

Subterranean Brainsick Blues

THE MINUS 5 DEBUTS THE BRILLIANT, BAFFLING *STROKE MANOR* IN EUGENE

By Rick Levin

PHOTO BY MIKE SHEAHAN

Minus 5's new release is a concept album, of sorts. In song after song on the aptly named *Stroke Manor*, words slip their foundation, falling through a looking glass of Lewis Carroll-like weirdness as wriggling couplets scramble after meanings that forever skitter just out of reach. Channeled through this kaleidoscope of confusion, nonsense becomes sense, like a stuttering ticker tape issuing from the chaotic core of a nightmare.

There's good reason for this. In November 2017, Minus 5 front guy Scott McCaughey suffered a devastating stroke.

A Northwest legend who founded the Young Fresh Fellows and for the better part of two decades played and recorded with R.E.M., McCaughey's music catalogue — four decades of ceaseless writing, singing and rocking — was wiped from memory. His doctor guessed he'd never play again.

"I wrote most of the lyrics to this record in the weeks after I suffered a stroke," McCaughey tells me. "I was touring with The Minus 5 and Alejandro Escovedo in San Francisco, having the time of my life, and then I was laid out in the street, possibly dying. A few days later, as soon as I was able to scratch out words, I started scribbling away in the ICU, not knowing what I was doing really, but trying to make something come out of the part of my brain that was dead."

Stroke Manor, then, is culled from notes McCaughey kept as he lay in hospital, partially paralyzed and largely speechless, confronting ultimate questions of existence through the vortex of involuntary adleplate: mortality, identity, past, present and, especially, future. The record captures dislocated snippets of conversation, misheard sentences and ambient confusions all filtered through a gifted musician's busted brain struggling to put itself back together.

The result is a wonderfully strange, disorienting and hard-rocking cycle of songs that takes you on an intimate journey into the heart of McCaughey's trauma and recovery, with an immediacy that is by turns sad, funny and excruciatingly poignant. With his keen knack for capturing the tragicomic absurdities of life, McCaughey turns his significant talents inward, giving us a glimpse of the erasure and loss that hit him big time. It's some of the most personal and powerful work he's done — a pop gem of darkness and light, with no shortage of hooks, musical and lyrical.

"The lyrics are the reason for the album," McCaughey says. "They're frustrating and frustrated — they're me trying to communicate something, to find out if I could communicate, if I could still hold a pen and get it physically to move... I think this record captures the feeling, the moment, somehow."

I dare say it captures something more than the moment. For instance, in "Scar Crow" — a phantasmagoric, unnerving song that seems to be about watching *The Wizard of Oz* from his hospital bed, with a heightened suspension of disbelief — McCaughey suddenly drops this line: "What tears you apart may later wing into homestead." The album is full of such moments, each one wrung from a surrealist poetry penned in extremis.

In "My Collection," a furious, fuzzy swoon of sound buoys lyrics that fight the ultimate loss: "Beneath the words you used to know 'em / They all climb a ladder but can't stay / Except the one you ask to be goin'."

Other songs, like the album's wonderful opener "Plascent Folk," create a dreamy soundscape of fractured poetry, as McCaughey strives to regain language, creating a Joycean steam-of-consciousness: "Monday fraught the moods across the rat and many moons / Thursday has been kenneled, lay thee fecund split."

By turns rollicking and mournful, trippy and trapped, the music reflects the lyrics in a funhouse mirror of pop history, as McCaughey taps — literally, like a spinal tap — his significant stores of music know-how, partly buried under the brain-bleed that walloped him.

"The music was the fun part," he says. "Ideas came fast, but partly tempered by my loss of physical ability to play instruments, as well as the jumbled, damaged mind. Therefore the music also seems from a different place in me, like the words. I was fortunate that I remembered basically how to form chords, so I could construct songs, and figure out how to record them... The act of willing myself to write down my thoughts forced me to follow the process through to a logical end."

McCaughey recorded *Stroke Manor* in his Portland basement, where he was helped along by a slew of fellow musicians including R.E.M. guitarist and fellow Minus 5 alum Peter Buck, Jeff Tweedy of Wilco, Corin Tucker of Filthy Friends (a band McCaughey also plays in), and many more. The album is hard driving and topsy-turvy, a psychedelic pop mash-up that raises a defiant noise against bedlam that threatens to swallow it.

"I took something that I didn't really know what I was doing at the time and took it the full distance," McCaughey says of *Stroke Manor*. "Not knowing whether it would work or not — but I feel like it really did work. I'm not saying I wish it hadn't happened, but at least I got something out of it. It's a weird thing. But it's my experience."

Fragility and strength, resignation and acceptance, darkness and light do a lovely, hypnotic dance across each song, and a sly humor tamps down the swirling sense of ultimate loss that surges beneath it all. McCaughey's voice has never sounded so vulnerable nor, at times, so defiant. Listening to it, I don't know whether I'm going to cry until I laugh, or laugh until I cry.

"My songs often seem more humorous to others than I meant them," McCaughey tells me. "Like in the past, I've considered a song like 'Aw Shit Man' as both the most hilarious and depressing song I've written. On *Stroke Manor* there are only a handful of bits that I can imagine I was thinking of something funny. It wasn't a funny time, but I did bleed some into it. Literally."

He continues: "Of course, now when we attempt to play the songs live, it will be my job to make them come across as a good time. That is always the goal of going to a show — to have a good time, right? Luckily, I've got friends who are willing to assure that. So this time it'll be Peter Buck, Casey Neill, Jenny Conlee (Decemberists), Jim Talstra (Eyelids), Alia Farah and Steve Drizos (Jerry Joseph/Jackmormons), all going with me onstage. You can't go wrong!"

The album drops Friday, June 14, and the Minus 5 will kick off its tour that same day with a show in Eugene featuring that all-star line-up.

So, does transforming a personal catastrophe into a rock album help McCaughey understand and overcome what befell him?

"It does help, though I'd be lying to say I can make sense out of it," he says. "There are definitely clues and images where I can recognize what I was trying to say — and a lot of it I have no idea."

What's certain is that *Stroke Manor* is one of the catchiest and most compelling albums of the year — a testament to McCaughey's grit, guts and boundless talent. It transcends the hell of its own creation through a joyous adherence to the healing powers of rock and roll. Not to be corny, but it's a stroke of genius. ■

The Minus 5 plays with Eyelids 8 pm Friday, June 14, at Sessions Music Hall; \$12-\$15, tickets at sessionsmusicall.com.