the occasional hiccup where his words become incongruous; square pegs in round holes.

Throughout the album, Carroll exhibits a melodic sensibility and talent for arrangement honed by experiences on both sides of the musical tracks. The Cajun-inspired *It Had To Be a Train*, about one man's frustrating experiences with an uppity ex, uses the fiddle and accordion to mock the poor guy in turns. *What a Picture Is*, following the absurd antics of a jilted lover, makes ample use of an ensemble of horns, strings, and a flute to amplify the emotions of a clearly nervous wreck.

Three of the album's traditional folk tunes, *Laveda*, *The Beech Mountain Waltz*, and *Mama's Making Something On the Loom*, come out like freshly-pressed linens, despite their familiarity. This can be attributed in part to Carroll's tremulous voice, arguably the most dominant musical instrument at play. As if to dispute that claim, however, he pays tribute to the late Doc Watson with skillful guitar work on *Every Little Bit Hurts*, a sketch of an alcoholic and a stripper who have hit rock-bottom, and the town pastor hell-bent on saving everyone's souls.

Colourful small-town characters and ghosts of the past commingle in Carroll's imagination, perhaps alluding more to modern Appalachian life than even he realizes. The track *Pauline*, in which he dons the cloak of the reaper to drag an embittered single mother to the grave, is devastating as a portrait of depression, punctuated near the end by the shriek of the electric guitar.

How many such individuals in Appalachia, driven to despair over worsening conditions of life, contemplate the unspeakable? As of 2011, Avery County's poverty rate was 18 percent, 2 points higher than the national average. In 2010, food stamp usage was 11 percent in total and 23 percent among children, up 63 percent from 2007 and most likely far higher now. A recent University of Wisconsin report revealed that county residents have "zero percent access to 'healthy foods.'"

The final two tracks of the album are the most introspective and hopeful. *The Saviors of The World* is a buoyant hymn to adolescent energy and idealism, while making clear that Carroll views his role less as a current participant than a chronicler. In the album's final, title track, the singer sits himself down in a confessional booth, fondly recalling the virtues and vices of Appalachian life, and acknowledging his own artistic limitations in the process.

In the album's liner notes, Carroll muses that his return to roots signifies a mid-life crisis. Commercially, music like his has not been in vogue for quite some time, leading him to make rather deflated statements during interviews about his various albums' prospects.

But the sorry state of popular music is not primarily the fault of artists such as Carroll, and cannot remain stagnant forever. Honest, outraged voices are making themselves heard, and the chorus must be strengthened. Carroll would be well-advised to continue reflecting

upon the comings and goings of ordinary people, while broadening his reach and sharpening his vision.



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