

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER WHALEN OF FIRE & RAIN: A TRIBUTE TO THE MUSIC OF JAMES TAYLOR

BY MITCH MCGILL - COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY RADIO SHOW- AUGUST 2009



Mitch: So James Taylor? Singer/Songwriter, Member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, whats not to like right?

Peter: Exactly! I have noticed even the most casual listener of all ages knows even a few of his songs. As a matter of fact I get a lot of younger people asking for some of the oldest and rarest album cuts which surprises me everytime! But even though I grew up with Jim Croce, Simon & Garfunkel and all of the other well known singer/songwriters I always gravitated toward his music because of the simple beauty and yet complex chord changes and how he just makes it all sound easy.

Mitch: Were you a songwriter yourself?

Peter: I actually was for awhile. Lived in New York area in the mid-late 80's and tried my hand at it. But I would have to say that JT's songs are the ones I would have like to have written the most - I couldn't have said it better than him!

Mitch: Most memorable gigs? Where do you intend to go with the music of JT?

Peter: I would have to say playing on a boat on the Hudson river in New York was a top memory. Again, I think playing out in Tanglewood out near JT's hometown would be fun. A East Coast tour, where there are a lot of JT fans would be a top goal. I got wonderful response from the fans in Boston last June.

Mitch: I know a lot of people do tributes to Frank Sinatra, The Beatles, I have even seen a few Steely Dan Tributes. Why James Taylor? Whats the inspiration?

Peter: Since I started playing in his style as well as singing in his style at such a young age, my whole musical outlook naturally formed around his sound. I sounded more like him than I did myself! I just gave up trying to develop my own sound and gave into it. Its all I ever really knew or loved musically and apparently I am not alone based on the response I get at the shows and from the website! JT fans are very loyal and show up no matter what the weather is. Obviously, like some of these tributes, I don't look or even try to look like him. I don't think that's the point. But everytime I play I always have at least one person that said they thought it was the cd before they actually noticed it was a musician playing. So for me that's the highest compliment

Mitch: So I guess the obvious question...ever met JT?

Peter: No. No. I know quite a few people have gotten their picture with him. I have shadowed a few of his tours playing in the towns he was playing in but have not gotten the privilege yet. I just enjoy what he has put out there for all of us to enjoy and know that a lot of people appreciate what I do. I am sure he is aware there are people like me doing this. I know there is a James Taylor tribute band in Rome. Also a few on the West Coast, I believe one in Canada. So the music will continue on and that makes me happy enough!

Mitch: Musically, are there any songs that come to mind that are more difficult to play or sing?

Peter: Well, he does have quite the range. "Handyman" for example he slips into quite a high register. Musically I would have to say "On The 4th Of July" is probably one of the more complex chord progressions. His fingerpicking style and running bass lines are something that are good to pick up early on as part of your playing style as they would prove to be difficult to a beginner player. Many of his songs are deceptively simple but when you break down the way they are played a bit surprising in their structure. I think that is why his music resonated so quickly in the early 70's because his sound was so unique and original.

Mitch: Apparently you don't do this just for the money, and quite obviously you didn't just jump on the bandwagon as you have been doing this a long time. I think the audience can really sense a deep appreciation and the effort of what you do.

Peter: Well it is a pure tribute show. I have played covers of a lot of artist before and I think that that was not my strength as well as I could feel a bit of restlessness from the audience. I think when you do what you love and what you are good at it seems natural and people pick up on that. It really is an example of "Do what you love" in that I have always done it and have always felt it was what I did well. I never set out a plan to do this – it just seemed natural. And I try to do a lot of album cuts that you just won't hear live even by JT himself as he does not perform them anymore or never did. I think that is what makes the show unique. And I do play requests, and if I am unable to do one always offer to have it ready for next time. I do favor the period of 1970-1986 in terms of the material and always trying to update. I can confirm that I have not gotten rich doing this and that is not the point for me. I try to bring the experience of a live concert to people that may not have seen him live or are just craving to hear these songs until he comes through town again.

Mitch: Well best of luck and I hope your success grows!

Peter: Thanks for listening!