



AMERICAN SONGWRITER MAGAZINE

Keith Chagall's latest album "SAIL ON BETSY ROSS"

Article by Paul Zollo

Stunning. In recent weeks several purveyors of things musical played me tracks from this album and stood back with awe. This is music of great purity and reverence, rendered by a deeply gifted singer-songwriter-producer. Keith Chagall is a master of resplendent harmonies, rich layers of vocals as sumptuously rendered as if Brian Wilson and his band teamed up with Paul McCartney and his band. Some people who love the music of the Beatles or Brian and try to channel it into their own songs often fail terribly. It comes off like a bad impression. But occasionally someone comes along with purity; not only the love, but also the inspired knowhow to do it right, and the result is remarkable. Such is the case with Keith Chagall, and *Sail On Betsy Ross*, a new album of gems. His song "Mr. Lennon" is a tribute to the lads that does justice to the source, not only in the inspired songwriting, but in the stunning orchestral Abbey Road-like production.

This is not an imitation of the Beatles, it's a reverent and deeply dimensional celebration. For that one song and track alone, this is an album worth having. But there's much more.

"Wake up baby, we're in the time of times." It's the place where great songwriting and great record-making come together. Though some have long mourned the death of the album as art, along come artists like Chagall who persist in puncturing that premise. Clearly this is a songwriter who has spent untold hours lost in the beauty of the great albums. It comes out of his pores. And so he's made an album that aims for inclusion in our collections of cherished classics in every song and track.

Linked musically to both the past and future – the timeless with the timely – these are songs and tracks of richness and moment. Spanning a rainbow of styles – from psychedelic Liverpoolian journeys to the calm acoustic Americana of The Band to the multi-layered harmonic brilliance of Brian Wilson to the smooth melodies of Bacharach and beyond – it's a delightfully effervescent journey through the many faces and phases of rock and roll: the visceral, the chromatic, the psychedelic, the epic, all of it and more combining to create a rich landscape for this cycle of songs that reflects on modern times.

Like Paul Simon with his anthemic awareness of our moment in history with these "days of miracle and wonder," Chagall calls it out, and names it "the time of times." It's an awareness of mankind – and America specifically – on the precipice of great change, both weakened and empowered by advances technological and spiritual. A time as

consequential as the 60s, reflecting the consequence of American tragedy itself that lives in the wounds on our collective spirit.

He connects the episodes of deep darkness, the deaths of both JFK and John Lennon, as well as the 9-11 attacks. But he also weaves in the moments of empowerment which pierced the darkness and expanded our consciousness, such as the Beatles themselves, their arrival and swift musical evolution, and the moon landing.

His production chops are staggering, both beautifully reminiscent of the best of the past, but modern, too. The constant in the music that has impacted him – the music of The Beatles, Beach Boys, Eagles, The Band – is the resplendent sounds of humans in harmony. He brings his love of deeply layered vocal harmonies to almost every track. And especially now, in these dissonant times so teeming with chaos and distortion, the sound of real voices unified in harmony is especially welcome, and nourishing. It's the sound of authentic human triumph, of music over noise.

Although it doesn't come until some 15 cuts in, a shining highlight of the album is "Mr. Lennon." It's among the most lovingly conceived and executed Beatles tribute songs ever created by a non-Beatle. Directed to John, the music is much more McCartney-influenced, and resounds hauntingly as a song of love from Paul to John. It's up there with "Two of Us," but produced with the remarkable psychedelic orchestral grandeur of "Penny Lane" and "Strawberry Fields" combined. A lovely melody is here, along with the sweet fluid voice of George's electric slide, beautiful harmonies, some backwards tracks, the bold chromatics of Beatles chords, and even piccolo trumpet.

All comes off as sweetly unapologetic about embraced influences. The title song is beautifully Beatlesque, as is "Mr. Lennon," while "Senator Please" resounds like the best Eagles songs they never sang. He honors heroes of the past – John Lennon, John Kennedy – but also modern heroes, including Diana Nyad, the 64-year old woman who swam from Cuba to Florida in 2015, after failing four previous times. It's a tale of persistence and courage both, and is a perfect fit. "Southbeach" has a hip Bacharach flow, with jazzy melodies, smooth samba-like groove, sweetly voiced by muted trumpet. It all starts with a fast spoken-word montage, with the voices of American history connecting 9-11, the shooting of JFK, the moon landing, the election of Obama and more.

All of history is here, connected with modern dilemmas, such as the curse of chem-trails and politics unhinged. The voices lead into the title song, an openly reverent hybrid of Beatles and Brian Wilson, with the four piano chords to each measure feel that Paul, John and Brian, as well as Harry Nilsson and others, connected to this moment in history. It is a moment of sorrow and joy forever intertwined, and beautifully contained in the image of the "cold November sun" around which "Sail On Betsy Ross" sails.

The photographs are by the legendary Henry Diltz, who captured iconic cover images for so many classic albums which defined the expanding spirit, and impacted this artist. Sail On Betsy Ross follows boldly in that tradition, and stands as a love letter to rock & roll and the expansive spirit from which it came. An album for the ages.