

THREE CHORDS & THE TRUTH

Tyler Stenson moved to Portland at a young age, though all his life he has carried with him what he calls “the Wyoming way,” a holdover from the place of his birth. Listening to his music, one can hear this Wyoming posture through his organic Americana sound.

Singing had always been a part of Stenson’s life, though his path with the guitar only started in 1999, when he picked up a few chords. These days, Stenson and his guitar can be found all over Portland, spreading his sound. Stenson was generous enough to give the Vanguard a few words on his musical world.

Richard D. Oxley: Is there a style you aim for?

Tyler Stenson: My goal is to write music that is authentic, heartfelt and human—I’d rather put a lump in your throat than make you tap your toe. The artists that I’m personally drawn to are saying something accessible but in uniquely poetic ways—interesting vocabulary, word order, phrasing, etc.—and I strive to model that. In the end, I want my music to be timeless and personal, and I find this inherently surfaces in “rootsy” acoustic songs.

RO: How many recordings do you officially have under your belt so far?

TS: Technically, I’ve recorded six albums but only four are available. I plan on releasing one of the unreleased albums as soon as I can afford it but, with a smile, I plan on never releasing the other.

RO: Why won’t you release that album?

TS: Oh, quite simply, it is my first album that only my family and closest friends get to hear. I smile because it takes me back to that era in my life when I had just learned the guitar and written my first couple songs. Very vintage, haha. Every step is a learning experience, but this is definitely the most novice album of the bunch. I may be my own harshest critic, but it’s not worth the monetary investment to see it through to a public release.

RO: Any plans to record further?

TS: Absolutely. I have my seventh album mostly written and ready to start recording, however, this portion of the music industry is a financial dance. As an independent artist I am more prolific than my pocketbook allows. Writing songs is one thing, but when it comes to recording and releasing albums, I am at the mercy of my finances.

RO: Any venues you have played that you prefer or enjoyed more than others?

TS: My favorite venues in Portland (that I’ve played) are Mississippi Studios, Artichoke Music, Lola’s Room and Doug Fir. These are places that people pay to see a concert and they act accordingly. Of course I love my Buffalo Gap and Macadam’s Bar and Grill, but, with my intimate style, I’m a sucker for a captive audience and the “concert” venues that suit me, my ideal situation and where my music is heading.

RO: How important are lyrics to you as opposed to their musical counterpart?

TS: I’ve said it before but I write under the mantra of “three chords and the truth.” My guitar progressions and various movements generally surface within one day but my lyrics safely spend years on the brain before becoming official. In my eyes, I’m not doing anything on my guitar that hasn’t already been done, but I’d like to believe my lyrics (and the care I give them) are my unique ingredient that keeps my crowds growing and coming back for more.

RO: When considering the context of your songs, are they fictional, biographical, issue-themed, etc? Do you like to write story-based songs, or more poetic?

TS: I pride myself on the fact that I’ve never written an emotionally generic song . . . meaning, I don’t write something if I don’t mean it. If it didn’t actually happen, it doesn’t get mentioned. I don’t write about heartache if my heart is whole. I don’t write about losing my job if I’m employed. I don’t write about being in love if I’m not.

This may back me into a corner someday, but for now, all of my music is a heightened reality—actual events, actual people, actual quotes. Some would say it is biographical to a fault.

RO: Musically, are there any artists that you draw from or are influenced by?

TS: I tend to wear my influences on my sleeve to a fault. In the past when I had musicians that I adored, I started to write like them, sound like them, etc. These days, I’ve pulled away from being a music listener and have adopted my role as a music maker. I’ve found the less I listen to other artists, the more true to myself I can be.

That said, I’m not living under a rock and I can still enjoy an album from time to time. I’ve been influenced by James Taylor, Josh Ritter, Adam Duritz [Counting Crows], Jason Ross [Seven Mary Three], Damien Rice, Bob Dylan, Garth Brooks, Ryan Adams. . .

RO: If you could team up with any artist dead or living, who would it be?

TS: Josh Ritter. I’ve always admired his style and his career path. I like that he has balanced poetry and accessibility. I like his brand. I like his venue choices. I like his timeless approach and his obvious love for his music and profession. “I’m singing for the love of it; have mercy on the man that sings to be adored.”

RO: If there were a sandwich made in honor of Tyler Stenson, what would it be called and what would it be made out of?

TS: This is a difficult question to answer considering I’m clinically insane when it comes to French dip sandwiches. It has been described as a nervous tick (by my friends) . . . If I go to a restaurant and see French dip on the menu, I don’t need to look any further.

That said, I would be made of red meat, cheese, onion and something involving garlic. They would call it the “Look No Further Dip.”