

RECONSTRUCTED COFFEEHOUSE BLUES



Freelance writer, Terry Hagerty's August 2017 interview with producer and singer-songwriter Travis Pike, about his 2014 album, *Reconstructed Coffeehouse Blues*.

Terry: You've had a particularly unique journey as a singer-songwriter, musician, and performer. With this album, *Reconstructed Coffeehouse Blues*, you retrace some of the songs you wrote and sang during the time you were a solo act in the 1960s. Up to that point, you'd always performed with live bands. How was it different, performing with just your guitar to accompany you?

Travis: I began singing in public when I was 14, so that wasn't a problem, but I taught myself how to better play the guitar when the Red Cross loaned me one while I was in Chelsea Naval Hospital, in Massachusetts. I learned a few new chord progressions and strummed along as I sang parodies of popular songs, and eventually began working out original finger-picking patterns. Without a band to back me, and unable to do the twist in a wheel chair, I added facial expressions and character voices to my songs.

Terry: Before your coffeehouse days, you had been quite successful, leading a show band in Germany, where you performed cover songs. Does this collection represent your transition to singer-songwriter?

Travis: It does. Most of my earliest hospital novelty songs are on my *Odd Tales and Wonders Stories* in *Rhyme* album, but the songs on *Reconstructed Coffeehouse Blues* come, for the most part, from my later, more developed coffee house repertoire.

Terry: How long did you perform in the coffee houses and naval hospitals?

Travis: About two years. I started performing in Chelsea, while I was recovering from a bone-graft operation in 1965, and carried on while undergoing physical therapy in Portsmouth Naval Hospital, Virginia, until I was honorably discharged from the Navy in 1966. I played my first coffee house hootenanny in 1967, the same year that I assembled my first rock band, Travis Pike and the Boston Massacre. Once the band learned to play my original songs, I rarely played solo, except at special gatherings of friends.



Terry: As the title implies, these are songs that you've pulled from your back catalog and reworked, or "reconstructed" them, for the album. Was there much rewriting of the songs or was the reconstruction more in the way they were arranged and presented?

Travis: Actually, an ironic double entendre is hidden in the title. The bone graft reconstructed my left ankle, and that process, coupled with a long and painful recovery, were one source of my "blues." But you're correct about the lyrics and arrangements. Rather than record me solo, my multi-instrumentalist youngest brother Adam and I created fresh arrangements for an imaginary club combo of bass, drums, two guitars, keyboards and sound FX. I updated some of my lyrics, then did all the finger-picking and sang the songs, but Adam played everything else . . . and recorded and mixed all the tracks, too.

Terry: Reading the CD liner notes, it sounds like you wrote these songs by yourself. Was it exciting then to have a collaborator like your co-producer brother, Adam, who is a skilled musician in his own right, to bounce ideas back and forth?

Travis: Absolutely. I wrote all the songs, most of them in the mid-to-late sixties, so it was particularly refreshing to arrange and record them with Adam, and the songs are better for the parts he created, especially for bass, lead guitar, keyboards, and drums.

Terry: My first impression, having listened to the album in its entirety, is the wide range of the melodic styles to the songs and the diversity of the arrangements. Was that intentional in choosing these songs from your back catalog?

Travis: When we set out to record my back-catalog, we didn't start with any specific concepts in mind. We simply arranged each song in a sonic palette appropriate to its program. Most of my songs found their ways into Travis Pike's Tea Party's repertoire, but we did not record them in any particular order. It was only after several songs were recorded that we began to sort them by period or type, and chose other songs from my list that had complementary development for each album.

Terry: As a lyricist, you are very much a storyteller, whether it's about the comely waitress at the Sword in the Stone or a midnight adventure on Boston's Beacon Hill. Do you begin with the story, the melody, or are they both conceived together?

Travis: "Yes" to all three. Hosting hootenanny's at The Sword and the Stone, I could not help but watch Jane (her real name), as she wove her way through the tiny, crowded tables, carrying trays of exotic coffees and comestibles. "Mesmerizing, Tantalizing, Hazel-eyed Jane" is about her. I'm sure her undulating walk was due, at least in part, to having to balance those trays, but I admit that night after night, as she glided between the tables, I sometimes delayed starting my next song to watch. My smitten expressions was not lost on my audiences, either, and before long, Jane had become at least as big an attraction as I was. Alas, she was the coffee house owner's girlfriend, but "you can't go to jail for what you're thinking," according to the Four Lads 1956 hit "Standing on the Corner." Although musically, "Mesmerizing, Tantalizing, Hazel-eyed Jane," has little in common with the sultry 1964 Stan Getz, Astrud Gilberto hit "Girl from Ipanema," both songs were visually inspired. In mine, the vision inspired the playful music, and the lyrics followed.

"Midnight Waltz" recalls the sounds, smells, and experience of the painful midnight descent from the top of Beacon Hill that inspired the lyrical content, but I think the haunting melody I discovered on my guitar conjured up those memories, so for that song, the music came first, and suggested the program now associated with it.



Travis Edward Pike
Photo by Judy Pike

Terry: While listening to the album, I kept trying to place your influences, but you seem so eclectic and unique. Who would you say were your influences as you began to write songs?

Travis: My songs are inspired by popular classical, jazz, folk, blues, country, and rock 'n' roll sources, and when I began singing, I sang songs made popular by Elvis, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters, The Platters, The Coasters, The Everly Brothers, Hank Williams, Jerry Lee Lewis, The Four Lads, Bobby Darin, Buddy Holly, Harry Belafonte, The Clovers, The Searchers, The Kingston Trio, Roger Miller, Marty Robbins, Roy Orbison, Lonnie Donegan, and even Somethin' Smith and the Redheads, and that's only to name a few. My earliest songs were probably most influenced by popular fifties recordings.

Terry: Let's talk a little about each track. When I name the song, tell me the first thing that pops into your mind. Starting with "Sing a Song of Blues."

Travis: It reflects my own experiences and emotions when I first returned to the U.S.A. in the mid-sixties. My country seemed to have changed, and I was deeply offended by the disrespectful and antagonistic behavior of my former peers. It took a while for me to come to the realization that I had changed as much or more than they, and what so disturbed me had been present inherent in our society all along, at which point rather than participate in angry confrontations, I elected to engage and reason with my peers, and together with them, work to implement reforms where necessary, but at the same time, preserve and respect the America I had served. It remains an on-going effort, but that's what this song -- and I believe this country -- is all about.

Terry: "Don't Let Me Change Your Mind."

Travis: I played this song at Lightfoot Recording Studios in 1967 for Ray Fornier, a blind, visiting sound engineer who came by to check out our new sound-on-sound recording system. He had me sing while he tested the equipment, and liked the song so much that he called Roy Acuff on the spot and got me invited to Nashville. I didn't go, but the invitation was encouraging.

Terry: "Grey Day Lady."

Travis: Performers generally face the crowd, and so see things the crowd staring back at them may not notice (or worse, deliberately ignore). I have seen both joy and sadness from the stage, and have been moved to intervene from time to time, and not always successfully. However sincere my efforts, the outcomes were always uncertain. This song describes such an observation and intervention.

Terry: We've already covered "Mesmerizing, Tantalizing, Hazel-eyed Jane." What about "She's Gonna Be a Woman Someday." It reminds me of Neil Diamond's, "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon," though he wrote his in 1967. After yours?

Travis: If so, not long after. My song stems from an incident in 1966. I was fresh out of the Navy, and cruising the old neighborhood with a friend, when he decided to stop by his girlfriend's house with me in tow. The purpose (or excuse), for the visit, may have been to ask his girlfriend to set me up for a double date, but whatever the reason, his girlfriend had a bright, younger sister, probably no more than eleven or twelve, who

wanted to tell him about whatever had her excited, but he ignored her, disappeared with her older sister, and left me alone on the living room sofa, with the unhappy youngster sulking in a nearby overstuffed chair. To break the awkward silence, I asked the girl if she'd like me to tell her a story. She lit up like the proverbial Christmas tree. I have no idea what story I told, but soon we were enjoying an animated conversation. When my friend and his girl returned, the youngster and I were sorry that our visit had come to an end. The memory of that afternoon, and my companion's insensitivity to the younger girl, led to this song.



**Travis on the left, Adam on the right
and David Pinto, seated, center.**
Photo by Judy Pike

As for the performance, my head was filled with images of straw hats and boaters, so I asked my friend and colleague, David Pinto, pianist extraordinaire (and Founder of the Academy of Music for the Blind), to come over and play the ragtime, honkytonk-style piano the song demanded. It was a glorious session. I sang it live in the recording booth as Adam and David played outside in the control room, plugged directly into the console. David, as expected, was brilliant, and Adam's bass lines were inspired, too.

Terry: Tell me about "You and I Together," which I defy anyone to listen to and not smile.

Travis: I wrote it as a theme song for a story I was writing about a man and his dog, but when Adam and I recorded

it, it became something more. I'm more than 21 years Adam's senior, but in my new appreciation of the piece, it became a song about he and I, exploring the New England coast. In fact, we were exploring my music together. That's probably as close as we'll ever get to living that song, but it now holds a very special place in my heart.

Terry: "Tommy Tew Run Run," which by your liner notes, appears to have had the most extensive reworking, at least with the lyrics.

Travis: True enough. The melody and chorus are virtually unchanged, but the song I sang in 1966 about a lothario and his conquests, revealed itself, finally, as a song about a pirate, whose path and mine, albeit separated by a few hundred years, had crossed in a pub in Newport, Rhode Island. The "To me too run run" chorus became "Tommy Tew Run Run," and the three women became treasure ships. What became of the lothario was not in the original, but Rhode Island pirate, Tommy Tew, was disemboweled by a cannon shot, which seduced women might easily consider poetic justice for lotharios, too.

Terry: "Midnight Waltz," with its wonderful blues guitar solo.

Travis: First and foremost, I remember that night. I was still rather crippled, and the back side of Beacon Hill is no friend to a gimpy sailor. The song recollects the things I saw, heard and smelled that foggy night, as I limped along, down the steep hill to the street below. The streets were bare, but possibility lurked behind every window and doorway, and I dearly hoped someone would invite me in, out of the dank night.

The song is an excellent example of what Adam brings to my songs. A song I strummed and sang in solo performances, with Adam's imagination and skills is transformed into a piece of haunting beauty. The moan of his fretless bass, and his moody guitar solo that seems to suggest my unsteady gait, are nothing short of uncanny.

Terry: "Shaggy, Shaggy Blues?"

Travis: My song is my tribute to this timeless genre. Adam tells me it's Memphis-style blues, and that's fine with me. I just wanted to write a blues in which I

could immerse myself, a song that went exactly where everyone expected, and then allow its lyrics and my vocal performance to bring it all home – and I think I did. But it's Adam's piano bar arrangement that takes me to this whole new, hitherto unexplored level of satisfaction.



For most of our recordings, Adam played his bass parts directly into the console, and didn't add any effects to the track until he began mixing the song.
Photo by Judy Pike

Terry: "Don't You Care At All?"

Travis: Obviously composed after the failed Viet Cong Tet Offensive in January, 1968, I never played this song in military hospitals or New England coffeehouses, but I did play it at my Monday night solo performances at Guru-V, on Arrow Highway in Glendora, California, where I met Chuck Monda. My first new friend in California, Chuck was later drafted and sent to Vietnam, making this song all the more poignant for both of us. He returned safely, but thousands did not, and this song is meant to memorialize their sacrifice. For the recording, I composed a faux Vietnam news broadcast introduction, read beautifully by Joe Kondash. I Adam and I also created an FX palette to remind older listeners, and introduce younger ones, to the horrific sounds that permeated that period. Toward the end of the song,, as in real life, the voices of protest faded, but mine did not, reminding us all to be certain of our justifications and clear in our missions, before we commit to military action. The cost of war is measured both in treasure, and in blood.

I called in a bunch of friends to sing the protesters'

parts. The gals who made the cut were Colleen Stratton, Barbara Jordan, Lauran Doverspike, Mildred Lewis, and Joanne Rowen. The male vocals were sung by Kris Snyder, my brother Adam, and me, and we all doubled doubled and sang harmony parts to create the growing chorus of protesters. For the album release, I deleted the faux news broadcast, but restored it for the new single release.

Terry: And the last song on the album, “A Red-backed, Scaly, Black-bellied, Tusked, Bat-winged Dragon,” is a wonderful blending of a tongue-twisting, tongue-in-cheek lyric and upbeat melody, highlighted by that tinkly piano. Did that take long to write?

Travis: Not really. It was my very Gilbert and Sullivan title song for a feature-length animated musical I wrote while still in high school in 1961. I taught myself enough guitar to strum and sing it on my own, but it wasn’t until Karl Garrett, lead guitarist of the Boston Massacre, played it in 1967, with all its strummed banjo riffs, that the Disneyland straw hat and boater arrangement became a favorite with live-audiences and a staple in our repertoire. The version you hear on this album is my “English Music Hall” presentation, arranged for

piano by our mutual friend and colleague, David Carr, formerly of the British pop group, The Fortunes (You’ve Got Your Troubles”), augmented with tracks added by Adam Pike and David Pinto in the studio.



Travis, Terry, and Long-Grin, with the Red-backed, Scaly, Black-bellied, Tusked, Bat-winged Dragon!
Photo by Judy Pike

