

ROUNDER RECORDS ARTIST BIO

Ron Block

Walking Song

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Ron Block isn't the ostentatious sort, and he doesn't need to be in order to stand out among the leading lights of contemporary acoustic music. That comes naturally, considering he's the rare bluegrass virtuoso—on not one, but two instruments—who's also earned respect as a songwriter, singer and producer. What further sets him apart is the fact that he's as comfortable in ruminative mode—whether it be blogging on philosophical matters or retreating to his home studio to be alone with, and capture, his musical thoughts—as he is participating in bluegrass's congenial, collaborative pickin' party culture.



He's put that singular mixture of sensibilities to use on *Walking Song*, his third album for Rounder Records.

Block has averaged half a dozen years between solo albums (*Faraway Land* in 2001, followed by *DoorWay* in 2007), largely because of an enviable problem: there's a lot else he could be doing. He's a two-decade veteran of Alison Krauss & Union Station, with whom he's earned a sizable, genre-transcending audience and a collection of Grammy, IBMA and Dove awards. He's written many a gospel song for the band, and had his songs recorded by Union Station band mate Dan Tyminski, Michael W. Smith, Rhonda Vincent, Randy Travis, The Boxcars, April Verch, The Cox Family, Sierra Hull and The Forbes Family, too. Then there's his production work on albums by Hull and the Forbes, as well as his sideman work with everyone from Dailey & Vincent, Bill Frisell and Andrew Peterson to Dolly Parton, Alan Jackson and Vince Gill.

The thing is, with a top-tier track record comes the pressure to keep it up. "You know, success can kill you," says Block. "It can kill your creativity. When you go to write a song, suddenly you no longer have merely sound and lyrics in your head—you have what other people will think about this line or that melody. All that stuff begins to weigh on you if you're not careful."

ROUNDER RECORDS ARTIST BIO

But it's clear that none of that stuff is weighing on Block anymore. There's a newfound sense of freedom throughout *Walking Song*, thanks, in no small part, to the chance he took on a newfound co-writer, poet and teacher Rebecca Reynolds. Most other bluegrass songwriters would look for a collaborator with a proven track record in the genre, but Block and Reynolds began their partnership through an online forum focused on spirituality, not music.

Block explains, "I would write posts on the theological topics that I tend to write about, and Rebecca would be one of the commenters. Whenever she'd write something, I'd think, 'Man, she's smart. Smart without trying to be smart, with a very poetic way of putting things.' I don't know how it actually ended up happening, but she said, 'Hey, would you ever want to try to write a song together?'"

"It's funny looking back on it," reflects Reynolds. "I still don't know how I missed the magnitude of who Ron Block really was; but I'm glad I didn't get it all, because I probably wouldn't have approached him with such levity. I knew he had some connection to Alison Krauss, but because I had never been in the music business, I didn't get how all that worked. I just liked his brain, I liked his character, and I figured his guitar playing would be fine if he played with a band."

"We were a little ways into making songs," she continues, "when I was Googling him, and I saw a Ron Block guitar. Then I saw a Ron Block banjo. I wrote him and said, 'This is YOU, isn't it? You have instruments named after you?' I had that rare and beautiful joy of finding out that a dear friend and co-creator was Bluegrass Superman in disguise."

Block and Reynolds embarked on a highly unorthodox yet extremely fruitful co-writing process that yielded some 50 songs, including all eleven of the originals on his new album.

Shares Block, "Rebecca came along and said, 'Let's just be kids creating again.' It's more like what I was doing when I was 17, 18 years old, even though the stuff I was doing wasn't as developed. It was just a kid sitting there experimenting, having a good time."

"Let There Be Beauty," a Celtic-tinged waltz-time meditation on "stepping into creative freedom," came to life when he wrote music to her lyrics. The same goes for "Summer's Lullaby," except that time he happened to be backstage at the venerable Ryman Auditorium when inspiration hit. While visiting his in-laws in Canada, he came up with the sprightly, fetching tune to "Ivy," sent it to Reynolds, and received lyrics from her the very same day. He says, "Almost everything else was done sitting down there in my studio, and she's on Skype and we're going back and forth: 'How about this?'"

ROUNDER RECORDS ARTIST BIO

This batch of songs contains the richest range of sentiments that Block has ever taken up, from the ultimate longings of the soul to the pleasures of a lover's company. "Some of these songs are just fun," he offers. "They're fun and they're sweet and they're just for a moment of relief or respite from the hum-drum everyday world. 'Ivy' is one of those, just a sweet little song. It's not some grand philosophical idea; it's a guy wanting to get back home."

He adds, "And that's the way bluegrass has always been. It's about human experience. I think there's a danger in separating the two, secular and spiritual, where you begin to look at certain things as *not* sacred and other things as sacred, when, really, washing the dishes is a spiritual activity, or whatever the thing you're doing is. If you're living in the moment with God, it's spiritual."

To the songs that he and Reynolds co-wrote, Block added his arrangements of three instrumentals: the fiddle tune "Devil In the Strawstack," inspired by Tommy Jarrell's version and executed at perfect Appalachian clogging tempo, the equally danceable "Shortnin' Bread" and a spare, contemplative reading of the old hymn "What Wondrous Love Is This."

When it came time to record, Block holed up in his studio and laid down every lick of banjo and guitar himself, a departure from what he's done on his other albums and from Union Station's increased emphasis on live tracking. The experience took him back to sonic exploration of his youth.

"Since I was 15 or 16 and I got a four-track recorder," he says, "I was always recording on my own, and I was always layering and then getting other people to play on the stuff. I have all kinds of recordings from those years of doing what I did on this record. So it seems really natural to do it that way."

Block then called on his Union Station band mates, Krauss and Tyminski for backing vocals, Jerry Douglas for dobro and Barry Bales for bass, and an array of other musicians who'd be familiar to any modern bluegrass fan, such as mandolin players Hull, Mike Compton and Sam Bush, fiddler Stuart Duncan and singer Suzanne Cox. Block even sent a few songs overseas so that British folksinger Kate Rusby could contribute delicate harmonies. He'd played on her twentieth anniversary recording, and she was only too happy to return the favor.

Walking Song shows just how easily Block can move between various branches on the family tree of acoustic music, presenting his polished takes on Scots-Irish balladry, Appalachian fiddle tunes, bluegrass romps, singer-songwriter narratives and, for good measure, grooving newgrass. And unlike his previous album, *DoorWay*, this one's entirely unplugged.

ROUNDER RECORDS ARTIST BIO

“I mean, this is the music I grew up with,” he says. “The Stanley Brothers and bluegrass stuff was what I was blasting out of my ’65 Mustang when I was driving to school in southern California.”

Block’s dad had promised him that he’d be able to buy that car, and use it to get to bluegrass festivals, so long as he agreed to work in the elder Block’s music store, rather than going out for high school football and risking injury to his hands, a musician’s worst nightmare. Block chose wisely, and wound up studying bluegrass at South Plains College in Texas, where he began to meet up with picking peers like bassist Mike Bub and work the festival circuit. It was at those gatherings that his path crossed with other rising stars of his generation, including one Alison Krauss.

Block long since secured his reputation as a deeply thoughtful musician. On *Walking Song*, he’s gotten back in touch with his music-making roots, and it’s a joyous occasion indeed.