

SHOULDERS, Raw Beautiful Music Madness with Michael Slattery and Todd Kassens

SHOULDERS, an Austin band led by Michael Slattery and Todd Kassens, is a largely undiscovered world of astonishing music and stories. In the 1990's, SHOULDERS won extensive recognition and awards in Austin, peaked close to the top of the French Album chart with TRASHMAN SHOES, and toured with THE POGUES. Slattery has been compared to singer/storytellers like Tom Waits and yet the music of SHOULDERS has not reached a broad US audience. SHOULDERS is now returning with a new album called ANOTHER ROUND.

How does such a fantastic band remain mostly unknown? My guess is that it happens more often than we realize, especially in the digital age, but that's another discussion. More importantly, the music from SHOULDERS has far greater depth and complexity than most commercial music. Even their lighter songs like "Charm" (TRASHMAN SHOES) contain complex lyrics and ironies. But it's in their investigation of darker topics that SHOULDERS and Slattery find strange, amazing landscapes. An obvious example is the title track from TRASHMAN SHOES, the story of a garbage man rejected and humiliated by a woman until he finally turns to murder. The music, lyrics, and Slattery's performance, combine to create a madhouse of longing and revenge.

I met Michael and Todd in Austin when we were all attending the University of Texas. Michael and I, together with other students like Marcia Gay Harden, formed a theater company called The New Movement Theater and we performed original works including several of Michael's plays, did street theater and improvisations. Later, Michael and Todd ended up living together in Queens and Michael, after producing a few of his plays in New York City, became frustrated with the limits of theater. I remember having lunch with him in Greenwich Village and he literally screamed at me about creating a new form that was vastly more aggressive.

He and Todd turned to music. In some ways, they did create their own form, something comprised of the complexity of theater stories mixed with the ebullience of music and drinking (all SHOULDERS albums have one or more songs about drinking). When I first heard the original TRASHMAN SHOES album, put out on cassette, I felt angry - "what the hell is this?!" I thought. But after a few more times playing it, I realized it was a powerful work of art. The album was later re-recorded on CD and I remain unsure which versions of the songs I prefer because both are excellent. One of the best on the CD is "I'll Take What's Left", a gentle, profound story about the pain of love. It has fantastic instrumentation and a complex, layered vocal performance. I've heard an extended unpublished version that I think is even better.

Michael and Todd have, over the years, been kind enough to allow us to feature SHOULDERS music in several of our independent films. As we did this, I had a personal goal of finding a film that could have a soundtrack made up entirely of SHOULDERS music. Michael sent me unpublished songs to consider and I was finally able to achieve my goal in our feature film CENTAUR, the story of a man who makes a video journal about his plan to commit a murder of revenge. The film includes twelve

songs from SHOULDERS. For me, the music and story meld perfectly and San Francisco Film Critic Kimberly Chun noted that "the refined look and sensual feel of the images — and the soundtrack by Bad Seeds-like, cacophonous Michael Slattery and *Shoulders* — make this independent rise above the ordinary." Mick LaSalle of the San Francisco Chronicle called the film "audacious and skillful" and I think much of that audacity is conveyed by the music of SHOULDERS. A perfect example is the otherwise unpublished song "Graves of Love" — its tone is macabre but, like much of SHOULDERS music, it also contains stunning beauty.

Back when we were creating The New Movement Theater, before SHOULDERS, Michael and I once worked an afternoon in a small, gray theater, just the two of us, improvising songs and stories on a piano that neither of us really knew how to play. We tried a few ideas, and then something remarkable happened. In an instant, we both suddenly understood the keyboard, suddenly understood how to play the piano and create music, and the stories we were improvising took on form and substance, like ghosts becoming real. I couldn't understand how we were doing it and when we left at the end of the day, I decided it was a wonderful illusion. Today, knowing where Michael and Todd went with the music of SHOULDERS, I don't think that afternoon was an illusion at all — I was simply present as something was beginning.

In addition to the above, my favorite songs from SHOULDERS include:

Each Little Cannibal
On Sunday
Walk with Me (on the new album)
Too Late for Latte (on the new album)
Drunk Spins the World (on the new album)
The Fun Never Stops (album and song)
My Offerings
Odyssey
Lula's Bar and Pool
All the Nights to Come

How can you hear some of this music? It's not easy because most of it is not available on the internet or anywhere else. I don't know the exact reasons for this but music companies come and go, and Michael and Todd are not known for promoting themselves. Perhaps the new album will help and they do finally have a website, www.shoulderstheband.com. I hope they make much more music available. I've never heard songs with more raw, beautiful madness. Here's to Michael and Todd, and all members of the band.

ANOTHER ROUND — CD Release 10/26/13, Austin, Texas
SHOULDERS — Michael Slattery, Todd Kassens, Alan Gene Williams, Chris Black, John Hagen, Hunter Darby, Christian Hervé, Max Crawford