

# Blitzen Trapper

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When I was twenty-three I had a waking vision of a creature trying to get inside my apartment. At the time I couldn't tell if it was malevolent or bent on my destruction since it would not speak but only scabbled at the windows and beat on the walls. Whatever it was, it had wings and was terrifying. All night I piled furniture in front of the door to keep it from getting in, which seemed to work. I should mention that I also had a fever and was taking exotic narcotics to deal with it. The upshot of this episode was that I dropped out of school and began to write songs, to play music. This was not music that ever traveled, at least not for many years (my lower-class, small town upbringing ensured I had absolutely no ambition), but it was music that permeated everything. My friends and I lived together, made recordings, played occasional shows and mostly just worked out our demons through narcotic substance and song.

My theory now is that the creature at the door was not evil, but rather a silent angel whose presence forced me to jump the rails. It would be many years of playing and drinking before I would once again jump the rails at the request of my deceased father, become homeless and record *Wild Mountain Nation* in the old telegraph building. This was a similar change, one which made me travel, pushed Blitzen Trapper out onto the road. In 2007 our reluctant success came in the form of "Best New Music" recognition from Pitchfork for *Wild Mountain Nation*, a record that sounded like it had been authored by a drunken scarecrow who had been dragged behind a truck. This wasn't far from the truth. At times I still miss sleeping by the river, cooking my meals on a hot plate, hiding knives around the old telegraph building so if I came in too late I'd have options if I got jumped. Old crack whores and dealers nodded off in the alcoves and alleys around the street. Cops would stop me at three in the morning to ask me what I was doing, "Oh, nothing officer, just looking for a quarter so I can make a call." "Well if you break that payphone I'll have to arrest you."

Our first tour was with The Hold Steady, a three-week jaunt that saw us playing for a lot of people who just didn't give a shit that we were there: typical and very informative. We camped our way back home, making hardly any money, but the record was selling and we kept going. We toured Europe and more of the States, played big festivals, Sasquatch! and others.

*Furr* came next, our first Sub Pop release, which I also made at the old telegraph building. We were touring so much that being homeless was really quite relaxing compared to the road. But *Furr* was a record that spoke from new perspectives we'd gained on the road. It was me becoming aware of the past I'd been trying to forget, and of the greater world around me. It's no surprise that the opening track is a dream-like treatise on the state of the western world. With this record we played TV for the first time, on the old Conan late night show and we started touring with heroes from my younger days: Stephen Malkmus and the Jicks, [Iron and Wine](#), a small tour with Wilco. Numerous Blitzen Trapper songs appeared in television shows and commercials and movies, we played more of the big festivals, Coachella, Monolith, Pitchfork. All of this stuff can, should and in this case did go along with making a timely, honest record. And, on top of that, I was no longer homeless. It was at this time that I began to

see that people were inspired by my songs, obsessive in many cases. The record kept selling and selling, and is still selling even today. And so we took a break from touring, from everything.

I had already cobbled together a new record during the previous year of touring, *Destroyer of the Void*, a patchwork of songs from my past and present which hung together like a house of cards. But there were certain glimmers of where Blitzen Trapper was heading, a certain feeling of open road and of heartfelt loss. Having turned this in, we spent half of 2010 doing nothing, hanging around Portland, revisiting our earlier, less ambitious days of drinking and getting into trouble.

And then a certain tragedy struck me, a death of which I can't speak, and I began writing. I wrote *American Goldwing*, our third Sub Pop release, in a span of six months, recorded most of it, and then we went on tour for *Destroyer of the Void*. We did more TV, including the Jimmy Fallon show, and we played for the biggest crowds we'd ever performed for at festivals through the summer (Lollapalooza, Newport Folk Festival, etc.), all the time knowing that this new record I'd recorded was the real record, the Blitzen Trapper record to come.

When I was six years old, my brother-in-law kept his Honda Goldwing out in back of my dad's house. It sat by the oak tree in the tall grass, a monster of a touring bike. I used to eye it with much curiosity at that age. One day I climbed up on it, my short legs dangling down the sides. I made noises like I was racing along some lonely road, my hands on the throttle and clutch. Suddenly the bike tipped and fell, pinning my leg beneath its weight. I laid there for a time, crying, feeling trapped, until my mother came and yelled at me and then pulled me out.

Writing *American Goldwing* felt much like that, like being pinned beneath a giant motorcycle, and its vision is that inescapable past, those feelings of being trapped in a small town, that fine line between the rural and the suburban settings that define much of America, that line between love and loss that occurs when you find yourself "taking it easy too long / sticking around this lonesome town." It's me trying to hazard a true American nostalgia. And like that kid the bike fell on, there's a good amount of thrashing about, trying to get loose. The roughness of rock and roll, and the independence of travel act as the flip-side to all this sentimental backward-glancing, the earthiness of these songs make you want to get loaded and get in a fight, or find a girl and fall in love forever, simultaneously. The subjects range from drug-running good old boys in the hills, to that final high school dance, to pondering that moment when the one you love walks away and you can't help but love her anyway.

It's us letting our loves, our early influences hang out for all to see. Entering into the sounds we grew up with, the hard guitar rock and country picking of our younger years mixes with glimmers of our usual space-aging technology and pawn shop Casio aplomb. Heavy guitar riffs and blasting drum fills live side-by-side with plucking banjos and wailing harmonicas, and muddy slide guitars that make you want to shotgun a beer in the shower while listening to the Stones or Joe Walsh. It's also our first foray into direct, outside influence in the creation of a record. It's me letting go in a certain way. I let Tchad Blake come in to mix this album, and my good friend Gregg Williams co-produced all these tracks.

When I say "does a true heart change / or does it stay the same / think I'll go on back to from where I came" it's a question I'm asking myself. Does the long road I've been on warrant more songs, can I still

fight those demons and come out with a handful of honesty? It's a summing-up of the longing and nostalgia of this record. But it's really just a starting point. In the end it's a record that jumps the rails, and travels, as I admit, "I left my home and all my money / to wrestling with the wind / on an old Goldwing gonna cross the ocean / 'cause I heard that it's a heck of a swim." That's me, wrestling with that silent angel at the door, reflecting all of that deep-seated American urge to travel. When I sing, in the title track, "I know / I know / I'll be staying if the wind don't blow," I'm seeking to invoke the unseen, the spirit that beckons you to saddle up that old 1980 Honda Goldwing, or your uncle's beat up Ford Bronco, or that Jeep you somehow, and only barely, keep running and leave this lonely town behind, "cause that wind's always blowing. I'm calling you to ride, to take those curves at speed and head for someplace better where love is true, whether that be into the depths of the galaxy or just to the next truck stop where the neon shines, and where the "company of strangers / and the close and the present dangers" are all that really matters.

E. Earley