

CHRISTOPHER DENNY

Christopher Denny

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Christopher Denny, whose self-titled debut album was released last month, is the oldest twenty-two year old on the planet. He seems to have come of age sometime in the '30s or '40s, on the dusty single-lane highways of the American interior, in the company of an itinerant cohort of men whose shoes were soled with cardboard but whose hearts were tender, and who were buoyed along in the margins of society by bad times and good love and the ability to turn all it into a song.

The songs that Chris Denny sings on this album—nine are his and three are covers—are in many ways straight out of that era. Their rhythms are energetic but uncomplicated, like the rhythms of trains, or chain gangs, or spit-shined couples stomping politely through coordinated dance steps. Lyrics for the most part are equally modest, the interior laments of a narrator looking for a girl ("Lookin' For You"), or regretting the loss of a girl ("All Burned Up"), or not quite regretting the loss of a girl ("Gypsy into a Carpenter"). Chords raise simple questions and resolve them in sunny, stair-step progressions. The production, on a couple of tunes, gives his voice a Pinocchio-in-the-whale echo, as though it were calling up through the years. Even his language is old-fashioned, the spidery script on a penny postcard: he "drifts from town to town" (who was the last twenty-two year old to *drift*? Hank Sr.?), his "rambling shoes don't fit anymore," he'd "rather lay down and die," he "burns, burns, burns," he "cries and cries and cries."

There is one reason Chris Denny gets away with all this, and that is Chris Denny's voice. Though it, too, sounds like it belongs to a sun-dried sharecropper in a WPA photograph, it is anachronistically vital, as though that sharecropper were young and hale and retouched in Technicolor. It has something of Jimmie Dale Gilmore's high-wire whine and Roy Orbison's throaty moan, but it is not exactly like either of those. It is sometimes like being licked and sometimes like being strangled. It is both smooth and peppery, wave and particle. It is impossible not to orient yourself to it, like a pole. He exerts over it a preternatural control: Here it is clenched and mournful, holed up in the center of his skull, here it is lean and elastic, here so thin the light shines through it. He makes it sound effortless, but there is heat coming off of it; his high notes are cauterizing.

Denny says more with his voice and music, actually, than he does with his words. The songwriting style he seems to be emulating, with its simple, almost cliched lyrics, and cartoony subjects, reads a little strangely today, an imitation in danger of being a caricature. Simplicity is a tall order these days, and his has neither the spoken-word poetics of Lou Reed's verses nor the charming, biting, reading-bad-news-from-a-teleprompter quality of Johnny Cash's. Although these are all songs of heartbreak and restlessness—fine things for a young man to be singing—it's hard to tell exactly what the trouble is. "There's no time to cry," he says in "Wake Up," vaguely if decisively, "I'd rather lay down and die." In "Apology," he adds, "I know nothing's gonna change/if I don't take the time to rearrange/I cry because I couldn't see the light."

On the other hand, Denny's music knows exactly what the trouble is, and the joy and the heartbreak, too. The foot-stomper "Hearts on Fire" is a tour-de-force of major chords

and golden crooning. On eight of the tracks he plays a drawling harmonica, which underlines the melodies with a pretty twang. And "Goin' Home," one of the best songs on the album, is wordless, a bubbly ditty with a harmonica melody that jigs uphill to a breathless conclusion, like a beloved traveling tune the words have worn off of. Even Denny, who can't resist humming a few bars in the middle, knows to leave it alone.

One of his most interesting songs, "When Will I Realize," seems to point the way to another level of songwriting, or at least a more contemporary one. He addresses someone who feels real—"I remember when you took off/It was just like that/Deep inside we all thought you were looking/for someone to cut you some slack." The song builds slowly, sort of a latter-day "Like a Rolling Stone;" a personal commentary instead of a social one, anguished instead of angry. The chorus, when it hits, only twice in the eight-minute song, is a masterpiece of airtight paradox—"When am I gonna realize/I really, truly do care"—that sounds current, even new.

Denny can cover songs like nobody's business. A gut-wrenching version of Orbison's "I'm Hurtin'" was a standout at a recent show at Whitewater Tavern in Little Rock, and the five notes at the end of his cover of "Frankie and Johnny" are surely five of the most goosepimply in the history of "Frankie and Johnny" covers. It's as though he needs to channel other people's experiences while he waits for his own to catch up with the complexity of his emotions and the range of his talent. All the "drifting" he does in his songs is a placeholder for a whole life, full of real rambling, that will eventually, hopefully, provide material enough for his old soul.

One of the last songs Denny played at the show at Whitewater was a cover of Neil Young's coming-of-age anthem, "Powderfinger," which he sang at his preferred pitch, high, and tempo, up. In a lot of ways it was the perfect song for Denny—hammering drums, big gnashing chords, a twenty-two-year-old hero with a loaded gun and a reason to use it—and its effect on the packed house was like a match on a tank of gas. The penultimate verse, "Raised my rifle to my eye/Never stopped to wonder why/And I saw black and my face splashed in the sky," and the ensuing instrumental mayhem jacked the place up to the rafters. Maybe he hasn't gotten where he's going, yet, but you could see it from there.