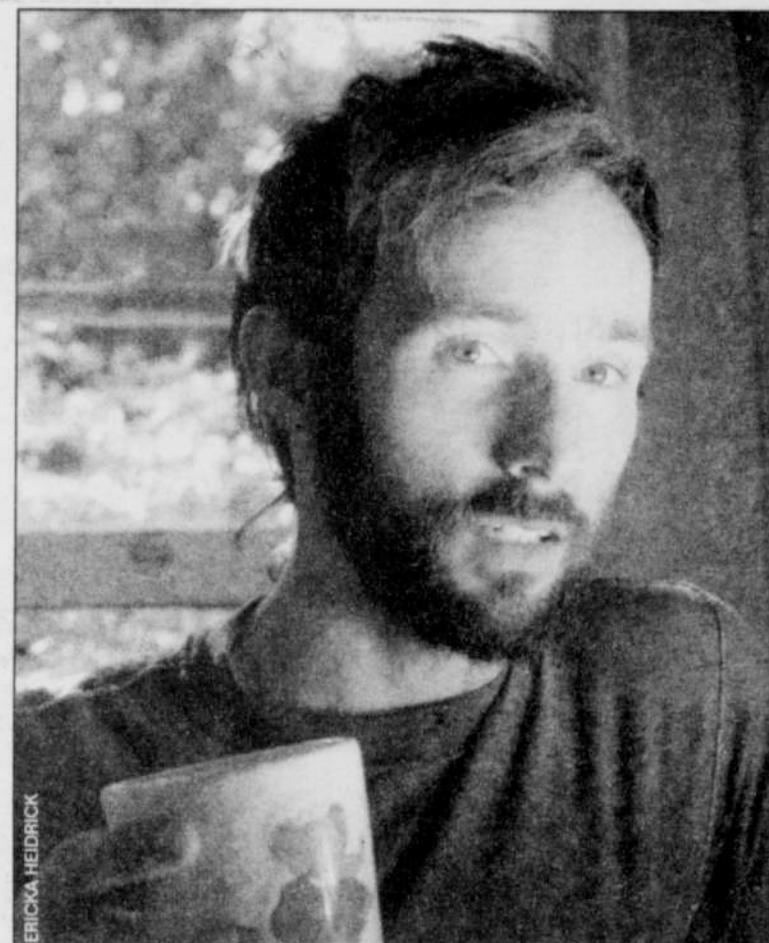


MUSIC

Angel in America

Holcombe Waller's seraphic voice provides comfort during *Troubled Times*

BY AARON SCOTT



A survivor of corporate America, Holcombe Waller now makes music about its ethos of greed, fear and despair.

The four-octave voice of Holcombe Waller sounds the way an angel would sound if it had been forced to wear a suit and tie, design Excel spreadsheets and commute to work in a world of nefarious corporations, crumbling towers and Prozac. Which is to say, the heartbreaking beauty of his music shines through and is even born of the suffering, sorrow and confusion of workaday America.

In a world where most musicians focus on their sexual urges and oh-so-poignant heart-break, it's rare, even unsettling, to encounter an artist whose songs strive to encompass more than himself. Waller's newest release, *Troubled Times*, is a meditation on the U.S. cultural landscape—a mournfully urgent series of ballads that address the American psyche, 9/11 and even the secretary of state.

Compared to his first two albums—1999's *Advertising Space* and 2001's *Extravagant Gesture*, both released on his own label, Napoleon Records—*Troubled Times* is a glaringly pared-down production. He and musical collaborator Ben Landsverk recorded most of the tracks live in a warehouse space with one or two well-positioned microphones. The results are achingly raw, mostly percussionless compositions of tender guitars, antique electric keyboards, banjo and, most notably, Waller's seraphic voice, reminiscent at times of Jeff Buckley, Damien Rice and even Tori Amos.

"I got interested in live performance and the subtle dynamics between you and the instrument and you and someone else," he says. "That's where the magic is for me."

But the warm, trancelike sweep of the music obscures an emotionally raw album deeply contemplative of the state of our union. Waller's music is like thick poetry: Very little

can be taken at face value, and motifs run throughout.

The song "No Enemy" is the most obvious example. Waller blends his only outright political lyrics—an entreaty of Condoleezza Rice to reveal the corruption of her administration—with his most saccharine pop, resulting in an ironic and even demeaning address: "Oh Condie!/Do you lie alone each night?/Put down the gun, girl, fight the good fight/There is no enemy coming/But you're making enemies, Condoleezz."

However, most of the songs are more veiled commentaries. "Joy Cruising," presumably about driving, explores the decadent imperative to consume that fuels the American psyche.

"People are embedded in the moneymaking enterprise because they are embedded in their car payments and their house payments," reflects Waller. "It's a really decadent period we're living in. We can have fruits and vegetables and anything we want shipped to us via petroleum. It's decadent, and it's going to end."

The youthful, scruffy-bearded songwriter is an unlikely prophet for the post-corporate class. Born of a software engineer and a librarian in Palo Alto, Calif., he won a songwriting competition at 15 that led to a recording deal, which he abandoned to study physics and then art at Yale University. Remaining involved in

music throughout college—he won Best Male Soloist at the National Championship of College A Cappella—he returned to San Francisco after graduation to begin again as a singer/songwriter. While temping to pay the bills, he quickly climbed a corporate ladder until he was making a handsome salary as a director of business systems analysis.

"I never bought into corporate America; I saw it as a game," explains Waller. "But office jobs aren't natural. It slowly started to destroy me." After a spiritual crisis of sorts following 9/11, Waller relocated to Portland to escape the world of elevators and dot-coms.

Troubled Times is the result of his journey. By attempting to weave larger stories from his own experiences, Waller says, "I'm trying to crack the egg of consensus reality."

But it's not all doomsaying. The album ends with "Hope Is Everywhere," in which Mia Doi Todd repeats the line to Waller's melancholy but trepidatiously hopeful piano. Citing Americana-punk balladeer Gillian Welch as an influence on his storytelling style, he says: "There's a magic and grace in the way things are. Art dwells in the things we don't see; the best art

reveals the life we are missing."

If so much is true, then *Troubled Times* is a great work of art indeed. **J**

HOLCOMBE WALLER performs with *Trespassers William and Rachel Taylor Brown* 9 p.m. Aug. 24 at the *Doug Fir Lounge*, 830 E. Burnside St. Tickets are \$7 from *TicketsWest*.

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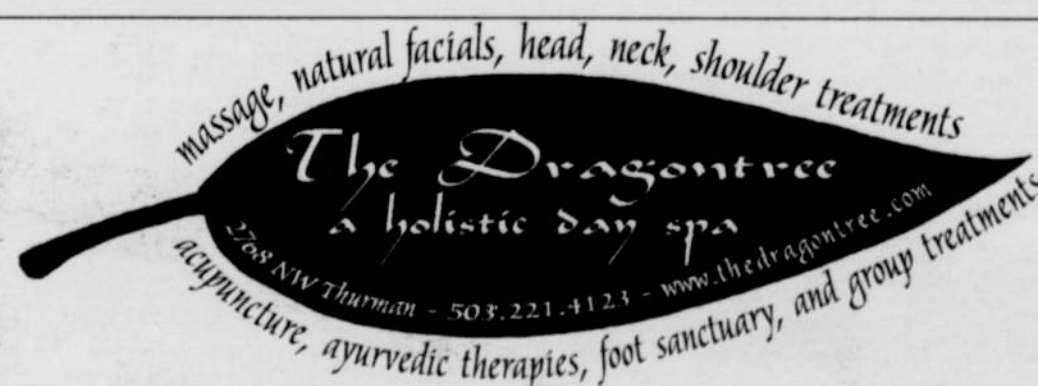
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