



"You've always got these ideas in the back of your head and you always feel like you're not finishing stuff. It's always hanging over you."

DONOVAN LYMAN

SURVIVAL
A Q&A WITH
INSTINCT
CHRIS
LATERZO

BY RICHARD OSBORN

LOS ANGELES — We've got a serious problem. It turns out that GJelina — the Mediterranean eatery along Boho-chic Abbot Kinney in Venice — doesn't serve hard alcohol. Chris Laterzo's dream of a spicy Bloody Mary is rapidly vanishing along with the late-afternoon January sun. But all is not lost. The Coloradoan-turned-Californian asks our waiter to bring us a Bloody Beer — a Tecate with tomato juice, Tabasco and a wedge of lime. Disaster averted. I guess I shouldn't question Laterzo's troubleshooting skills. He has long been one to think on his toes. It's a surviving instinct he's picked up while carving out a career on L.A.'s burgeoning alt-country/roots scene. If you don't learn to ad-lib, to roll with the punches in this unforgiving environment, you won't be around long. Finding (and keeping) talented musicians, renting rehearsal space, booking studios, acting as manager/promoter/accountant/ travel agent — you've got to get the most out of what's available when it's available. The Bloody Beer is a necessity. We're both feeling the after-effects of a 3:30 a.m. bender during which Laterzo and Buffalo Robe bandmates Paul Inman (piano), Jeff LeGore (bass), Robert Dill (drums), Bret Jensen (guitar), Dan Wistrom (guitar) and Laurie LeGore (vocals) officially unveiled Laterzo's fourth full-length release *Juniper and Pinon* (Yampa) with an inspired performance at El Cid in Hollywood. It's on GJelina's patio that we sit for a candid conversation, our Tabasco-infused concoctions in hand:

RICHARD OSBORN: As was the case with your three previous albums, *Juniper and Pinon* was a bit of a marathon run. When did you kick off the project?

CHRIS LATERZO: We started in August of '07. That's when we first did the bass and drums for six of the tunes at Sonora Studios up in Glendale. I had the album in my hand by the beginning of December '08, so it was about 14 months. You go through spurts where for a month you do a lot of work, and then you won't get anything done for a couple of weeks. Everybody has their schedules. It might be a week before we can get together and record a cello track, a vocal track. Some of it I could do on my own. A lot of the acoustic tracks I did by myself. In a lot of ways, you have to become a project manager. You're not only thinking about when you're going to book the studio, but when everyone's going to be able to come in and do their parts. You end up wearing a lot of hats. You're producing it, you're trying to do it on a budget. There's all this commotion going on. The project tends to drag out, especially if you want to produce the record, instead of going for more of a live feel, which would be a quicker process. If you're doing multi tracks, layering tracks, that takes a long time. Plus, the mixing of the record probably took five months. I was doing it at Larry Goetz's studio. He's a friend of mine, but to do it on a budget I had to do it on his down time. He usually books the studio for \$500 or \$600 a day, and that just wasn't possible, so I would work around his schedule.

RO: Often at funky hours, I imagine.

CL: Yeah, and sometimes I wouldn't get in there for a couple of weeks. He would book some big bands and had to take them over me. It tends to

delay the conclusion of the project. But on the other hand that can be a blessing because you get a lot of time to sit back on it and reevaluate what you've done, make changes. You can fine-tune it. There's no deadline, really. You can spend time tweaking stuff. There are pros and cons to doing it fast or stretching it out.

RO: You opened *Waterking* with *Beautiful Blue*, *Ocean View* — a light, upbeat tune that seemed to set the tone for that album. *Juniper and Pinon* is a bit different. You give us an old-world, lone-rider type of feel on *Hacienda*, but you've also got a song about suicide [*Peculiar Fate*] and another that has you shooting your way out of an L.A. traffic jam [*Crowded House Blues*]. Was that a conscious decision to bring that mood in?

CL: I don't consider myself very prolific. I don't write a lot of tunes. Some people are able to crank out 10 songs a month. By the end of the year they've got tons they can work with. They can pick and choose. For this record, I might have had 14 songs. From there I picked nine originals and the Elton John cover [*Holiday Inn*]. Everything has a place on the record. I didn't just take 10 tunes and throw them on there. They all kind of had to work with one another, to come from the same ballpark in terms of their vibe, their feel. Most of the tunes were written in the same time period, coming from the same place. *Crowded House Blues*, for the most part, was written a long time ago and I had thought of putting it on *Waterking*, but it didn't fit. I liked the song, but it didn't fit on *Driftwood*, either. But it fit this one. It fit in with the context of what I was doing.

RO: But thematically, there is some departure for you.

CL: The crude structure of *Peculiar Fate* I had started a long time ago, probably around 2000. I started writing a song about the concept of suicide — where it might come from and why it might happen. I started writing it, but I never got very far. I had a couple of verses, but they aren't anything like what's in the final version. It always sat on the back burner, and every once in a while I would try to dabble with it. It never finished itself. I was just thinking about fate. People have their final outcome. How could people come to the point of taking their own life? Everybody gets depressed, but how does one get to that point? We all have days where you're spent, you're done. Maybe that's how some people come to the concept of suicide. Their road has ended. They're tired. They've done everything they can possibly can and they can't live anymore. It's the end of the road, time to draw the curtains. I was trying to explain how somebody might come to that conclusion. It's basically a suicide letter. "*Dear beloved ones, by now I'm gone...*" Someone's reading the letter.

RO: It's their fate.

CL: But it's a peculiar fate.

RO: It's hard, from an outsider's perspective, to look at somebody like Kurt Cobain or Elliott Smith, with the incredible talent they had, to see how they chose suicide.

CL: I'm not trying to make excuses for them, but some people are maybe just content with going. There are no hard feelings. When I finally sat down and finished that song maybe a year ago, I

back of your head and you always feel like you're not finishing stuff. It's always hanging over you.

RO: For the lack of a better term, I suppose it gives you some closure.

CL: Yeah, it is closure. You can move on. Actually, *Juniper and Pinon* is another example of a song that had been in the process for four or five years. I had the melody. I get the melodies first. Then I have the problem of jamming the lyrics

life or anything like that, but there's a connection. It kind of gives you the chills.

RO: You're continuously pulled back there.

CL: My second home has always been Colorado. Even if I wasn't living there, I was always there once a year. I love the mountains. I love the wilderness, the endless skylines. It's always felt really comfortable. I guess it's also the idea of the settlers, the pioneers, the Indians — the whole theme of the West. It's hard to put into words. My uncles always took us up in the mountains, camping and fishing. They introduced me to the wilderness.

RO: You moved around quite a bit growing up — Colorado, Massachusetts, Belgium. You lived in D.C. Maybe that's why you never quite feel at home.

CL: I'm definitely not settled, which is unfortunate, whether that's being married, having kids. As much as I like Venice, I'm not really settled here. Even in relationships — for some reason I never can settle with them. It's becoming frustrating. That's part of the theme of a lot of the songs. You want to be happy with your relationships, and I never seem to be. I guess that's a constant theme in my tunes. Elusive love. But most people go through that. It's nothing unique.

RO: Except that you sing about and put it out there for everyone to hear. It's a bit like opening the pages of your diary for everyone to see.

CL: Some people hide it better than others. You can put veils over your tunes. I think I write more with a veil. I don't know how many tunes are directly about me. I tend to write more with imagery. My tunes aren't usually very direct. You need to read into the imagery a little more. Some people are able to be more direct with their feelings. Maybe that's a defense mechanism.

RO: In *Grey in L.A.*, Loudon Wainwright sings, "When it's grey in L.A. it's much better that way, it reminds you that this town's so cruel." You've been here for some time — do you view L.A. differently now?

CL: The structure of the industry has changed via the Internet. If you have records out, you can be anywhere and set up your tours there. You can make records anywhere now and be in touch with "the industry" from anywhere. There's more leeway as to where you can live now. I think 15 years ago, you had to be in L.A. or Nashville or New York or Austin.

RO: The music industry has been turned on its arse. People are listening to music in a different way now. It's all about downloads, MP3 players. The days of people sitting down and listening to a concept record from song No. 1 to song No.



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made a commitment to set the lyrics up in such a way that it was a general point of view. I didn't want to get too philosophical. It was just a guy writing his letter: "This is how I feel." The chorus is actually the person reading the letter. "If we could only hold you now, still your soul..." They're thinking, "Maybe we could have changed your mind." But on the other hand, maybe they couldn't have. It was their fate.

RO: In the title cut, *Juniper and Pinon*, you sing, "You know the rush is sweet and strong, there's nothing like a brand new song." Do you still get that rush from songwriting, whether it's finding a melody, seeing the lyrics come together?

CL: It's great, because finishing a tune carries you through to a new day. It's such a good feeling. I don't write so many songs where that's a regular thing, so finishing one — it's a feeling of accomplishment. You feel like you've been worthwhile for a couple of weeks. That carries you for a while. Then you can move on to the next one. With most people who write songs or stories, you've always got these ideas in the

into the melody. I had the idea for the lyrics, but I could never really focus on them. Sometimes you can't think too much about the lyrics.

RO: You've spent a lot of time on the road as a solo act, particularly throughout the Southwest. There's a sense of that solitude that seems to come through in your songwriting.

CL: There is a lot of reflection. The characters are often wanderers, dreamers. *Juniper and Pinon* is a wandering tune. It's about a guy who wakes up in the morning looking out over the plains, the Pawnee grass. He's a traveler. He's been to many places, but there's a new horizon in line. That's me. I've always wanted to find "home," wherever that may be. My thoughts of moving to Santa Fe, wherever. I'm always hoping there's a new horizon in front of me.

RO: You've always had a connection with that part of the world. What is it that draws you?

CL: You feel like you're home. The territory, the geography, the rocks — there's something old about it. It's not like I've been there in some past

12 are all but over. We're making mixes, shuffling songs. There's no going to Tower Records anymore to run our fingers through the stacks. What are the pros and cons you're seeing with these growing pains?

CL: Anyone can get in the game now.

RO: Which can be a good thing or a bad thing.

CL: Right. You get all kinds of great stuff. You also get inundated with a lot of crap. Although there's more stuff to weed through, you're going to find a lot more quality material. It's crowded the field, which isn't good, especially for independent artists. But it's affordable to make records. Anyone can make a record. Whether it's good or not is another issue. The hard part now is getting it seen and heard because there is so much stuff out there. It's unbelievable. The digital world is endless.

RO: You've been touring in The Netherlands in recent years. What is that audience like compared to a U.S. audience?

CL: There's a connection with roots music in The Netherlands, as well as in Belgium and Germany. The whole singer-songwriter scene, honky-tonk. They love it over there. They're hungry for it and they're kind of devoted to it. It's a much smaller market.

RO: You feel embraced over there?

CL: Yeah. They're more receptive. They're there to listen to the music as opposed to a lot of the places you play here. There they go to listen to the songs themselves.

RO: If they could just do away with the cigarettes.

CL: [Laughs]. People smoke like fiends there. It's terrible.

RO: Now that you've done this four times, putting out an album, what have you learned about the process? Have you streamlined things since *American River*?

CL: Well, I know what I'm getting into now. [Laughs] For me, it's always very tug-and-pull. It's really hard to get everybody to be in the right place at the right time. To get stuff done, it takes forever. Studio time, getting the right mixes. It's always a tug-and-pull, but you get a lot of benefits out of it. There are great moments.

RO: With *Driftwood*, you decided to take the whole project on your shoulders by recording it yourself. You were looking for a certain rawness. Looking back at how taxing that was, do you think you'll ever do that again?

CL: I knew that if I did a record myself it could *only* come out raw. I don't have the production skills to make a really polished piece. But I also wanted to micromanage that record. I kind of

jumped in and went for it. There are actually two phases to *Driftwood*. I ended up remixing it. I'm really happy with *Driftwood* now. I think I nailed what I wanted. I had to go back and remix five of the tunes, and I edited a couple of the songs. I cut an intro out of one tune. I fine-tuned it. The mix is 20 times better now. I feel really good about it. The first edition was just a little bit lacking.

RO: You had to learn on the fly.

CL: I didn't really know a lot about the recording process. Before, I always had an engineer. On this I had to do everything. A lot of reading and asking questions. It was "Jump in and swim." It ended up working out really well.

RO: One of my favorite tunes on *Juniper and Pinon* is *Red Dust*. There's some really nice things going on there. Talk about how you came up with that imagery.

CL: We did some production with that. That was kind of fun. I did a solo opening act for a friend of mine. There were three of us on the bill. I did my acoustic set and I was watching the band after me — I See Hawks In L.A. They write some really nice lyrics. Very dreamy stuff. A lot of old-time lyrics, a lot like The Band. Traditional tunes that take you back to the 19th century. I was sitting at the bar listening to this one tune. They were singing about a mountain man working his way up some river. It struck me. I literally got a napkin out and I started writing. I put myself in a different time. "*We were the Roman cavalry...*" I scribbled some other stuff down. But they inspired that tune. I thought I'd jump in and out of time — from Romans to Astronauts. I wanted different scenes. One was a battlefield. The other has Astronauts out on a butte. It was painting a picture. I don't remember how I got the melody. I was originally going to do it with two acoustics. The production influence was Neil

Young's *Pocahontas*. I was going to play a 12-string with some simple congas behind it, some kind of percussion behind it. But I was going to keep it simple. Then it developed into something else. I ended up doing two acoustics, accent acoustics like *Rocket Man*. If you ever listen to that tune, you hear these these ringing guitars that send it off into the chorus.

RO: *Holiday Inn* was an interesting choice for *Juniper and Pinon*. You once said Elton John's *Yellow Brick Road* was your favorite album. Why?

CL: I've always been drawn to melodies. The melodies on that album are just phenomenal. Every song on that record — and that's a double record — is unto itself. Every song has its own identity. The songs are so strong. They take on a life of their own.

RO: What's an example of a perfect song for you, whether it's the melody, the lyrics, the production...

CL: Jimi Hendrix's *The Wind Cries Mary* — that's a 10. The lyrics are a little bit dreamy. There's ethereal stuff going on there. It's not very direct. The melody is ridiculous. You could play that song acoustically and it would be good. The production doesn't matter on a tune like that. I'm drawn more to the song. The production to me is secondary. I know that if he did that acoustically, I'd still love it. That's why Dylan is so great. Most of the songs are stripped down. They're so good, it doesn't matter how you produce them.

Richard Osborn is a San Francisco-based journalist/photojournalist. He was recently honored by the USTWA for his story "Miracle at San Quentin," based on three years of research inside the walls of California's oldest and most renowned correctional facility.

