

MARK SEYMOUR & THE UNDERTOW

SLOW DAWN

(album out 29 May 2020 through Bloodlines)

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Mark Seymour discusses *Slow Dawn*

To see yourself in the suffering of others is to see the life you've lived for what it really is, not how you wished it might be.

I see my own story as part of a larger historical process that explains much of the world I live in. The songs on *Slow Dawn* are in many ways, a search for home through a landscape of decay, love and memory. Much of my thinking takes place behind the wheel. All the songs are triggered by travel, looking out at the land.

Recently I've passed through remote South Africa, Ireland and the U.S. In that time, I've been struck by the amount of debris that litters the world. Discarded machinery, the ruins of ancient farm houses, gold mines, Aboriginal middens, the refuse of war, especially in rural South Africa. There is very little of the world left that hasn't been touch by history. The scale of human struggle is deeply humbling.

'Night Driving'

Bell Street Pascoe Vale on a Sunday night, the road bathed in hard yellow streetlight. Driving to escape, to think and calm down. I see a body lying in the middle of the road, one arm rising as I approach, twitching as if maimed, maybe a hit and run.

Cars ahead slow down, then move 'round it.

I pull over. Someone has to. I run towards it, a woman, maybe early 30's, dressed up, fresh from a party. I call out as I approach. A man runs out from a nearby gateway, lifts her up bodily from under the shoulders and half drags her to the side of the road. He sees me and yells, "Don't worry mate. She's an epileptic." I ask her directly to confirm, while he props her up against the fence. "Are you an epileptic?" I say, looking directly into her eyes. She nods. The man thanks me and I leave.

I never forgot the cars though, slowing to look, then moving on.

Don't get involved.

'Kliptown Mud'

Australians travelling in South Africa led by a young male guide, into the guts of Kliptown. A vast shanty of open sewers, public showers, thousands of huts made of bagging and corrugated iron. Into a tiny two-room hut. An old woman sits at a table, next to her a vase of Proteas in full bloom.

We are shocked into silence, suddenly exposed to a life utterly alien to us, surrounded by the grinding poverty of generations. The old woman's eyes are filled with grace and calm.

They cut through, as if to ask, "Now how do you feel?"

'Against My Will'

Mildura motel room. A child's voice in the corridor. The sound of a small hand knocking on a door. "Daddy.." Sky news muted on the tellie. And further away the blast of a news broadcast, the page on my phone, open to some Facebook lie that a thousand comments are wailing to.

We are bombarded with reasons to be fearful. Social media is a prison of narcissistic thought. It teaches us to feel helpless, introspective, to ponder bad news as though it is the only reality of our lives. We live in a constant state uncertainty and yet the truth is right in front of us:

We are always in control.

'Applewood Road'

A train across America, Interstate 80. The 'Immigration Trail.' From the manic cleanliness of the Latterday Saints, across the ranges into the lonely casino towns, past nuclear power plants, fracking pipes and roadside prisons where signs direct the traveller:

"Do not shoot from the highway."

The desert neon cowboy toting a pair of colts, rises high above the plain while street people lurk in the twilight, scavenging food down by the Jordan River.

The western dream in slow decay.

'The Demon Rum'

A convict's lament. A story of alcohol in the history of Australia. From the first landing of convicts apparently released and granted shots to overcome the stress of the 252 days at sea then on through to its place in the vernacular of modern Australian life. How alcohol has always been used as a form of social reward and how it ultimately numbs sensitivity and intelligence.

'Slow Dawn'

My youth in a Victorian country town, playing in a dry river beds, the ashes of old middens remembered years later as though I walked on the bones of souls who'd been banished to the outskirts of every town across the country, secrets covered over by denial, guilt and fear. My father's warning words: There were forbidden places and other kids I wasn't not supposed to talk to or seen with.

'The Dogs of Williamstown'

Anthem to the convicts of Williamstown. The short rebellion of 1857 when the grievances of convict laborers spilled blood and ended the life of magistrate John Price. It is said their ghosts still lurk on the shores of Hobsons Bay beneath the looming tower of Westgate. A history of cruelty and courage just below the surface of suburban life

'How The West Was Won'

The search for Eldorado imagined in South Africa, walking the streets of colonial Cape Town then out on to the long road north towards Zimbabwe, to the mines of Johannesburg, where it was once believed rivers of gold flowed like honey and that paradise might one day be secured by force of arms over a savage people.

How Western barons surged out of Europe into the frontiers of the unknown to gouge wealth from the ground, the world over. And the debris they left behind them, wasted earth and the seething anger of billions who rose up one day to take back what was stolen from them.

'The Ones Who Got Away'

Country town, Victoria. Kelly Country, flat, dry and desolate. Wangaratta summer time. The ghosts of stolen horses running in the twilight and the history of lawlessness amongst the Irish who settled the land in the North west. Golden light sparkling on river red gums along the banks of the Murray and the dreams of ageing locals who remember the young ones who escaped the emptiness.

'Johanna'

Love story in a car. Johanna and me driving across New Zealand, her lead foot, a dodgy Ford Anglia, no brakes, two heads full of hope and promise.

'The Whole World is Dreaming'

It was always a ritual in our family to sing our children to sleep. I've often wondered how the relationship between a parent and child never reaches the same degree of closeness and trust those early moments hold. And then comes death. We sang to my mother as she died. To know your life might be bookended by song is a deeply comforting idea.

I often think of the wonder of the night time sky in country Victoria, the explosion of the southern starlight, a child's view through an open window as it drifts off to sleep.

To be sung to a tiny child and a dying parent..

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