

TOM VARNER
The Window Up Above

New World Records 80552

All Quiet on the Potomac
(words by Ethel Lynn Eliot Beers)

"All quiet on the Potomac tonight,"
Except here and there a stray picket
Is shot as he walks on his beat to and fro,
By a rifleman hid in the thicket.
'Tis nothing, a private or two now and then
Will not count in the news of the battle;
Not an officer lost, only one of the men,
Moaning out all alone the death rattle.
All quiet along the Potomac tonight.

The music of America is the richest and most diverse of any nation's in the history of the world. Although its evolution began with the meeting of West European and West and Central African music, wave after wave of immigrants have continued to bring the folk and national traditions of most of the world's cultures with them and have added to the collective project we know as the American musical canon. This creolization of cultures has produced what critic Max Harrison calls the matrix of American music, a body of components that includes patterns of rhythmic and harmonic structure, varieties of timbre and tonality, gestures and patterns of interpersonal relations in performance—an enduring bank of musical elements which can be drawn on to create new musics or to re-create older ones. American musicians of every stripe have felt free to draw on these elements and forms—Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Charles Ives, Duke Ellington, George Gershwin, Bob Dylan, Patti Smith—and to benefit from this great cultural engine. While musical styles change at a furious pace in America, if you live long enough (or have a big enough record collection) you can hear the elements recycle and return in new configurations, giving American music an identity that we instinctively recognize, even as it progresses. Over time, no form of American music sounds alien to those raised within its reach.

Jazz musicians have never been shy about exploiting this matrix. Among the earliest recordings we call “jazz” are hymns, marches, operatic arias, drinking songs, pop tunes, vaudeville hokum, minstrel songs, and exotica borrowed from other shores, all of them given a distinctive rendition. Jazz, as Jelly Roll Morton once put it, was not so much a particular way of composing or a special kind of composition, but *a way of playing*. Anything, he implied, could be “jazzed.” Forty years later Miles Davis would also say that jazz was a question of playing with attitude (or, in his case, even with no attitude, if attitude was what was expected).

Over the years musicians have rummaged through the American tradition, sometimes looking for something that would sound new, at other times merely hoping to reconnect to the past. What Tom Varner has attempted on this record is nothing less than a survey of the entire American songbook, a millennium review of the past three centuries. Every song he has chosen has that American “thing,” and his approach to every song is patently jazz, even where he chooses to play the melody “straight” to let its qualities shine through. Varner's family comes from the heartland—Missouri,

home of balladeers like Jimmy Lunceford, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Miles—and like them, he holds songs in the highest esteem.

Although this record is Varner's personal choice of American songs and not an all-time hit list, it nonetheless is studded with some genuine chart-toppers, especially those from the Revolutionary and Civil War periods: "Stone Grinds All," for instance, is a Revolutionary War fife tune borrowed from the Scots fiddle tradition, and "When Jesus Wept" is a composition by William Billings and one of the monster hits of the late 1770s; "All Quiet on the Potomac," "Lorena," and "Battle Cry of Freedom," were hits of the Civil War on either the Northern or the Southern side, and sometimes even both, as when a love for "Kingdom Coming" unified the two sides musically. Varner's varied response to these songs is expectedly late-twentieth-century, but full of surprises: His treatment of "Stone Grinds All" is a kind of music video of the Revolutionary War, while "Kingdom Coming" (with a blues interlude added) and "Battle Cry of Freedom" (a copy of which Varner found in his mother's piano bench) are punkishly deconstructed. "When Jesus Wept" is treated first as a meditation, then taken "out." But, by contrast, "All Quiet" and "Lorena" are played straight.

The later religious songs he chooses are presented with all of their multicultural credentials intact: "My God Is Real," a gospel song identified with Mahalia Jackson, but with Midwestern roots; "When the Saints Go Marching In" is a church march that became a New Orleans jazz standard (though Varner here finds the Blue Note/Jimmy Smith/Grant Green groove); "There Is a Balm in Gilead" is a black hymn which was first popularized through minstrel shows; and "Abide With Me" is a Euro-American hymn that Thelonious Monk recorded (no doubt in part because one of its composers was W. H. Monk). While George Jones' "The Window Up Above" (with Varner's horn playing the role of the tinkling Nashville piano) is not strictly speaking a religious song, its ironic title and treatment can trick the listener into believing it is. Similarly, "Over the Rainbow," a pop song if ever there was one, has been performed by so many (from Judy Garland to Sun Ra) and has assumed so many meanings that it has taken on a kind of anthem-like aura—one here enhanced by allusion to the often ethereal trio of Paul Motian, Joe Lovano, and Bill Frisell.

Even country songs like Hank Williams's spooky "Ramblin' Man," Tammy Wynette's "Till I Get It Right" (a descendant of tear-jerkers like "Lorena"), and—if I may be so bold as to call it country—Bruce Springsteen's "With Every Wish" connect to the American religious song tradition and highlight the "soulful" quality that white singers have adopted from black gospel.

"I Got It Bad" and "The Man I Love" are given relatively straight but shimmering readings, to enhance what Varner hears as their American lieder quality—songs that sing even when they are played instrumentally; and Varner's own meditative "The Best Thing" comes from the same mold. Finally, Eubie Blake's "Memories of You," when it's given a straightforward treatment, reveals a nineteenth-century affinity not heard in the usual up-tempo jazz versions.

The proof—as if any were needed—that there is an organic American tradition of music spanning more than three hundred years can be heard in the character of these songs, even with the unique readings that Tom Varner gives them. In fact, it is in their uniqueness that these performances represent the deepest of all American musical attributes—the "jazz ethos" that Max Roach and others have spoken of, where each player strives to achieve a distinct sound and approach to the music, even as they all coalesce together. It's another definition of democracy, one seldom achieved in American politics, but blessedly present in the best of American music.

—John F. Szwed

John F. Szwed, *is author of* *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra and the forthcoming Dig! Miles Davis and the Birth of American Cool.*

I wanted to do something different for this record. Instead of playing my own compositions, I wanted to simply explore a variety of songs that have an inner resonance, whether from family, religion, nation, or culture. In this process, fascinating connections popped up. Dave Ballou found out only recently that his great-great-great-uncle was Rhode Island's Sullivan Ballou, author of the deeply moving letter featured in the Ken Burns Civil War documentary. And in 1998 here is Dave and myself—a great-grandson of a 17-year-old Varner kid who enlisted at the close of the war to fight in General Lee's defense of Richmond—playing "All Quiet on the Potomac" together. My mother, Dorothy (white rural Missouri background), and my childhood piano teacher, Capitola Dickerson (African-American East Coast urban background), both grew up in the Depression, and both loved Mahalia Jackson. The three of us went together to see Duke Ellington perform in 1971. Ms. Dickerson, who played Art Tatum 78s for me at lessons, sang "There Is a Balm in Gilead" at Mom's funeral in 1984. She's still going strong and teaching today.

I want to thank all the musicians for their hard work and beautiful contributions, including Thirsty Dave for his voice and help in choosing a Hank Williams tune. This recording is for Cappie and all my family and extended family, but especially for my wife, Terri. She is "The Best Thing."

—Tom Varner, July 9, 1998, NYC

Please visit Tom Varner's Web site: www.tomvarnermusic.com

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

As a leader:

Covert Action. New Note 1009.

Jazz French Horn. New Note 1004.

Long Night Big Day. New World 80410-2.

Martian Heartache. Soul Note 121276.

Motion/Stillness. Soul Note 1067.

The Mystery of Compassion. Soul Note 121217.

Tom Varner Quartet. Soul Note 1017.

As a performer/composer:

Ed Jackson. *Wake Up Call*. New World 80451-2.

New York Composers Orchestra. New World 80397-2.

Producer: Tom Varner

Engineer: Jon Rosenberg

Assistant: John Reigart

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THE WINDOW UP ABOVE 80552-2
AMERICAN SONGS 1770–1998
TOM VARNER

1. Stone Grinds All (Traditional) 1:26
2. The Window Up Above (George Jones) (publ. Trio Music Co. Inc., Glad Music Co., and Fort Knox Music Inc., BMI) 2:57
3. I Got It Bad (Duke Ellington and Paul Francis Webster) (publ. EMI Robbins Catalog and Webster Music Co., ASCAP) 4:17
4. Kingdom Coming (Henry Clay Work; public domain) 4:10
5. Over the Rainbow (Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg) (publ. EMI Feist Catalog Inc., ASCAP) 3:59
6. My God Is Real (Yes God Is Real) (Kenneth Morris) (publ. Martin and Morris Music Studio Inc., BMI) 3:41
7. The Man I Love (George and Ira Gershwin) (publ. New World Music Co. Ltd., ASCAP) 4:21
8. When the Saints Go Marching In (Traditional) 4:58
9. Lorena (Joseph Philbrick Webster and Henry LaFayette Webster; public domain) 1:53
10. Till I Get Right (Red Lane [Rudolph DeLaughter] and Larry Henley) (publ. Sony-ATV Songs LLC, BMI) 4:51
11. Memories of You (Eubie Blake and Andy Razaf) (publ. Shapiro Bernstein & Co. and Razaf Music, ASCAP) 4:48
12. Battle Cry of Freedom (George F. Root; public domain) 3:02
13. All Quiet on the Potomac (John Hill Hewitt and Ethel Lynn Eliot Beers; public domain) 1:53

14. Ramblin' Man (Hank Williams) (Acuff Rose Music Inc. and Hiram Music, BMI) 4:32
15. Abide With Me (W. H. Monk and H. F. Lyte; public domain) 1:24
16. When Jesus Wept (William Billings; public domain) 4:27
17. With Every Wish (Bruce Springsteen) (publ. Bruce Springsteen, ASCAP) 3:41
18. The Best Thing (Tom Varner) (publ. Tom Varner Music, BMI) 3:36
19. There Is a Balm in Gilead (Traditional) 1:52

Tom Varner, horn

Pete McCann, guitar

George Schuller, drums

with:

Lindsey Horner, bass (tracks 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 17 and 18)

Mark Feldman, violin (tracks 1, 2, 9 and 14)

Dave Ballou, cornet (tracks 4 and 13)

Steve Alcott, bass (tracks 1, 2, 9 and 14)

Thirsty Dave Hansen, vocals (tracks 2 and 14)

All arrangements by Tom Varner

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