

Pokey LaFarge: 'The Best Music Is Yet to Come'

by Thomas Crone

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Talking to Pokey LaFarge is an interesting experience, with little moments that both confirm and confound expectations. That he makes a pot of coffee by heating water in an old metal pot on a stovetop isn't a shocker (his whole persona, after all, embraces a days-gone-by vibe), but that he's taken on the proprietorship of a couple of neighborhood cats, renaming them Carl and Doyle and handling some of their vet bills, gives a moment's pause — as does the soundtrack of dub reggae. That he can explain any of his decisions, actions and ambitions with articulate, detailed, winding stories makes a pair of lengthy, 75-minute conversations float by, even as you feel that LaFarge is acutely aware that these words are being parsed, analyzed and eventually shared.

These days, LaFarge is primed for... something. He might not be at a tipping point, exactly, as digital music distribution has changed the way careers are built, promoted and sustained. But with the release of his seventh studio album, *Manic Revelations*, this week, the remainder of the calendar year is starting to come into a crisp focus, with a lot of that time spent on the road, the venues a little larger than in the past and trips a bit longer. Now a veteran of multiple tours and the lifestyle that accompanies them, LaFarge, 33, is contemplative, if not downright contemplative-plus.

"There's definitely an internal feeling," he says of his place in life. "Somewhat, it's physical. You may not be able to get around quite as well as you used to. You

definitely value some different things. Chasing girls, drinking, doing a bunch of drugs ... that stuff's not important to me any more. I was always pretty in touch with my being in a long game. Being that I wanna create art for my whole lifetime and make a living off of it, you always wanna see where you are in your life, mentally and physically. I always wanted longevity. Now that I'm in my thirties, there's a benchmark, compared to where you were in your twenties. You look at that time for what it was, you look at the big goals you set out to achieve. There are pitfalls and things you didn't achieve, or you bit off more than you could chew. You put it all behind you.

"When you're in your twenties, you're more connected to your upbringing," he continues. "There's this kind of raw mindset, which is entirely about experimentation. You're full of piss and vinegar. You can fuck up and there're less repercussions for it. There are greater repercussions now, less margin for error; there's less experimentation and more knowledge. I tell people that my thirties are great. I love it. I love being this age and I look forward to getting older.

"It's unfortunate, those who say that high school are the best years in their life; it's the saddest thing I ever hear. I plan on the greatest years of my life to come. Being that I'm an artist and everything is a direct translation of the life that I'm living, I have no fear that the best music is yet to come."

"I plan on the greatest years of my life to come."

Earlier this month, LaFarge led his band on a tour of Europe, one that the group would describe as "really easy": There were four shows featuring the whole band, as well as a pair of solo dates, along with a TV appearance. In Europe, especially the Netherlands, where the band enjoys its biggest following,

LaFarge's profile continues to grow. Ditto in the U.S., where the band's now moving into the career point where they're playing the bigger venues in each town, while also looking at a host of a summer festival dates.

Now releasing music on the well-respected, established Rounder Records, with a management/media/support team located in LA, Nashville and New York, the years of self-booked tours and scratched-together recording sessions are, for the immediate future, a thing of the past.

And while some old-school fans may debate the assertion, *Manic Revelations* is LaFarge's finest album to date, moving the songwriter's sound into a new, surprising, R&B territory. The ten songs that emerged came from an initial pool of 25 tracks. Recording at Cherokee Street's Native Sound, the band stayed close to home — literally, in this case, as several of the players simply walked to the studio from their nearby homes, sleeping in their own beds at night.

Though happy with the comforts of this arrangement, the studio setting is still fraught with ennui for LaFarge.

In creating something that's going to be sold, "You can attach these other, worldly, earthly desires to what is just a pure thing: singing," he says. "That's what sucks about going in the studio. The greatest freedom I have is taken away. At home, by myself, singing gibberish or a melody until the words come... that's purity, that's art. When it's rehearsed and recorded and put on a record and it's my face on that and you have a publicist and then the record's out and everyone gets a hold of it... then it becomes a different thing. You don't have to be happy with it, but do you have to live with it. If you're making a with it, you still want to improvise, create things on the spot. In the studio, there're so many people telling you what to do, your mind can play tricks on you."

The flipside is that there's a batch of new material to spring on the world.

"Most of this work," he says, "people haven't heard before. And I like that."

That's changing, slowly and then, soon, quickly.

A couple of weeks back, in the mix of his morning drive show, John Wendland of KDHX's *Memphis to Manchester* spun "Better Man Than Me," the second single off *Manic Revelations*. It sounded right at home on his playlist. A songwriter and occasional performer himself, Wendland's a true musicologist, yet on-air, he spins tracks with just a touch of the backstory, rather than holding forth for minutes at a time. He's spare, yet generous with his musical knowledge. He also gives local cuts more than a fair shake.

With "Better Man Than Me," Wendland notes, "My first exposure to this song was from the official video they just released. It's instantly recognizable as Pokey LaFarge, but you hear other musical influences — doo-wop, early rock & roll, R&B — creeping in there. You could slap the Jordanares in for the backing vocals, yet the song still wouldn't sound like a musical relic. I was enamored with the song within the first ten seconds and knew it would sound great on the radio."

He adds, "I like music that has a timeless feel about it but doesn't just sound like a slavish impersonation of something from the past. I think Pokey avoids that, whether it's from his lyrics (the lyrics to 'Riot in the Street' aren't going to be confused for those of a '40s song any time soon) and attitude (I feel like there's an undercurrent of punk to some of his songs). I don't know the man. He would probably laugh some of this off, but I get a feeling of him using music influences

of the '30s, '40s, and '50s as a template; but he's twisting it into something different to get his own personally defined music across."

Chloe Feoranzo, who played in LaFarge's band from 2012 to 2015, says that his "songwriting is very accessible. People hear it and can instantly like it. Some of the melodies are really catchy and will rattle around your head for awhile."

David Beeman and Tony Hoffer of Native Sound coaxed the good stuff out of whatever anxieties the studio might bring, LaFarge says.

"Me and Beeman were there the entire the time," LaFarge says. "The guys came and went. There was no one producer.

"They're constantly evolving over there," LaFarge adds. "I want people to know how special that place is; David and the whole team there are pretty awesome. We have a special thing in this town with them, it's truly a special place."

It's a relationship that could, he says, be carried over to the next work. And it's the relationships that LaFarge has built, those longest ones, that serve him well today.

PHOTO BY NATE BURRELL

LaFarge and his band.

Once upon a time, a group of young men named Adam Hoskins, Joey Glynn and Ryan Koenig were playing in and around St. Louis in a handful of emerging bands. Concurrent to their early efforts, a young man from Bloomington, Illinois, born as Andrew Heissler but self-dubbed Pokey LaFarge, was bouncing

through a bohemian phase that saw him passing through a few towns of residence, including Asheville, North Carolina. There were moments of synchronicity, times when various groupings of the four were in the same place and these kindred souls began to coalesce. Once St. Louis became LaFarge's mailing address, good things began to happen.

As the dapper Koenig recalls, the band started as a duo, with LaFarge and Glynn coming together. At the time, Koenig's band with Glynn, the Vultures, had just broke up.

"I had a van and wanted to get out of town. With me joining up, the only expectation was to drive them in my van on their West Coast tour," he says.

"The first night, the gig turned out to be more of a busking situation, and I started playing some tunes with them. I became part of the band organically, as the tour went on. 'That thing you did, can you do that again?'"

With Hoskins joining in, the group was coalescing. Then as now, lots of side projects existed, and the Glynn/Koenig duo eventually began to tour with Mat Wilson as the Rum Drum Ramblers. With multiple songwriters and projects pulling at their time, time was starting to get tight. "For a decent part of the next year," Koenig recalls, "we would kinda travel with whoever could make it.

Sometimes it was all four of us, but usually there was a member down. When we did our first Pokey & the South City Three record, it was 'OK, now all of us are doing this.' There was a period in between, freeing ourselves up to work to make it happen. Upon making that record, we knew, 'Now we've recorded, so now have to be a band.'"

Koenig's part of a group that has grown a lot since — in membership, chemistry and ambition. Under the banner of its bandleader's name, the Pokey LaFarge

touring experience now includes that core band, soon to reach its first decade together, as well as newer players. Three years ago, Matt Meyer became the band's first drummer. Horn players have shifted over the years, with Luc Klein and Ryan Weisheit now positioned at trumpet and sax, respectively. Live sound's provided by Justin Brown, now in his third touring season, augmented by new tour manager Todd Piotrowski, who doubles in the same role for the Violent Femmes. At times, the band has even been augmented by a touring photographer, Nate Burrell, whose work accompanies this piece.

It's a far climb, in most respects, from those early, couch-surfing days. But to Koenig, the arrival of LaFarge's new record this week and the touring that will accompany *Manic Revelations* is a natural continuation of everything that's come before.

"I think if we were the kind of band that would've had the money to hire publicity and booking and all of that before the first record, or if we were a big overnight band, then we would've had a definitive moment," Koenig says. "Since it's been a logical, slow progression, nothing's ever felt that much bigger or that much more of a turning point. A lot of people, depending on when they became a fan, or become aware of the band, often see something as the turning point. People in St. Louis might talk about when we started going on the road all the time, or being on the Letterman show, or working with the Old Crow Medicine Show guys. But for me, it's always seemed like a logical progression. I would say that when I was able to quit my day job and play music, I thought that was as successful as I could ever be — and everything else has just built on that."

And now band members have a different juggling act. Instead of balancing their day jobs and their work with LaFarge, now they're balancing their better-paid work with LaFarge with other collaborations.

"When I'm here," Koenig says, "all I want to do is travel. When gone, I want to be here. ... It's important to have people here holding down the fort. And having people on the road exposes people to the culture we have, in a first-hand kind of way. Whether that's us coming to them, or them coming to you. When bands are coming to town, I'm often putting them up, taking them to shows and bars. Then they go back and tell people they've had a good time here."

Koenig doesn't just live these words, he takes them to an extreme. As collaborators of the first order, he and Glynn and Meyer (in particular), help form a core of side projects around town, joining forces with folks including Valerie "Miss Jubilee" Kirchhoff, Ethan Leinwand, Nick Pence, Mat and Rachel Wilson, Joe Park, Kellie Everett and myriad others who mine early-to-mid-20th century music in multiple forms. As occasional-to-regular projects, Koenig alone counts himself a part of nearly a dozen groups: Skin and Bones, Southwest Watson Sweethearts, Jack Grelle, Sidney Street Shakers, the Bottlesnakes, Hooten Hallers, Lavender Country, the Scrubby Dutch Jug Band and the band with whom he and Glynn collaborated when Pokey's gig emerged, the Rum Drum Ramblers.

"Just about all of us have something else going on," he says. "For me, being involved in a lot of different things means that every time with this certain group of people is a singular experience and you don't know when the next time will be. That keeps all of the projects interesting."

Meyer, the group's drummer and a contender for world's happiest person, adds, "I think what's interesting about this band is that everyone is an artist in their own right, as much as being a part of the Pokey LaFarge band — through doing these outside shows and being able to express yourself, if it's Ryan as 'Lonesome Cowboy Ryan' or Adam starting a surf band. We all grew up on punk, blues, R&B, country, doo-wop, even modern pop of the '80s and '90s. On stage with the Pokey LaFarge band, you can sneak in a little of yourself and satisfy your needs, but it's when you're with Rum Drum or Sidney Street that you can really do your thing. That keeps you satisfied to give your all to everything that you're doing."

To LaFarge himself, this album shows that the diversity of influences and constant outside gigging has created a versatile, tight unit.

"They all have four or five different bands," LaFarge says with a hint of a laugh. "Cowboy Ryan's just finished a record. Adam's got a new band. Obviously, with being off the road for a few months, it's allowed them to keep staying busy. And it makes them better musicians when they come to play with me, all the different ideas they inject into their playing."

PHOTO BY NATE BURRELL

The musician is in a good place right now.

Standing outside his landmark music store in the Delmar Loop on a recent, overcast Saturday afternoon, Tom "Papa" Ray is absolutely in his element. It's Record Store Day, and with bands playing on the sidewalk outside Vintage Vinyl, a makeshift performance area under the store's mezzanine finds

at least 100 fans forming a ring around LaFarge and his band just prior to the group's scheduled noon set. With traffic moving at the Loop's languid weekend pace and the lightest of mists in the air, the seven-piece stands with instruments in hand for a good minute or two, as Ray launches into an introduction he's given more than once, in more than one setting.

To Ray, St. Louis has been missing the mark for a while when it comes to championing arts and culture. While the city chases sports teams and businesses looking for the best deal (or best hand-out), Ray says, St. Louis' strongest elements, including its music, are given little to no attention or support by the powers that be. And here is a group carrying St. Louis' banner to the world.

As he speaks, a few heads nod in agreement. And as Ray hits his crescendo, he throws things to the lead performer, who, as always, easily slips from bystander to center of attention.

Even with a tight set time of only 30 minutes, LaFarge is able to run through a good chunk of his newest album, as well as Emmett Miller's "Big Bad Bill (Is Sweet William Now)" which he sets up with a story about David Lee Roth's unexpected Miller fandom. At one point, LaFarge throws a nod to each of the band members and the crowd cheers accordingly. As short, promotional shows go, this one gets an A grade, even as the band passes on playing its familiar material, the known cuts like "Central Time" or "Something in the Water."

Orlandez Lewis, Vintage's effervescent promotions chief, says that promotion of the upcoming album surely played into LaFarge booking the gig. Still, he says, "At the same time, Pokey is one of those that when he performs gives it 110

percent every time. ... He always shows love to St. Louis, and us at Vintage Vinyl. And we're all huge fans of him at the store."

Despite being a name-brand act, LaFarge charged no performance fees for the gig, Lewis notes. "The intimacy of it was a major standout. All kinds of ages and faces came out for it. Which is a perfect representation of not only our customer base, but of the St. Louis music scene in a whole. It was very beautiful."

Though the material is new, the response is solid. Brown coaxes an excellent mix, right there on the street corner, and the song's inherent hooks do the rest. With some of the crowd traveling to town for the gig and with Ray's windup introduction, the show feels a bit more like a concert than the performances of some of the other bands, who hurriedly toss their gear into place, playing only to friends and curious passersby.

Within a few seconds of ending, LaFarge's band, like any other on Record Store Day, begins striking gear, making way for another group. This will be the band's last full show in St. Louis for a good month. Makeshift "stage" or no, it's a good one.

These days, LaFarge and his wife, Megan Mae Newman, are awaiting a move, into a three-story, brick charmer on Cherokee, just a stone's throw from the Mud House, where he and the band are regulars. Though he's arguably the most famous musician touring out of the city these days, his appearances at the coffeeshop have the vibe of the everyday; he greets workers, finds a seat on the patio with friends, enjoys life without the trappings.

And yet, there are those moments when folks who aren't daily visitors notice him and talk and ... yeah, there's that moment of star stir.

LaFarge is in that interesting zone now: established, but still growing, with a history that's embraced by the most avid of fans. In other words, he has a catalog. Many of the songs of his prior six records (along with some EPs, singles and a Dutch live set) have entered the public's consciousness, becoming part of his fans' personal soundtracks.

"I don't really think too much about my catalog," he says. "You do have to be aware of it, because fans wanna hear certain stuff, but I can't always please them in that regard. Sometimes, you can bust out a solo or, when the band's behind me, do a verse or chorus of a track and that usually suffices. It's just off the cuff that way and the risk factor is there. People love you messing up live. It's another way of breaking that fourth wall."

Even with his band in Europe earlier this month, LaFarge allowed himself a few solo shows, as "I think I'm in a good place for that. I'd been in the mindset of making as much sound with three, four, five people and I ultimately wanted a bigger orchestra; I knew I had to have that for the sound. But you also need to satiate a part of your creative mind that wants a little more minimalism, not so much noise.

"Songs change almost night to night," he suggests. "That's just what happens when you start to perform things live: You learn more about the songs. That's the great thing about creating a song. A sculpture, when finished, is done. A painting, it's done. A collection of poems is done, unless you keep writing and do another edition. Songs change every night. There's improvisation at your fingertips, every night. The fans aren't there in our minds every day; they're not at every show. It can be jarring for them, this change, you know?"

The band's now a bit removed from its biggest change in personnel to date, which occurred when horn players Chloe Feoranzo and TJ Muller left the group; she embarked on a career in New Orleans, while the Englishman began a role as bandleader of the Gaslight Squares, while still playing with his former bandmates in the Sidney Street Shakers and other guises.

Koenig knows that the previous lineup drew a lot of folks into the band's orbit, and that its sound, inflected by the trad jazz backgrounds of those horn players, was a definite part of the appeal. But ...

"The core of the band has maintained the whole time," he says. "He's been playing with the South City Three pretty much since day one. I think the hardest part is that we've involved our with players with a lot of personality and it's how some people come to know the band. If you see the band the first time and you're into it, you remember the players who left. It's interesting. I'd like to think overall, that it's been a résumé point, or a badge for everyone involved in it."

Feoranzo says there was no animus. After four years, she was simply ready — ready for "something different." She explains in an email, "The band was going in a different direction musically, and at least for myself I was ready to get off the road for a bit.

"I am absolutely grateful to have been asked at all," she adds. "We did some amazing things — so many different countries, the David Letterman show, the Grand Ole Opry, Garrison Keillor's 'Prairie Home Companion' twice — so I will always be thankful to the group and for the opportunity to travel and perform around the world at a young age. Touring is a hard life and I learned so much

about the lifestyle and how to survive on the road with that band. Definitely earned my touring stripes with them."

[image

Bill Christman is one of St. Louis' certified geniuses, having created Beatnik Bob's in City Museum, as well as his home base, Joe's Cafe. The primary stage room and its affiliated gallery play host to a variety of Thursday night entertainments, under the guise of a private club, rather than a full-on, advertised concert venue. While the room can get crowded with a salt-and-pepper audience on a regular Thursday evening, when LaFarge played a few weeks back, Christman found himself looking for a new method of crowd control.

On that night, he and several friends check each patron for a Dixie cup; these 50-year-old relics come from Christman's own collection, and he shaped each into a unique "ticket," though many of the people rolling up to the room claim to have theirs inside with a friend, or they're waiting on their cup, or they paid for the cup but never received it, or ... the variances are enough to make Christman swear a little bit, even as he takes time out to introduce newcomers to the hen that's pecking around at his feet. (Which would seem random anywhere else in the world, but not at Joe's.) You get the sense with Christman that he wants to do little more than create things for people to enjoy, but that he'd pick the things over the people if ever forced to choose between the two.

This one is a solo show, with just Brown on hand; as people roll into the venue, a few note that LaFarge is nearby with Newman and friends, eating Thai food. At the venue, Christman tells folks about the hen who showed up four years ago, now pecking around the entry at showtime. It's all very idyllic, kind of a

small-town vibe and a uniting of two esoteric characters in performer and presenter. It's a tune-up gig of sorts, and done in a cool way.

It will also be one of the last times LaFarge gets to do something like that for the moment. This weekend he plays the Pageant, with his new record's release show set for May 20. And after that, LaFarge and company will pack bags and become "a big, happy family," in Brown's words. By mid-June, the touring machine will fire up and LaFarge's side projects will be monitored from the road. And that's become a growing list recently, with everything from a limited release beer (Pokey Pils from 4 Hands), a small clothing line (with New York's Knickerbocker Manufacturing) and even acting work (he plays Hank Snow on CMT's *Sun Records*).

While the U.S. will be the main target of 2017's early dates — the East Coast and Midwest in particular — LaFarge dreams about "Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand. That'd be sweet. Japan, that'd be great. I'd love to buy green tea and decipher all the architecture and clothing.

"That's the love of traveling that came before being a musician," he says.

"Writing took me into singing and writing songs. I always knew I wanted to write and travel. That was always kind of there. I always traveled a lot as a kid and read a lot of literature; the Beat writers and early 20th century American authors. They drew a picture of this being a big fucking country, and I knew I wanted to travel it.

"I'm living my dream."