

## David Wilcox

Cleveland-born David Wilcox is a father, a husband, a citizen and a songwriter. He is also a traveler - an adventurer at his core, always on his way somewhere. So how appropriate is it that the career of David Wilcox, celebrated songwriter and creator of more than 18 albums, began with a bike ride through North Carolina when he was just a teenager?

"As my friend and I bicycled the full length of the Blue Ridge Parkway we were asking people that we met, 'Where can we find musicians?' because we were traveling light and didn't have our instruments, and they told us about this a hippie school, Warren Wilson College," he says. He spent a week in Asheville, and decided to attend. After hearing a fellow college student playing in a stairwell Wilcox began to study and pursue his new calling.

"There was this cute little music venue, like 150 people max, and that was the perfect size for me. I was playing there every Tuesday and really learned how to make it fresh, not to just play the same set, but how to respond to the crowd and be spontaneous."

It's been that way ever since. Wilcox released an independent album in 1987, was a winner of the prestigious Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk award in 1988, and by 1989 he had signed with A&M Records. His first release on the label, *How Did You Find Me Here*, sold over 100,000 copies the first year largely by word of mouth. Wilcox and his wife Nance Pettit briefly moved away, "but Asheville had its tractor beam on us - it had its gravity. We had to go back." He's called Asheville home ever since, and from his 1987 debut through his latest record *blaze*, Wilcox has primarily sought to find a way to stay always in the moment, to never let his art feel like a routine, to never be afraid to take a chance.

Considered a 'songwriter's songwriter', his songs have been covered by artists such as k.d. lang and many others. In addition to his writing prowess, his skills as a performer and storyteller are unmatched. He holds audiences rapt with nothing more than a single guitar, thoroughly written songs, a fearless ability to mine the depths of human emotions of joy, sorrow and everything in between, and all tempered by a quick and wry wit. His lyrical insight is matched by a smooth baritone voice, virtuosic guitar chops, and creative open tunings, giving him a range and tenderness rare in folk music.

For *blaze*, Wilcox worked with producer Ric Hordinski, following Ric's playful ground rules, designed to insure maximum spontaneity: Don't over-

think it; only one vocal take on a song before moving on; listen back the next day.

"Ric's rules made this record a real challenge but also a whole lot of fun. No fixing, no re-taking, just 'Get it right the first time, listen to the drummer, slow down, don't think so hard...' It was like hiking a new trail and seeing a vista for the first time... that surprise as the song changes in the middle of the take and suddenly I understand what the song means and I just go with it. That's where 'blaze' comes from. I'm out there on a trail I don't know but I'm not just bushwhacking. There's a blaze on the trail for me to follow."

This off-the cuff approach didn't just apply to the way Wilcox sang; it changed what he sang about, as Hordinski's approach and the support of bassist Byron House and drummers Joshua Seurkamp and Daniel Joseph Dorff emboldened Wilcox to take chances with both execution and subject.

As Wilcox notes in his liner notes, *blaze* is a "complex blossom of contradictions that is held together at the center by this blissfully focused state of mind that I first came to know while pedaling across the country." The blossom of this record has petals that go out in different, seemingly contradictory directions. "Working with the bigger sonic choices that this rhythm section brought gave me a broader emotional palette and meant that I could go beyond those introspective, soul-searching songs and actually state some strong opinions." This led to blaze's first single, the driving protest anthem *Oil Talking To Ya*, a rallying cry against environmental neglect. "That song started with just a riff that was fun to play and morphed into a statement about the world." Rather than surrender to the sort of post-apocalyptic, killing-each-other-for-gasoline model of the future that we're used to hearing, Wilcox has painted a positive vision of a society that's gone beyond its destructive habits. It imagines that we really do have other viable choices

*Ocean Soul* is a straight-up love song, something that's quite unusual for Wilcox. As he says with some amazement, "A real love song where nobody dies! It was terrifying. How can I do that? But it's really a song about seeing the beauty in someone who mostly sees things about themselves that they don't like, while I know that if they could only see themselves from my point of view it would change everything."

From songs like *Guilty By Degree* and *Bail My Boat*, where the writer finds himself navigating the shoals of life, through *It'll Work On You*, where he

slyly uses a story about cars to describe the therapy of songwriting, to the haunting finale of *Single Candle*, the songs on *blaze* create a path that Wilcox invites you to follow. As Wilcox describes that last song, *Single Candle* is about Martin Luther King and the words that struck a match and lit a flame that is still bringing light to the world. "This song is my way of making peace with how little each one of us can do. No single match burns for very long, but it is enough."

"If you're hearing a performer sing all these songs, you should know not only where he gets his joy and who he loves, but you should know what pisses him off and what frightens him and what runs him off the rails - what takes him apart and what puts him back together. For me, this album is truer in a lot of ways, because it gets to those places where I have not made my peace."

With *blaze*, David Wilcox has stayed true to himself, and artistically alive no matter what, leaving only the path ahead and the trail to blaze.