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Russ Barenberg  
*When At Last*

Russ Barenberg is a guitar superstar that far too few people have heard of. Hopefully his latest release, *When At Last*, will bring his artistry to a more appropriately sized audience. Barenberg began his career in 1970 when he formed the seminal band Country Cooking, which also included two banjo whizzes, Peter Wernick and Tony Trischka. Some of his career highlights include his first solo album from 1980, *Cowboy Calypso*, which became an instant classic. In 1993 Barenberg recorded the influential trio album *Skip, Hop and Wobble* with bassist Edgar Meyer and Jerry Douglas.

Every cut on his newest album, *When At Last*, is a Barenberg original except for the traditional French folk song, "Aux Marches du Palais," which he re-orchestrated and arranged. Some of the tunes display a strong Celtic influence, such as "Little Monk," while others have a Dixieland feel, as on "The Man in The Hat." Bluegrass is represented by the tune "On Milo's Back." Perhaps the most innovative cut, "A Dream for Sophie," combines many influences, and demonstrates Barenberg's special ability to synthesize traditional forms into modern acoustic music. Call me an old softy, but my favorite song on the CD is the fiddle tune, "Jump Back Barley," named after his dog's reaction to new situations.

Barenberg has played a very rare 1945 Gibson "banner" J-45 for many years. Due to materials shortages during World War Two Gibson was forced to make instruments with whatever wood was available. His J-45 has laminated maple back and sides instead of the more usual solid mahogany, but in his hands it sounds simply glorious. Barenberg also plays several other special instruments on the CD, including a 1946 mahogany J-45, a 2004 Olympia Op-20SWM, a 1944 Gibson LG-2 and Tacoma baritone guitar. He also plays mandolins on several cuts, using a 1924 Gibson A-1, a 1918 Vega Cylinder-back and a 2005 National Model One resonator mandolin.

Other musicians on *When At Last* include Dennis Crouch and Viktor Krauss on bass, Jerry Douglas on dobro, Stuart Duncan and Ruthie Dornfield on fiddle, Kenny Malone on percussion and drums, and Jeremiah McLane on accordion. All are seasoned pros with hundreds of sessions under their belts. Here they display their ability to bring the excitement of discovery to Barenberg's compositions.

Recorded by Erick Jaskowiak at the Compass Sound Studio in Nashville, TN. *When At Last* epitomizes the Compass Records' sound. Compass Records' sonics are so consistently superb that I've come to expect nothing less near-perfection. *When At Last* doesn't disappoint. Every instrument sounds correct with just the right harmonic balance. Jaskowiak adds just a smidgen of "room sound" and top end air to the mix and viola! - fidelity that pushes the boundaries of CD sound.

I review a lot of fine albums every month, but very few achieve the status of an instant classic. *When At Last* is a must-have album for anyone who loves the sound of a flat-picked acoustic guitar.