



PHOTO BY MICHELLE MCAFFEE

B LUE HIGHWAY VAGABONDS

B LUE HIGHWAY KINGS

by MARK ELLIOTT

I peered out the windshield of a Chrysler Newport in 1968 and saw the West Virginia hills from the undulated, frost-heaved rural routes of Monongalia County. It must have made an impression somewhere deep inside the artist I had yet to become, because I still have flashes of memories, shadows really, of blue-tinged mountains, ash-covered coal

tipples, and gray smokestacks.

But it was through the narrow panes of a 1972 VW Camper that the road first coupled with the future soundtrack of my life. The view from that off-white hippie bus, traveling the moss-laden live oaks of the Florida Panhandle, opened more than just my eyes.

Apollo was in the heavens, and the King was still on the ground. The landscape drew out before me with the sounds of Jim Croce, John Denver, Harry Chapin, and the Fifth Dimension's *Aquarius*.

To see the open road through the window of any freedom machine makes a powerful

impression, but to do so surrounded by quadraphonic eight-track sound, proved to be a spark of a different fire. That kind of spark catalyzes wonder and calibrates souls. And, unbeknownst to me, that spark set in motion a love affair with music and out-of-the-way places that eventually grew from adolescent obsession to mature, adult career.

with out-of-the-way picnic tables, family farms, dying industry, and riches hidden behind forgotten pins on a map. Those pins, towns once destinations on fifty-cent postcards at a Stucky's, may look all but dead at 65 miles per hour, but their wealth has kept me on stage for over three decades now.

Life along the blue highways is

buggies outside an upstate New York hamlet.

The phrase "There is nothing to do in this town" does not have to be the desperate gasp of the unappreciative. Because when there is nothing to do in said town and a van-full of musicians eager to play roll up to a grange-hall opera house, guess who

“What the hell am I doing playing this one-horse town...”

I am fortunate to have had some significant commercial success in my life as a singer and songwriter, but that is not where my happiness, creative fulfillment, or ironically, financial relief is rooted. Publishing deals, major-label cuts, and the occasional mention in *Billboard Magazine*, all helped to move my career along, but those stepping stones have been too few and far between to measure any meaningful distance by.

You can trace my life as a teenage musician, and now one in his early fifties, along roads less traveled by tour buses and tractor trailers and more by those marked by yellow lines and broken asphalt. I count blue highways - those roads lined

a uniquely American one, especially for the independent artist. It personifies freedom, not only through the bombastic vistas and humble shadows pouring through your windshield at any given moment but for the access it allows to music rooms and fans long ignored by high-dollar tours.

Many indie-artists, including me, have made the mistake of saying, "What the hell am I doing playing this one-horse town, on a Wednesday night no less?" In fact, it was me who said that, just a few years back as my band, *Runaway Home*, sat waylaid behind a line of Amish

shows up? Everybody! And on a Wednesday night no less.

Blue highways and those towns still surviving alongside, hold the



PHOTO BY MARK ELLIOTT

densest population of art lovers and mega-fans of anywhere in the country. The storied venues, tucked within, allow for the last brick and mortar record store left: your off-stage merchandise table. This is no small matter. A well-populated merchandise table, with items ranging from a couple of bucks up to expensive packages, often smooth over the rough edges of a low guarantee or anemic ticket sales. People in out-of-the-way places will often take risks on artists they've never heard of. A small town's wealth is rooted in its people, people who may not have much but continue to put money into CDs like they're going out of style (and they are, except along the blue highways). These future fans arrive less judgmental and with only the expectation to be entertained and moved, and if you can't do that, well, the type of highway you travel isn't the problem.

Many of these audiences turn quickly from fans to friends as they put independent musicians up in their houses. And we all know that lodging is the most significant variable influencing a tour to end in the black or the red. They send us down the line with copious amounts of road food, and some even become ad-hock, regional booking agents anxious to keep the music they love in their lives.

In an ever-changing (and not for

the better) music-industry landscape, there is one place - well, ten-thousand one-places really - that leave the doors open. You don't need a record deal, be the momentary *Billboard* darling, or be the rage on Instagram or YouTube. But you must be authentic, moving, and above all else, able to entertain any kind of audience. Do that, and the reaction is lavishly genuine. The money and the crowds follow as your new base builds.

Being a vagabond of the blue highway demands but one thing of you, and it is a big one. You must continuously travel its miles. Touring is a beast like any beast, requiring constant feeding. And if not by you, then by anyone willing.

Though the structure of the music business and the mechanics of how artists make money has changed forever, the tenants of being successful remain the same: talent, dogged determination, and authenticity. If you have chosen a life of endless struggle and ever-present poverty, you might as well spend that life where you feel rich.

Find a Wednesday-night stage in the middle of nowhere. For one night anyway, you won't be a cold and hungry vagabond. You will be a king. A king of the blue highway.

MARK ELLIOTT

is a published songwriter, author of blogs, essays, and a new full-length book *The Sons Of Starmount*.

markelliottcreative.com



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