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MAGAZINE

FREE

June 2017



Howie Newman



The Ben Cote Band



The Velvet Ants



Laura Vecchione

Howie Newman

by Brian M. Owens

Howie Newman is a seasoned veteran of the local music scene both in the live arena and recorded realm. Since the late 1970s, Newman has been releasing well received vinyl albums that over time have made the transition to the digital realm [CDs, mp3s, streaming] while performing at coffeehouses, libraries and town summer concerts throughout New England.

Hailed as “whimsical” by critics, radio jocks and fans alike, Newman is a storyteller of the highest order who has a keen eye for chronicling everyday life in his songs with a light heart and plaintive voice. We talked one spring morning and he told me about his successful musical journey that continues to this day...

METRONOME: Your new album, *When You're Happy* is excellent. How long did it take to write and record?

Howie Newman: Well, it took a while. About a year to record. The songs were all written before I started recording. I don't write the songs as I go along. When I'm doing an album, I just focus on the recording of it.

METRONOME: How long did it take to write the songs?

Some of them were older than others. I usually spend a week or so on a song. I get the basics down on the first shot and then play around with it. It's an organic way of writing. I don't really have a musical background. I just keep moving on it until I get it to the way I like it.

METRONOME: How does the songwriting process work for you? Do you hear lyrics first?

It's funny, I always start the same way. I always have a theme that evolves in to a couple of lines of a song like, “My Baby Can't Parallel Park.” Once I got that phrase down, I started writing the song.

I write serious songs, funny songs and whatever comes to me really.

METRONOME: It sounds as if many of the songs are personal as well. Is “My Baby Can't Parallel Park” about someone close?

My wife.

METRONOME: It's easy to write about what you know isn't it?

Yes. I tend to write about things that happen to me, although I have written a few fantasy songs too. What you hear is what you get. There's nothing too terribly cryptic about the stuff I write about. I think that's

part of the appeal. People understand what it's about and they can relate to it.

The song, “Our Kids Aren't Kids Anymore” is obviously about my kids growing up. I've gotten very good response to that song. When I play it in concert, I can see people leaning forward and nodding their heads to it.

METRONOME: You have an uncanny knack for chronicling everyday life in song...

I guess that's true.

METRONOME: You stated earlier that you don't have a musical background. Can you elaborate on what you mean by that?

Well, I'm a musician. I perform and play

When I was in elementary school I knew how to read music, but I don't really read music now. That's interesting because I can write songs and arrange them, but I do it just by ear. I think a lot of musicians are like that.

METRONOME: How old were you when you picked up a guitar?

I didn't start playing guitar until I went to college. I was eighteen before I started playing.

METRONOME: How about your singing?

I have always sung, but I didn't take myself seriously as a singer. Even when I started playing the guitar, I didn't have a sense of whether or not I was a good singer. One time



the guitar and sing, but I don't have any real musical background. I never studied music. I had lessons informally early on. I would bring in songs that I wanted to learn and the teacher would teach me how to play it and that would be it. Everything else I learned on my own. I listened to music and tried to emulate some of the things I would hear and worked on developing my own style.

I recorded myself and thought, That's not too bad. When I was in college I performed at coffee houses and got more confidence in my senior year and took it from there.

METRONOME: You're more of a storyteller in the vein of Dylan and Seeger rather than a crooner.

I think I do okay.

METRONOME: How many CDs do you

have out under your name?

I have five. Two of them are full length and three are EPs.

METRONOME: What was the name of your first release?

The first CD was released in 2001 and it was called *Here We Go Again*. Basically it was remastered from vinyl records that I had recorded decades ago.

METRONOME: So you have released vinyl as well?

I still have some left. I did a couple of 45s and a few EPs on vinyl. That's the way I started. I've been around for a while. I only have a few of those recordings left though. People don't ask for them and I really don't sell them anymore.

METRONOME: Vinyl is making a comeback though.

The disadvantage of that of course is that you can burn CDs and email mp3 files, whereas the vinyl thing limits you to what you can do.

So the first album was six songs that were on vinyl and one song that I recorded in a studio at WBZ a long time ago. That album relaunched my career having not done it for a while.

METRONOME: What was the second album called?

The second album was *Baseballs Greatest Hits* which was a collection of baseball songs that I had written. The vinyl for that came out in 1979 and the CD came out in 2001 shortly after the first CD. When I wrote that album and put it together, it might have been the first album of original baseball songs that anyone had ever done. Everyone writes baseball songs now, but it wasn't quite in vogue back then.

METRONOME: Are you a huge Red Sox fan?

I'm a big baseball fan and a huge Red Sox fan too, but I just love baseball. I'll go to any baseball game anytime.

METRONOME: Is that what inspired the writing of the album?

I think so. I grew up in New York and used to be a Mets fan a long time ago. One of the songs on the album was about Tug McGraw. He was a left handed relief pitcher with a very engaging personality. I wrote a song about him.

My most famous baseball song is about drinking in the bleachers at Fenway Park. I'd like to think I'm a little more sophisticated than that, but people seem to really like that

one. That release was a five song EP.

METRONOME: What was next?

The third one was a big project. It was a thirteen song, full length album in 1996. I decided at the time that I wanted to make a really good album although I think my recent album is really good too.

I had some really good musicians on it and did some nice arrangements. Duke Levine played on five tracks and did a lot of different kinds of stuff. I'm a big Mary Chapin Carpenter fan and I had watched him play at Great Woods in front of 10,000 people. It was exciting to have him play on the album. He was a terrific musician and a terrific guy. He showed up with seven or eight guitars.

A great keyboard player, Jim Gambino, was also on the album. He did a fabulous job. He played a lot of piano on that album.

Billy Novick played saxophone and soprano sax on three songs. He's great. It was an expensive operation, but I wanted to blow it all out.

I performer a lot as a duo, so this was really an opportunity to see what the songs would become in the studio. Live is a different thing, but when you're in the studio, you want to see what you can turn the song in to. I was really happy with the way it came out.

METRONOME: What came after that album?

After that was a follow-up: Baseballs Greatest Hits- Volume 2 as a six song EP. People really liked that one.

METRONOME: When did the idea for your latest CD, When You're Happy, come to you?

I had ten songs that I really liked that I hadn't recorded yet and it was time to do it.

METRONOME: You recorded with Rob Ignazio. How did you meet Rob?

I have done my last three projects with him. He plays bass and is a really good engineer. He has good ideas and w're on the same wavelength. He knows what I'm trying to do. He also played electric guitar on one of the songs.

METRONOME: Where did you record the project?



We started out at this guy's home studio in Woburn and then finished up at Woolly Mammoth.

The other guy that stands out on the new album is the piano player, Tim Ray. He played with Lyle Lovett for a long time, Bonnie Raitt and Aretha Franklin. He's a local guy.

METRONOME: How did you meet him?

I asked Billy Novick if he knew a piano player and he gave me a list of guys. I emailed Tim. He lived locally and said he would do it.

The great part about bringing in musicians for the first time, that are really good, is that they bring in their own style and bring in something special to the project. I had a

vague idea of how it was going to sound and that I wanted some piano in it and then Tim comes in a wows everybody by playing really great. He was excellent. Tim and Billy [Novick] actually played on two of the tracks together.

METRONOME: How did you run in to Jackie Damsky?

I was looking for a partner to do some outdoor summer concerts about three years ago. I saw her play with Don White and talked with her. We played together for a couple of years. She decided just this year not to do it anymore, so I put together a new duo called Knock On Wood. I have two guys that

I alternate depending on their schedules, Joe Kessler and Steve Latt. Both of them are really good. Joe also appears on two tracks on the new album.

METRONOME: Do you perform live a lot?

Yes. My summer outdoor concert tour is kicking off on June 13th. I enjoy performing live. It's a lot of fun. You get a lot of energy from the audience and I get a chance to have some fun with it. Music should be fun.

METRONOME: Your children Keith and Jennifer Newman both appear on When You're Happy. Tell us about them.

They're not in the area anymore, but we used to perform together as a trio. My daughter sings and my son plays the flute and sings. Keith played on one of the songs on the new album and did a great job. They both did some backup vocals too.

Keith lives in Los Angeles and my daughter lives in Boulder, Colorado. Last July they were all coming home for a wedding. I really wanted them to be on the album so they took a red eye in the day before and we went in to the studio that day. They slept for a few hours and did the three songs and did a great job with it. I miss playing with them.

My daughter got married this past January so at the brunch the next day we did a half hour concert. Keith could play professionally in a band. He has an amazing ear for music. We used to play as a duo too. They're both very talented.

METRONOME: Where can people go to find out more about you and your music?

I build web sites as one of my side lines. They can go to my site: www.howienewman.com. If you go there you can find my concert schedule, watch videos and buy the CDs. It's got everything you need.

METRONOME: Are you on CDBaby?

Yes. If you want to buy tracks on iTunes or Amazon, you can buy them there. If you want to buy a physical CD, you can get it at www.CDBaby.com or buy it directly from me. The digital thing has been very interesting for my music too. I've sold a lot of my baseball songs all over the world. That's really worked well for me.

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