




music

Under the Covers

Holcombe Waller dives deep into the masters' underwear drawer

by Timothy Krause

In the two years since moving to Portland from his native San Francisco, indie singer/songwriter Holcombe Waller has released an acclaimed third album (*Troubled Times*), and performed at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's 2006 Time-Based Arts Festival and appeared onstage in *One: The Musical* and *Tao Soup*. Now he integrates all three creative facets in *Patty Heart Townes*, a new original theatrical performance based on the songs of Patty Griffin and Townes Van Zandt.

A music performance at its core, *Patty Heart Townes* will incorporate movement, singing, costume, video projections and a live string ensemble following the travails of Mihael Sagalovesky, a sad clown seemingly doomed to live out the legends of the songs he sings, transforming from disgruntled businessman to drunken, homeless and perhaps post-mortem minstrel.

"Mihael has been through the ringer. He's been fucked over, he's been hired, fired, loved, forgotten. God has appeared to him, and then disappeared, and now just haunts him with emptiness. In other words, he's one down-and-out little clown," says Waller, setting the scene for a character at the heart of a public dream, a being that is neither human nor animal, not of this world nor of another—a tragic comic cabaret character, a focal point for self-pathsos, the zeitgeist of disempowerment.

"He can't talk, but he can sing," explains Waller, "and that to me is also important, because it's obviously going to take a lot more than words, thoughts and intentions to get anything done on planet earth, at this point. This is why the living remnants of the '60s generation all standing around shaking their heads about young people while finishing their attics can't repeat their revolution—but action must come, and draw on those forms, but in a new way, and from the new generation. Whatever's after Gen Y."

Moreover, this character/concert combination is an experiment in contemporary postmodern sensibilities hiding a shield of personal armor for the performer himself. "It's a ritual, like drag war paint: There is a power in costuming, in drag, in character. It is akin to the power of the story in folk music, the kinds of stories that propelled Robert Allen Zimmerman into Bob Dylan," notes Waller. "The clown is my high drag, an avatar of myself, but masked, abstracted. In this day when everyone with a MySpace profile can market themselves like a pop star, you know the revolution is a highly media-saturated idea. Identity is no longer a one-to-one

relationship with individuals. Anyone interested in telling a story cannot deny themselves exploring all facets of media, including characters who inhabit worlds of their own. If I had the resources to incorporate online gaming into this piece, I probably would."

The differing styles of Van Zandt and Griffin are so far removed from Waller's own that they give the musician fresh inspiration.

"Patty's work is ethereal and in-between worlds—songs from the perspective of the dead, love and loss, pain and triumph, but all with an eye on the big picture, our ultimate mortality. Deeply human songs, eternal longing, the voice from the deep," says Waller. "The Townes portion is very, very different. Poetic storytelling in the vein of a florid Guthrie or more self-absorbed Seeger."

In some ways, *Patty Heart Townes* is Waller continuing his education as an artist. "It's so



Holcombe Waller portrays a sad clown seemingly doomed to live out the legends of the songs he sings in *Patty Heart Townes*.

rewarding to dive deep into the masters' underwear drawer and poke around," he remarks. But for a musician obsessed with string arrangement, covering Griffin and Van Zandt helps Waller get his head away from composition to focus exclusively on performance. He wants this show to be an exercise in efficiency, with limited elements woven into something big and seemingly complex, focusing on the richness of clean, minimal gestures.

But for as much as Waller touts the artistic explorations behind *Patty Heart Townes*, he also offers this shout-out to his homo homies: "Don't think of it as a show. Think of it as real-life, online dating, with artsy filters." 10

HOLCOMBE WALLER presents *Patty Heart Townes* 9:30 p.m. Jan. 26 and 3:30 p.m. Jan. 27 at *Holocene*, 1001 S.E. Morrison St. Tickets are \$10 from *Brown Paper Tickets*, *Jackpot Records* or the box office. For more information visit www.holcombewaller.com.

This month Q Center will host an art installation of video from *Patty Heart Townes* at 69 S.E. Taylor St. For details visit www.pdxqcenter.org.

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