

Musician, artist and carpenter

Nathan Hamilton brings it all together with *Beauty Wit and Speed*

by Tom Geddie

FROM TIME TO TIME IN WHAT'S BECOMING a trivialized world, singer-songwriter-artist Nathan Hamilton works as a carpenter to help support his family.

And from time to time, he'll be pounding a nail with a hammer or doing some other carpenterly deed in Austin when one of his songs will come on the radio. Often, he said, the owner of the house will comment.

"He'll give a sorta headcocked look and ask if that was me, and then what I'm doing here on this job," Hamilton said. "There's some sort of illusion that if you're played on the radio, that's all you are doing" — making a living with art.

Making things and fixing things is by no means trivial. It's honest and honorable work, especially when compared to the shallow, inverted sort of hero worship in a culture that turns too often to greed, to superficial celebrity worship, and to belligerent isolation without the perspective of art. One of our most celebrated writers, Charles Bukowski, carried letters and worked many temporary jobs to help pay the bills, although that was more because of his own odd self; actor Harrison Ford and spiritualist Jesus Christ were carpenters, too.

Hamilton, one of our finest songwriters and always a satisfying performer, has cut back on his traveling performances — these days, probably half a dozen or so road shows in a typical month — to spend more time with his wife Sarah and their daughters, Lila, ten, and Helena, five, and to pick up some local gigs.

"The days of being gone four, five, or six weeks at a time are kinda gone," he said. Still, there is the lure of the music which sometimes necessitates the road; there is that European trip that took up the last half or so of November. As Hamilton put it on Facebook, "Washed the sawdust outta my hair, donned my shimmery sport coat and headed to Holland and Belgium to throw down the folk 'n' roll with fellow troubadour Michael Fracasso."

And there is the song "In All That We Might Find," one of the eleven fine songs on Hamilton's recent CD, *Beauty Wit and Speed*. Slow down and read these words:

*There's a dirty face kid on a K-Mart pony
A cherry Icee laying on the ground
It looks like blood spilling out of that cup
With the blue light special coming down
A burnt out trailer and the siren sings
A crazy porch lady's got a rat on a string
Screaming at the kids that trample her flowers
Running with their capes and Superman powers
The rain's coming down on my windshield now
I'm thinking on my childhood days
It all just seems like a dream somehow
I woke from and it slipped away
Nine to five, the daily grind*

*Trying to raise these kids of my own
To give a full share of my heart and my time
And somehow make this house a home*

*I miss the day's end soft embrace
And the stillness of our minds
When a sense of mystery remained
In all that we might find
Well they cut down a thousand pines
And built up a hundred homes
Then called that place A Thousand Pines
Like some kind of twisted joke
In the age of information the screens of isolation
Bathe us in a cool blue glow
The network imperfection the lack of real connection
Has left us feeling more alone*

That's a lot of lyrics to quote in a single-page article, but it fits. The CD is filled with that sort of insight, as is all of Hamilton's solo work.

Beauty Wit and Speed begins with the short, sorta piano classical, mood-setting instrumental "A Red Thread Runs" followed by ten more original songs ranging from roots to near-pop — in the best sense of that word "pop." His first solo CD, *Tuscola*, was basically country-folk; his second, *Six Black Birds*, was basically rock.

He sees all three fitting into the loosely defined Americana genre with a common lyrical thread.

"Everything I've done falls under Americana because it's such a broad umbrella now," he said. On the new one, "I brought in some jazz elements that I'm not at all claiming to understand. I wanted some upright bass and the trumpet, and a different kind of percussion.

"It's definitely a conscious sort of journey. I know with this CD I definitely had a sound in my head, a road map of what I wanted, and I articulated that to Britton (Beisenherz), the engineer and co-producer. Basically I told him my vision sonically was to take the listener into the studio beside me, and hear each instrument around us in its place. In between, there are these ambient sounds that you sorta lean into to hear, that reveal themselves over time. He helped me capture that."

Lyrical, Hamilton sees "a certainly unity" to the three solo CDs.

"I did sort of move away from the sort of literate narrative or the outlaw or renegade theme — a very narrative, literate storyline



He thinks of his music as "soul work": Nathan Hamilton

that you might follow. I veered from that, and tried to leave a little more impression, leave it a little more open for interpretation still being tuned in to detail, imagery, and sort of trying to paint pictures with words but not define it too much for the listener," he said.

"Let the listeners come up with their own ideas.

"There was certainly, on this new record, a very conscious decision to write about the acceleration of our days through technology and social media, all these sorts of things — the self-expression all the time," he said. "There was a time when I put all the emphasis on lyrics. Of late, that's been not as important to me as sort of just connecting musically, wanting to use different instrumental elements, wanting to be moved by the music itself.

"Still, my main intention in

anything I'm doing is connecting — just a general idea of connecting with someone out there. It's a cliché kind of thing that we are all in this together, but it's true. That's what I'm hoping."

Hamilton attended the Art Institute of Dallas in the late 1980s and has also spent a lot more time in recent years making abstract art. He's shown in several galleries, often using found materials — "any kind of found wood that I put together or nail together; oil, tar, all kinds of raw materials.

"With songwriting being more straightforward, I like the painting to be otherworldly, not really representational at all," he said. "It's exploration and emotion, and responding to whatever. I equate it to melody."

Music is almost physical to Hamilton.

"It's soul work," he said. "It's

comfort, joy, everything. Whether it's the primal driving rhythm of rock 'n' roll or a melody line that hits you right in the gut. It touches on the full envelope of human experience and emotion."

With the way the music business is changing, though, Hamilton isn't sure what's ahead.

"I'll always make music. Right now, I'm leaning toward visual arts. I may take a musical break for a while, but that notion could change next week."

However many houses he builds or repairs, however many abstract paintings he does and however well they are received — I own a small one titled "Adrift" — Nathan Hamilton is a songwriter with a family to raise, with a couple of children — Lila and Helena — who surely at one point in their lives have been dirty-faced kids whose cherry Icees spilled onto the ground. ■

"Everything I've done falls under Americana because it's such a broad umbrella now ... I brought in some jazz elements that I'm not at all claiming to understand. I wanted some upright bass and the trumpet, and a different kind of percussion. It's definitely a conscious sort of journey."

—NATHAN HAMILTON