

Central Valley refugee reflects on latest CD, music scene in beach town

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Crooked Eye Tommy is Tommy Marsh, a refugee from the Central Valley. He grew up in Porterville and used to live in Fresno. He's a veteran of numerous bands, including the Tule Devils that have played up and down Highway 99, stopping at dive bars, casino gigs and shows at places with names like Mickey's Minute Mart.

Then a few years ago, the dude in the band met a girl in the crowd — gee, that's never happened before — all of which resulted in a new ZIP code for Marsh. The girl was Tammy who is now Tommy's significant other.

Her dad is Johnny Mosby, the former owner of the legendary country and western bar on Main Street in Ventura — the Ban-Dar. Unfortunately, the city of Ventura once again demonstrated historical indifference by allowing the Ban-Dar to be rezoned into the past tense. Jeez ... just like the original Top Hat, whose empty shell sits forlornly on Main Street mocking us.

Brotherly love or lack of is a frequent theme in rock music going back to the Everly Brothers, Ray and Dave Davies of the Kinks and Liam and Noel Gallagher from Oasis.

None of that stuff seems to be happening with Crooked Eye as Tommy and his brother Paddy Marsh appear to be two happy fifths of a well-oiled machine. They're ably assisted by a trio of veteran local players, Glade Rasmussen on bass, Jimmy Calire on keyboards and sax and Tony Cicero hits the drums.

Before he went Crooked, Tommy used to front Tommy Marsh & Bad Dog, but this is a whole new thing. He has an eye on a road trip even further than Fresno and discussed the latest during a recent phoner.

Wow, what a cool cover on "Butterflies & Snakes."

Mike Lemos made the cover. It turned out really great, and we're really pleased with it. Chris Jensen did the other three panels.

Snake Bites

Crooked Eye Tommy, Dan Grimm Band at Plaza Playhouse Theater, 916 Carpinteria Ave., Carpinteria, 7:30 p.m. Friday. Cost is \$25, which includes their latest CD "Butterflies and Snakes."

Call 684-6380 or visit www.plazatheatercarpinteria.com.

For more on the band, crookedeyetommy.com.

So how's the album doing so far? Are you guys rich rock stars ... almost?

Actually, we're not releasing it until Aug. 1, but we've already been getting some airplay on some stations. We've been sending it out and people have been playing it, so that's a good sign; and I'm really happy with it. It turned out better than I expected, so that's always good.

What's the dang deal on the CD release party in Carp?

Basically, we're gonna play the whole CD from start to finish in the first set, and then for the second set, we're bringing a bunch of our friends together — Guy Martin, Deb Ryder, Kelly (Zirbes) and Perry (Robertson) from Kelly's Lot, Rick Reeves — and we're just gonna throw a big jam session. Dan Grimm is gonna open up and play a few tunes for us. He helped me produce the record, so we're sorta giving him a shout out at the show because he did such a good job helping me navigate the studio there. That Brotheryn Studio is crazy amazing, and it was all new to me so it was nice to have Dan helping us out.

There was a memorable line from the first song about “a saber toothed tiger and a homecoming queen,” I can just see the ad on Craigslist, “Must like cats...”

(Laughs) Yeah, that's from “Crooked Eye Tommy,” the first song ...

How many gigs do you have during the week? Are you like Teresa Russell as a dude or what?

No, I've got a regular job, but we've been playing a lot more. I do the Wednesdays at the Bombay (in Ventura) that we call "The Session," which is the Ventura County Blues Society jam session. We also play around town, and we've got some shows in the Bay Area coming up in September. We had BB Chung King (Alan Mirikitani) just a couple of weeks before he passed. That was really sad.

It was. I just talked to Alan in April. So, what's been happening with the blues scene since you've been down here? What have you seen change and how much of that are you to blame for?

I'll take blame for whatever it is that can be proven. I don't know, but it seems like there's a lot more people doing it now. Jerry McWhorter is putting on a bunch of great shows every week. I think he's doing three regular blues shows every week now, and that's a lot more than when I started over here. I don't really know if I've had any impact. I just like to do what I like to do and folks seem to like it, so that kind of works out.

So you're getting better gigs these days than Mickey's Minute Mart in Marysville?

(Laughs.) Yes, sir. Yes, sir. We sent some copies of the CD to some friends in the Bay Area, and we've got a show coming up with Chris Cain and Kim Wilson. So that's really cool. I was surprised but very pleased. Oh, and Rick Estrin & the Nightcats are also gonna be at that show. It's gonna be crazy.

You came down here originally with Ban-Dar connections. Have you seen the site lately?

Yeah ... they're building apartments ... on Main Street. What the hell's that about?

When you were a kid growing up in P-Ville, what were some of the records you wore out listening to, trying to figure out, "How'd they do that?"

Oh, I'll tell you the one that was the biggest for me was Lynnyrd Skynyrd's "One More From The Road." That's probably the best live album ever, and me and my brother Paddy, we wore that sucker out, man — a couple of times. And then I was into the Outlaws. I was kind of a Southern rock kid. We had some Muddy Waters records and my mom used to listen to Ray Charles and had a bunch of show tune records, so we had a really eclectic upbringing that way. And there was Santana, too. That's why we went with the crazy cover. When Paddy and I were growing up, one of the coolest things were the covers of the records. You'd sit there and stare at them while you're listening to the record, and we thought, "Man, that's the kind of thing we want." When we hooked up with Mike Lemos we told him we were thinking throwback.

You've been doing this for a while. What's the coolest gig you've ever played? Have you ever been up there and everything is clicking and you're thinking, "Wow, do I have the best job in the world, or what?" Has that ever happened to you?

You know, I've played the last few Ventura County Blues Festival gigs, and I think last year was one of those kind of shows. My brother, Paddy, he's in town now. He's in the band. He's the guitar player, and playing with him again has just been tremendous. You know, I don't really have any words for that except that it's the best thing that's happened to me since I've been over here. He decided to come over so now we're doing this.

And this isn't about a show, but was an event. When we were recording the album, we were doing "Time Will Tell," and we had had a few rehearsals and we had kind of struggled a little bit with the lead part, but we went ahead into the studio and we sat down and played that song. We went through it and played it perfectly all the way through. It was one of those keystone moments that happen. It was like, "Holy crap! What just happened there?" I think it translates pretty well on the record.

What happens when you play live? Do the people dance or stare or drink heavily or what?

There's definitely each of those components. You've probably listened to the record or some of it, and I don't think we're a dance band, you know. That's not really what we think about. The covers we play are dance tunes obviously, but we're really the kind of band you want to sit and listen to. That's just my take on it. Other folks might say differently, but I'm not down there, so it's hard to tell.

Was there serious culture shock moving from the Central Valley to a SoCal beach town?

It was like night and day. The valley is just kind of a dark kind of place. I lived there all my life and didn't realize how bad it was. When I moved over here, it was like "holy crap," the people, the sunshine, the cool weather and the vibe — a lot of people are out listening to music. Over there, I played in a band, and we played a bunch of Indian casino gigs and you're just background music. People don't even really pay attention, but since coming over here I've noticed that there's lots of folks watching everything you do and that's very, very unusual — at least it was before moving here. Now that's sort of the norm.

So what's the master plan for a part-time band? You guys all have day jobs, I would assume?

Well, we do, but I've been pretty good about taking care of myself so if an opportunity were to happen, I'd be willing to go for it, but honestly as a band, we just wanna do great shows, you know? In fact, we're talking about working a trip to Europe in the fall and just try to have the shows pay for the trip — part of it, anyway. Even if it doesn't pay for all of it, it's an opportunity to go. We can go play and see the world. That's really the idea — go play some great shows and see some country.

What a great idea. Need a roadie?

You're welcome to come along.

Crooked Eye? Where did that come from? Do you have one?

I do, yeah. I was born with amblyopia — the muscles are too long on one side of the eye, so I have a lazy eye. You don't really see it because I was trained pretty well as a kid by my optometrist, but get a couple of cocktails in me or I get kind of tired — boom!

OK, that should be more than I need to know. I'll track you down if I'm missing anything.

Thanks for talking to me ...

http://www.vcstar.com/entertainment/central-valley-refugee-reflects-on-latest-cd-music-scene-in-beach-town_79852661