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Tom Mank and Sera Smolen

MODERN FOLK BLUES IMPROVISATION

Tom Mank and Sera Jane Smolen have been performing and writing music together since 1994. Mank, a self-taught singer-songwriter, and Smolen, a conservatory trained cellist, blend their musical languages into an eclectic style. Guitar, voice, and cello have many ways of blending, with the cello as bass, and doubling with guitar or soloing. Mank's eloquent writing of instrumentals is contrasted well with his poetic lyrics. Their latest CD, "Where the Sun Meets the Blue", was recorded in Bearsville, NY with mostly Woodstock area musicians and vocalists contributing. Their previous CD, "Souls of Birds", was released on I-Town Records and was rated as the 5th best CD of 2004 by *Real Roots Café* in Amsterdam, Holland. In May 2007, Mank and Smolen performed in The Netherlands at De Furs / Lage Vuursche in Utrecht, at De Waag in Haarlem, and at KHL Coffehouse in Amsterdam—and in Belgium with Amy Merrill at De Lakenhal in Herentals and at Ter Voncke in Herenthout. They will tour again in Europe in April '09.

Tom Mank, an independent singer-songwriter for the past twenty years, has played in folk, blues, and bluegrass bands collaborating with a host of singers and instrumentalists in Boston (MA), Brattleboro (VT), Keene (NH), and Ithaca (NY). He currently performs with Smolen and many other musicians and continues to generate new music.

RECORDINGS: *Where the Sun Meets the Blue*, 2007; *Souls of Birds* 2004; *Conversations in Waves*, 2001; *Almost Time*, 2000—original collaborations with Sera Smolen.

Dr. Sera Jane Smolen is an active performer of many genres of music, including four centuries of classical music. In addition to her collaboration with Mank, she has performed extensively with the Cayuga Chamber Orchestra, Albert Consort (New Violin Family), Tri-Cities Opera, Mansfield University Piano Trio, Ithaca Piano Trio, Trio Melange, Chiron Festival of the Creative Spirit, and Cornell University Hesterian Musicism. She has taught at Mansfield University, Alfred University, Hobart & William Smith, and Ithaca College. She is the assistant director of the New Directions Cello Festival, a founding member of the Binghamton Cello Festival, and a guest clinician around the US and Canada

RECORDINGS: *Where the Sun Meets the Blue*, 2007; *Souls of Birds* 2004; *Conversations in Waves*, 2001; *Almost Time*, 2000—original collaborations with Tom Mank; *Harmonious Soul Scenes*, Karlton Hester and Hesterian Musicism, 2000; *The Way Of Creation*, Betsy Bevan, 1999, *Improvising Chamber Music Sampler, Music For People*, with David Darling, 1998.

Press

Where the Sun Meets the Blue

"Tom Mank and Sera Smolen are so far beyond the mainstream, it's scary. They are acoustic music's Igor Stravinsky in a world of Brahms and Schumanns. I mean, Brahms and Schumann are great, but Stravinsky—man, that's adventure! So it is with Mank and Smolen, at least as presented in 'Where the Sun Meets the Blue', an album of amazing musical styles. Sure, the overlying style is folk and jazz with a bit of Smolenized-classical thrown in on the side, but that does even

begin to describe what goes on on this album. And trust me when I say that the meager attempt I make here will fall sadly short. Mank approaches the album like a modern beatnik, picking subjects on the edge and presenting them with unerring touch. ... Up to this point, I have not really talked in terms of expertise. After having listened to this album numerous times, I am of the mind that Tom Mank and Sera Smolen are easily Grammy material. They are expert at their craft, but more than that, they develop it. At their level, I am not at all sure that it is a craft but art. Regardless, I know one thing. There can't be a gig they play where a large percentage of their audience is not comprised of fellow musicians. That, my friends, is a given, and it speaks in volumes".

- Frank Gutch, Jr for *Folk and Acoustic Music Exchange*, August 2008

"Sera's sinuous cello and Tom's driving guitar generate a firm beat beneath metablues that's homespun yet exotic, hinting of smoky nights in Istanbul or Calcutta. The blend of Dave Van Ronk and Mose Allison in Mank's voice pins your ear to delicious synesthesiac lines like 'the sky won't bend and the wind won't cry'. As a centerpiece Smolen's 'Sarkori', a cello nocturne evoking Dave Brubeck and Phillip Glass, nestles in nicely. Throughout, Sera gives the cello an uncannily human voice".

- Spider Barbour for *Woodstock Times*, August 2008

"'Where the Sun Meets the Blue' is the fourth CD of the American duo Tom Mank and Sera Smolen, for musical gourmets. The combination of Mank's voice, songs and guitar, completed with Smolen's cello and every time one or two changing instruments and voices, results in a wonderful charismatic, quiet folk album."

- *Heaven Magazine*, August 2007 **** (out of 5)



"From the very first notes on, this CD excites your imagination. The cello of Sera Smolen and the voice of Tom Mank create magic from the opener 'Off-Beat Rhyme' until the last ethereal track 'Lit By The Moon'. Both performers sense perfectly each others changes of mood. Tom Mank knows how to translate his own lyrics into poetic language: about segregation in Baltimore, lost lovers, for short songs of complaint, nostalgia and desire. But it is the Robert J. Spear cello, already for fifteen years the

loyal companion of Sera, that provides the fairytale-like frame with bass-lines that sometimes reach to atmospheric heights. This album is Tom's 4th already as a duo with Sera. His talent lies in songwriting and in creatively dreaming away to horizons 'where the sun meets the blue'. His songs remain on that emotional line which perfectly keeps the balance between jazzy blues notes and improvising day-dreaming-blues. Sometimes his voice resembles Nick Drake. He also knows how to embrace the nostalgia of the fall as well as the spring-breeze in his songs. (This is) an album to become silent out of respect for the wandering spirits on dancing feet, reaching out for a melody and the rhythm of the beat. No better words than this 'free translation' of the passage from Tom Mank's 'Where's That Train', to describe this CD."

- Marcie for *Rootstime*, January, 2008 (translation: Yvonne Böhm)

Souls of Birds

"Oh, there is so much crap out there! Thank heavens there are GREAT records like this to stem the tide! If you brought a pile of CDs home from a folk festival, 'Souls of Birds' is the one that would end up on the top of the pile. It is risky, real, and pushes boundaries in a natural way with nary a hint of pretentiousness. Tom Mank's low-key Lou Reed/Leonard Cohen-ish vocals have a compelling, spoken word quality to them. Mank is one of those singers who could be reciting the phone book and you'd go 'yeah, there's something to that!' Sera Smolen's cello takes us all kinds of places weird & wonderful, while never losing touch with the emotional roots of the songs. She's soloistic, but always in a way that supports the overall thrust of the music. Her cellistic terrain includes emotive, whacked-out natural sound fx & high-energy solos drawn from many influences, such as 19th century etudes and Indian ragas, to name but a few. Smolen is a passionate player who is clearly intimate with the inherent joy in taking musical risks. Due to their willingness to keep changing things up, the sounds of their instruments are continually fresh and inspiring, as are the arrangements. There is always some cool surprise poking its impish head around the corner ahead of us as the CD progresses. It is thrilling when artists dig in and craft a work as rich, vibrant and authentic as this." Five Stars.

-Corbin Keep, Cello City Ink, Fall/Winter - 2004/2005

"This is not an 'easy' album. But those who take the time to get used to it will agree with us that the album's complexity holds the real strength of the work. There are not many CD's that stand the test of time and remain interesting, but this is sure one of those few."

- Benny Metten, www.ctrlalcountry.be, March 2005