

Jay Farrar

Stone, Steel & Bright Lights

Ask anyone who was lucky enough to squeeze into Cicero's Basement Bar in St. Louis in 1989 or the Blue Note in Columbia. Missouri in 1993 to watch Uncle Tupelo play a show. Even way back then, Jay Farrar was a riveting live performer.

Farrar's performances have gained in depth and in craft since those days. But if you are among the thousands of listeners who've had the good fortune to catch Farrar with Son Volt in the mid-1990s, or watch one of his remarkable solo performances in recent years, you already knew that.

Yet one thing has puzzled Farrar's listeners over the years: Why, after nearly 15 years of making records, had he never released a live disc of his songs to capture his distinctive live performances?

Farrar's latest record (and a bonus DVD) on Transmit Sound — *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights* — answers that particular riddle at last. Recorded in September and October 2003, *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights* culls songs from Farrar's last three records — plus two new songs ("Doesn't Have to Be This Way" and "6 String Belief") and dazzling covers of Pink Floyd's "Lucifer Sam" and Neil Young's "Like a Hurricane." Along the way, the new record (recorded with Washington DC alt-rockers Canyon as the backing band) documents the acrobatic swings from quiet intimacy to guitar roar that typify Farrar's approach to live performance.

Many of the best live records in rock history — the Rolling Stones' *Get Your Ya-Ya's Out*, Neil Young's *Live Rust*, the Jefferson Airplane's *Bless Its Pointed Little Head*, the Mekons' *New York* — find those artists resisting the urge merely to regurgitate their studio recordings. Rather, they reinterpret, reinvent and try out new material.

Farrar also points to some other live favorites down through the years. "You can take the man out of the seventies, but you can't take the seventies out of the man," he observes. "ZZ Top's *Fandango* and Cheap Trick's *Live at Budokan*, as well as The Band's *The Last Waltz* were highlighted live records for me over the years."

Farrar takes a similar tack as those classics did on his own *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights*. After all, his recent three solo recordings — *Sebastopol* (2002), *ThirdShiftGrottoSlack* (2002) and *Terroir Blues* (2003) — have been distinguished by Farrar's innovative use of the studio's technological wizardry and craft. Translating such material to the stage is a high wire act of sorts. Can material that is carefully honed and tweaked in the studio stand up to the stern test of soundchecks, repetition and feedback?

Stone, Steel & Bright Lights proves that the heart of Farrar's last three records lay not in manipulating tape but in his superb songwriting. The live versions of Farrar's most tricked-out and trippy experiments of recent years — *Terroir Blues*' "Fool King's

Crown," or *Sebastopol's* "Voodoo Candle" — are triumphantly reimagined on the new record.

"The idea was to reinterpret the songs, to stretch them out a bit," says Farrar. "Allowing the collective style of the new group of musicians to breathe seemed the way to go instead of retracing the original CD versions."

He cites "Fool King's Crown" as a good example of the new approach. "We used keyboard instead of electric sitar, played electric guitars instead of acoustic guitars and made the tempo faster," observes Farrar.

Another element that longtime fans will notice on *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights* is the warm groove imparted to the songs. In part, that feeling of sonic abundance stems from Farrar's choice of Washington D.C. alt-country rockers Canyon to back him on the tour that produced *Stone, Steel and Bright Lights*.

Canyon has made three records over the past few years – a self-titled debut followed by *Empty Rooms* and their own live record, *Live in NYC*. The five-piece band features a two guitar attack (Brandon Butler and Joe Winkle) augmented with keyboards (Derrick DeBorija) and a crack rhythm section (bassist Evan Berodt and drummer Dave Bryson). Canyon's backing provides Farrar with a fuller sound than he's had on tour over the past few years, and they took quickly to the challenge of translating Farrar's newer songs from studio to stage.

"I was looking for a band to take these songs on the road," says Farrar. "Canyon's CD *Empty Rooms* was passed along to me, and apart from liking the record, I thought that the five-piece instrumentation of the band would work with my songs." The fact that the band was already a self-contained working unit also appealed to Farrar. "Canyon brought their common experiences and chemistry as a working band to these songs," he says.

Stone, Steel & Bright Lights features two new Farrar compositions in its first three tracks. "Doesn't Have to Be This Way" and "6 String Belief" – which bookend a terrific solo take on *ThirdShiftGrottoSlack's* "Greenwich Time" – are among the most straightforward tunes that Farrar has written in recent years, touching on headlines in the newspaper and trends in the music business.

Farrar says that "Doesn't Have to Be This Way" was written and recorded during the tour, at a soundcheck at Columbia, Missouri's Blue Note club – which was an early Uncle Tupelo stronghold and a frequent pit stop on Farrar's tour itineraries. "It reflects the headlines in the newspapers during that period," he says of the song, which frames its surging protest against a "new world of shame" with a chiming piano and mournful lap steel.

The other new song on *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights*, "6 String Belief," touches on an issue that seems equally close to the songwriter's heart – the strength of rock and roll to renew and redeem itself in moments when it becomes jaded, corrupted and bankrupt. The

song, says Farrar, “deals with the idea of rebellion against the status quo in a music industry context. When corporate blitzes and payola reach a saturation point at the mainstream level, it spawns a reaction of good music – a grassroots, do-it-yourself level.” He calls the song “two-thirds idealism and one third reality.”

As *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights* unfolds, some of the best songs of Farrar’s solo career roll out of the speakers in astonishing new guises or with clever new twists in arrangement or instrumentation. The rollicking shuffle of *Sebastopol*’s opening song, “Feel Free,” gains power and urgency in its live version. That same record’s “Damn Shame” takes on even more sour twang and zest. *Terroir Blues*’ mournful elegy “Cahokian” echoes powerfully as lap steel and keyboard wash over Farrar’s voice.

Farrar and Canyon don’t forget their rock’n’roll, either. The aforementioned “Fool King’s Crown” and “Voodoo Candle” are crushingly melodic rock. *Sebastopol*’s “Feed Kill Chain” is given an undulating but anthemic treatment, while that same record’s “Clear Day Thunder” packs a gritty, downright menacing wallop.

Those powerful sounds run through the two covers that provide *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights*. One of those covers – a super-charged version of Neil Young’s “Like a Hurricane” – nods to one of the oft-acknowledged inspirations behind Farrar and Canyon’s music

“When it came time to pick a cover,” says Farrar, “Neil Young was a common influence. ‘Like a Hurricane’ was the most bombastic one we could play, so that’s the one that stuck.”

Odder – but clever and inspired – was Farrar’s decision to dip into his back catalogue of covers and pull out “Lucifer Sam,” a Syd Barrett song from Pink Floyd’s 1967 debut record, *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. Farrar says that “it started out as an alternate cover song. I remembered the song because I used to sing it with Uncle Tupelo years ago, and Canyon reminded me a bit of early Pink Floyd anyway, so it seemed like a match.” Caught on the new record, “Lucifer Sam” becomes downright combustible.

Like many great live records, *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights* provides a snapshot of an artist at the height of his songwriting and interpretive powers. Farrar’s mixture of clever wordplay, sharp imagery and deep sentiment, married to melodies that stick and backed up with strong arrangements, finds a straightforward and kinetic voice on this record.

Stone, Steel & Bright Lights listeners also receive a DVD featuring selected performances from the Slim’s show that forms the backbone of the new record. Eleven songs, including the new “6 String Belief” and the covers of “Lucifer Sam” and “Like a Hurricane,” make up the bonus disc.

“The DVD provides a straightforward glimpse – a short document of the tour,” observes Farrar. The combination CD/DVD, he says, “will maybe give some people a chance to

see the songs presented live that would not have an opportunity to do so otherwise. I still have not performed in Japan, for instance.”

Hearing Farrar and Canyon launch into “Lucifer Sam” is a treat, but watching Canyon guitarist Brandon Butler first tease – and then assault – his guitar strings with maracas tells a story that goes beyond the terrific sounds on *Stone, Steel & Bright Lights*. It’s a story that lasted 13, 049 miles and 38 cities, used 678 guitar strings and entertained thousands of fans who find their own 6 String Belief in Farrar’s music.