



RUSS BARENBERG - WHEN AT LAST
[March 2008 issue]
Compass Records
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For the past thirtyplus years, Russ Barenberg's name has been synonymous with tasteful and tuneful flatpicking guitar. Although his prior solo albums and his work with Tony Trischka, Andy Statman, Country Cooking, Fiddle Fever, and Jerry Douglas & Edgar Meyer influenced and inspired countless musicians, it's been almost twenty years since his last solo release. The story goes that a move to Nashville from his New England base led him down a path where music, or at least touring, had to take a back seat to feeding his family—an all too familiar story. But, circumstances have changed, and we all stand to be the beneficiaries of his return to the studio and the road.

"When At Last" proves that he's lost nothing over the years. His new CD features eleven tracks, all but one original compositions. Barenberg uses two essentially different supporting bands: one newgrass ensemble with Jerry Douglas on resonator guitar and Stuart Duncan on fiddle, the other more slanted towards his northern fiddletune style, featuring fiddler Ruthie Dornfeld and accordionist Jeremiah McLane. Both bands alternate using either Viktor Krauss or Dennis Crouch on bass, with Kenny Malone adding tasteful percussion on several tracks.

If anything, Barenberg's musical vision has only become more vivid over the years. Whether he's sketching a gentle evocative landscape as on the title track and "A Dream For Sophie" or writing tunes that sound as if they've been danced to for centuries ("The Pleasant Beggar" and "Jump Back Barley"), his attention to the collective band sound and his willingness to bring nothing but the cleanest, not just hottest, tone to the package continue to set him apart. Fans of the funkier interplay of Barenberg, Douglas, and Meyer will also enjoy numbers such as "The Man In The Hat" and "Little Monk," with which the listener is rewarded by being in the midst of a crossfire of mutual musical repartee. And don't be surprised to hear him play a generous amount of mandolin on about half the album's tracks.

With Russ Barenberg back playing music on a fulltime basis, the acoustic music world seems like a warmer and sweeter place. Welcome back, and may the interludes between subsequent CDs be much shorter from now on. (Compass Records, 916 19th Ave. S., Nashville, TN 37212, www.compassrecords.com.)HK