



Salt of the Earth

Boris McCutcheon's songs are brined in New Mexico.

Boris McCutcheon first rattled my cage on March 30, 2006, when I went down to Albuquerque's Outpost Performance Space to meet up with Susan Hyde Holmes. Susan was a session-quality bassist who had just joined Boris's band, the Salt Licks. Her day job was in graphic design, where she was also an ace; she had agreed to help me out by setting type for a tribute I'd written for my youngest son, who was getting married. Backstage, we talked. She more than liked the special paper I'd picked out. We concluded our arrangements. As I was about to head home, however, she said, with force, "You should stick around and hear Boris." I settled down in the club.

After a while, when the Salt Licks had tuned up, Boris stepped to the mike. He was wearing a pork-pie hat and seemed painfully shy. He kicked around, fiddled with his guitar. Then he shrugged off his nerves and started singing "Volcanic Wind."

I saw a crazy lady

On the side of the road

Fading the coyote's echo . . .

A month earlier, I'd spent long afternoons wandering Petroglyph Natural Park, west of Albuquerque—a haunting place with a line of volcanic cinder cones punctuating its lunar landscape. I'd circumambulated the park more than once, pausing to investigate its lava caves. At the end of "Volcanic Wind," when a muttering Boris admitted that he'd written the song in that same park, I was startled. A little later, when he launched into "Caves of Burgundy," a Gaelic ode of underworld love and healing co-written with his buddy Mark Lewis, I was hooked. This guy was locked in. To what, exactly, I couldn't say. Only that it ran very deep.

In the ensuing months I found out more about McCutcheon. In his mid-30s, he was from back east: Woods Hole, Massachusetts. The son of working-class parents, he'd played guitar since the age of 14 and written songs since his college days at U.C. Santa Cruz. He was married to Laura, with whom he lived off the grid in a valley that bisected the High Road to Taos. The valley was a few miles beyond Truchas, up a "heinous road," as he would later describe it in his panegyric to rural northern New Mexico: "Bad Road, Good People." For me, "off the grid" evoked '60s hippie *Whole Earth Catalog* fantasies, with well water, no plumbing, and generated electricity. Chickens, of course. Maybe a cow or two. Lots of butter churning and sundresses. But no. Midway through the song, Boris exploded the image. On the contrary, his idyll was "a good place to burn a car. Or shoot an old washer or dryer." Boy, did I roar when I heard those lines.

In a previous life, I'd worked for Warner Bros. Records while managing my best friend back then, the Texas songwriter Ray Wylie Hubbard—himself no stranger to New Mexico, Red River in particular. Ray and Boris shared a tender reticence, in addition to a wicked sense of humor.

"Do you know this guy Boris McCutcheon?" I asked my music-business friends. But nobody knew anything. I told them he played a thorny, literary brand of folk-country, in the Townes Van Zandt/Steve Earle lineage. That traces of Roger Miller could be heard in his music. Of Randy Newman. Levon Helm. Like them, he possessed a soulfulness that drew on gospel and R&B.

"Is he playing only in New Mexico?" they asked me. "That place has no people. He needs to move to Dallas, or Austin. Or some other big city. That's where the audience is. He can't sit out

WES NAMAN

Boris McCutcheon onstage in the Netherlands, in 2011, accompanied by Salt Licks members Brett Davis and Susan Hyde Holmes.



there in the wilds and still expect to have a career.”

They wondered what he was doing in New Mexico in the first place, when he was from urban Massachusetts. Boston was a sophisticated place, they pointed out. Surely, he could have established himself there. I didn’t tell them that he’d already done that by winning the 2004 Boston Music Award for Best Male Vocalist. I was probing something else. “But what if it’s the terrain here that inspires him?” I asked.

Nobody had an answer for that one.

A few months later, on a Friday night, I caught up with Boris in Bernalillo, at the Range Cafe, where he was playing. That week I’d been out to Acoma Pueblo, visiting elder friends, and I sensed at least a provisional connection between the earth-centered traditions embodied by the tribe and the kind of life Boris was trying to carve out for himself in the upper reaches of the Sangro de Cristos. By this time, Boris was immersed in New Mexico Ditch Culture. He was beginning to appreciate the sanctity of the acequias. The reverence that surrounds water here. Eventually, he would be elected mayordomo of his valley, the acequia manager. “Chasing water in an old Spanish town” is how he would put it later in a delightful song that celebrates this unique slice of New Mexican life. He even wrote an exuberant song called “Acequia,” on an album called *Mother Ditch*.

But on another subject, Boris was less sanguine. He’d just come back from a sold-out series of dates in the Netherlands, only to find that there was no work for him here—in his absence, all the local clubs had filled their booking calendars. He’d been traveling to perform in Holland since 2004. The Dutch loved him, but he couldn’t make enough money in a month of touring there to sustain his family for a year. He didn’t know how he could continue like this. Laura had just given birth to a baby girl. He was beginning to feel the excruciating weight of fatherhood.

“How did you even come to be here in the first place?” I

asked him. We were standing outside the Range, leaning against a wall. To the east, as Boris sucked on an American Spirit cigarette, a big moon was rising over the Sandía Mountains. He spun out his story.

When Boris was 20, his girlfriend’s godfather asked him for a favor. As it happened, her godfather was folk-music hero Ralph Rinzler, who played banjo and mandolin in the Greenbriar Boys, a legendary group that had worked out of Gerde’s Folk City, in New York City, often with Bob Dylan as their

warm-up act. When the folk craze died down, Rinzler landed a job with the Smithsonian Institution. In 1987, after founding their famous Folklife Festival, he persuaded the Smithsonian to buy Folkways Records and its vast catalogue of recordings of American folk and indigenous tribal music. Rinzler asked Boris if he would drive a truckload of them out to Ojai, California.

“Our route took us through New Mexico,” Boris said. “As soon as we hit the state, I got excited. It was just the land itself. I could see that this was a place of endless space, of endless possibility. Immediately, I felt that I could become anything here. A great artist. A good poet. I knew that I could be happy here.”

I looked hard at him. I’d heard similar stories from others. A British classical scholar. A Texas physician. My own story mine the same vein.

“One good thing about not having any work,” Boris added; “with all this spare time, I’ve been able to spend a lot of time with my daughter. In fact, this morning, it was weird. I was playing with her, you know, and she had, like, this light around her. Or something. I guess I was just seeing it for real. A father’s love for his daughter. Her love for him. Anyway, I’ve never experienced anything like it. I felt like I’d been struck by a lightning bolt.”

Over the next few years, a second child—a son—was born, and Boris’s music began to reflect this new aspect of his life, even as the tug to a bigger town intensified. Laura taught school in Peñasco, volunteered at El Centro Family Health Clinic there. Boris continued to travel to the Netherlands, with excursions to Germany and Belgium in the offing. Still, it was a scratch-it-out existence. Then, this past summer, Laura was offered a scholarship at the University of New Mexico’s medical school to study to be a physician’s assistant. Maybe, the couple mused, she could even be a doctor someday. And so, perhaps inevitably, Boris moved his family to Albuquerque. Here, things got easier for them. Travel. School. Shopping. Gigs.

Finally, they began to relax. Little did they know that an even bigger venue loomed on their horizon.

On September 11, 2013, Boris won the prestigious PBS Mountain Stage New Song Contest, Southwest U.S., which meant that he would be taking his music to New York City for the international finals. He won the region for two songs from his new album, *Might Crash*. One song, "Flesh and Dream," by virtue of its structure and the still, soothing place at its center, evokes the earliest poems in the Gaelic bardic tradition, which holds our connection to the earth as sacred. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, only a few days before the contest results were announced, an emissary from a remote village high in Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains had descended to tell a group of indigenous timekeepers gathered in the area that it was time for people who cared about the Earth to step up and speak their truth. Via song, Boris, who had descended from his own mountain, would be doing exactly that in New York City.

You can ride the wave yourself by checking out *Might Crash*. Fair warning, though: From off-the-grid Truchas to Lincoln Center is a dizzying whirl. Ralph Rinzler, though long dead, is digging it all. ❖

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LISTEN UP

Boris McCutcheon and the Salt Licks perform regularly in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and environs. For information about gigs and recordings, see borismccutcheon.com.