

# Out of darkness, comes light

Wednesday, 20 January 2010

By Bill Nevins

&ldquo;I lived that life close to the bone and in cold blood, like a rattlesnake&rsquo;s kiss.&rdquo;  
&mdash;from the song &ldquo;Highway 52&rdquo; by Cole Mitchell

The preceding lyric, penned by Albuquerque songwriter Cole Mitchell, was inspired by his years spent living in the southern New Mexican town of Cuchillo, a former stagecoach stop and trading center located about 15 miles northwest of Truth or Consequences. Though the town thrived for many years, it all but shut down when the mining industry eventually went bust.

&ldquo;I spent a little time [in Cuchillo] in my teens and 20s &mdash; my grandmother owned a store and bar there,&rdquo; said Mitchell in a recent phone interview with Local iQ. &ldquo;It&rsquo;s mostly a ghost town now; maybe 30 people still live there, but there are actual ghost hunters poking around the place with their meters and detection devices.&rdquo;

Mitchell has chased a few ghosts himself throughout his career in a seemingly never-ending quest to write the next song. He spent years on the road honing guitar licks and fronting rock &lsquo;n&rsquo; roll bands, including the now notorious Albuquerque cow-punk outfit, Saddlesores. Though Mitchell&rsquo;s live shows, both then and now, are something to behold, it is songwriting that remains his primary focus.

Even a life-changing trauma &mdash; the loss of his eyesight in 1992 &mdash; did not distract Mitchell from that vocation.

&ldquo;It was the best thing that ever happened to me,&rdquo; Mitchell said of his blindness. &ldquo;Before that, I was so distracted by life in general that my writing really was not as sharp as it should have been. That caused me to focus and my writing was as strong as it had ever been before.

&ldquo;I don&rsquo;t really write fiction,&rdquo; he continued. &ldquo;I tend to write from what I&rsquo;ve lived and observed. I had 35 years with sight and living a pretty colorful life. I gathered a lot to write about, and it&rsquo;s been a true gift to be able to build songs out of that material.&rdquo;

Mitchell said he spends at least one day per week in the studio working on new material, with another CD in the works for this year.

“Really, I just have to write songs” he said. “I can’t not do it.”

Born in Silver City — “Billy the Kid country,” as he calls it — Mitchell acknowledges the strong influence of New Mexico’s special landscape and unique people in his music. His work has also been shaped by his lifelong admiration for other witty, hard-bitten song writers such as Shane MacGowan, Steve Earle and Townes Van Zandt. Also among his favorites, cited Mitchell, are Texans Ray Wylie Hubbard, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Joe Ely, along with Hank Williams and gunfight balladeer Marty Robbins.

“I like their story songs,” Mitchell said, adding that he has lately been enjoying the work of Imelda May, whose debut recording, *Love Tatroo*, came out last year. “She’s a young rockabilly singer from Dublin, Ireland,” he informed. “I think she’s really got it, too.”

Mitchell’s own music leans decidedly toward the rock edge of country rock, with an emotional undercurrent of honky tonk blues always present. His growling vocals, which suggest a blend of Mick Jagger and John Fogerty, belt out tales of love gone wrong, deals gone bad, hard work and hard nights spent clocking miles along restless highways.

“Americana is the best way to describe my music,” Mitchell said, further explaining that his sources of inspiration have decidedly “tangled roots.” He cited the Rolling Stones and Ron Wood’s pre-Stones band, Faces, as early influences, but also spoke proudly of Albuquerque band Acoustic Curs, which includes Johnny Burns (lead guitar), Shelby Lee Means (standup bass), Jacob Means (mandolin) and August Johnson (drums), as well as Matt Sneddon (dobro), Henry Bruner (accordion/keyboards), Keith Werblow (bass) and vocalist Michelle Collins. In collaboration with Acoustic Curs, Mitchell has crafted *Primordial Reckoning*, his latest studio recording.

Acknowledging the album’s stripped-down feel, Mitchell stated: “Everything I write starts out on acoustic guitar and on this album I was trying to get back to my beginnings in some ways. The title has something to do with spiritual beginnings, and the sound is mostly acoustic.”

Cole Mitchell

With Jasper Burns, Freddy Raygun and Johnny Burns

8p, Sat, Jan. 23

Low Spirits Bar & Stage

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