



## Ken Whiteley & The Beulah Band

**Amazing acoustic alchemy from a masterful journeyman and a crack cast of accomplices.**  
By Roger Levesque

**K**en Whiteley's creative curiosity seems to push him to continually explore music's many possibilities, and we're all richer for it. Heading into his 40th year as a performer, the Toronto singer, songwriter, arranger, multi-instrumentalist, and producer has traversed an amazing soundscape, sometimes discovering new tunes as much by chance as design.

Consider his latest project for Borealis Records, Ken Whiteley & The Beulah Band. Ken and his son, Ben, have been playing together off and on for more than a decade and

when they began tossing around ideas for their first-ever co-production effort in early 2014 the younger Whiteley suggested a working strategy.

"He was encouraging that this be a folkie record and to go for a greater consistency," explains Whiteley senior, "because you know, I'm pretty eclectic and I do a lot of things. I'm not going to change who I am, but after I sat down to write songs for this album Ben might say, 'make it more like a jug band,' or whatever. So we played around a lot with the feel of the songs."

And the album is consistent at least on one point: that everyone sticks pretty much to the same acoustic instruments throughout, Ken on guitars, Ben on bass, with Frank Evans (from The Slocan Ramblers) on banjo and Rosalyn Bennett (from Oh My Darling) on fiddles. But underneath that the quartet sets a wonderful pace, taking their cues from swing jazz, rural

blues, jug band grooves, country waltzes, gospel, Appalachian, or Cajun gates, and hints of the wider world, Asian influences or Hawaiian slack key, with a few good chuckles in the bargain.

As familiars to the Toronto roots scene, Evans and Winnipeg's Bennett are closer in age to Ben Whiteley but along the way they found a moving organic vocal chemistry with Ken.

"The more I got to know them the more it seemed like a really good fit, especially the way the harmony vocals really came together. You can't just buy a vocal blend. There are things you can do to tighten it up but if the voices don't blend it's never going to be great. With Frank and Ros, I felt we had that right away."

Those delicious harmonies take flight on numbers such as the Watson family's *The Lone Pilgrim* with the exotic sounds of sruti box organ and bowed strings to affect an eastern drone backdrop, one of five tunes drawn from



historical sources. Add Rev. Gary Davis's *Feel Just Like Goin' On* (with a tasty vocal cameo from Basia Bulat who employs Ben in her band), or the happening *Beulah Land* borrowed from the Georgia Sea Islands gospel tradition.

An original song, *Friends All Over The Place*, features a chorus with Ken's compatriot Mose Scarlett and The Good Lovelies' Caroline Brooks, among others, celebrating his musical community. Harmonies continue on the gorgeous, easy-going *How Fast Flies Time* that Whiteley co-wrote with Arthur Renwick, and again on the spare, lazy ballad *Straight To You*.

The expert tunesmith takes unexpected lyrical inspirations from all over, especially when he's mining the humour element. Hear the way he adapts an excerpt from the Tao Te Ching to the gently thumping blues of *Try Not To Fail* complete with a kooky mouth trumpet section, or the piece he first wrote for Amos Garrett called *Hands On That Guitar* that pokes fun at guitar players.

Then there's his nutty gastronomic dissertation *Indian Buffet*, geared to those of us who love Indian food. The confirmed vegetarian raves that, "A good Indian buffet is a beautiful thing". It also chimes in with his long-held interest in Eastern cultures and other global music traditions tied to previous recordings such as *One World Dance* (2007).

Whiteley spent about six months writing new songs and sorting out covers before recording began in June. His masterful guitar picking takes centre focus on much of it when he isn't strumming along in rhythm but Beulah Band's dozen tracks are truly a band effort. Evans's banjo and Bennett's fiddle get their time to shine, too, for instance, on the endearing cover of Pete Seeger's *Quite Early Morning*, which closes the album for a tribute to the recently deceased folk icon.

"He was a huge influence on me at a lot of levels. I took that off a CBC podcast I heard when he died about a year ago. I sat in with him onstage when he was 89 and just that force of spirit, it's about 'us' as opposed to 'me', about how we're all in this together. It was so moving. I sometimes do another song of his, too, *Take It From Dr. King*, about how we're blessed with what we've been given by those who've gone before and how we have a responsibility to those who come after us."

At 63, Whiteley takes that role quite deliberately, crediting examples such as Seeger and genre-crossing maestro David Amram before him, passing on his expertise to new generations. In addition to seven Juno Award nominations for his own music (two wins), Whiteley has chalked up two Grammy nods and another 22 Juno nominations as a record producer, often for Borealis, the label he helped found nearly 20 years back.

Born in Pennsylvania but a resident of Canada from age five, he grew up amidst a legacy of career musicians including his older brother, Chris, and now his niece Jenny, and son Ben. Following his public debut at 14 in a Yorkville jug band, he took in his first Mariposa Folk Festival in 1969. He returned to play Mariposa in 1972 in the now-legendary Original Sloth Band, which found notoriety across North America.

That was just the start of his life-long collaboration with so many other musicians. Today Whiteley's name is attached to about 150 records in some context.

"I sometimes joke that I never went to university, I went to folk festivals instead, starting from when I was 13 years old. I think that's where I absorbed the idea, that there are connections between musics all over the world, that the lines which divide us are pretty arbitrary, and that music has the capacity to bridge some of those lines. I remember being up in the highlands of Haiti in the late '70s with my guitar where no one spoke English and my Canadian French was useless, too, but we could play music and sing together."

For a guy who found his 'promised land' in music decades ago, the Beulah Band seems to be one of the most satisfying encounters yet.