

## **Times Argus Article published July 25, 2008**

### **Spencer Lewis: Two albums, two approaches**

By Art Edelstein Arts Correspondent

Spencer Lewis, who has made a successful musical career as a vocalist, guitarist, new age fiddler, and songwriter, is passing a milestone in 2008 as this is his 20th year in the recording business. To celebrate he's released two new CDs: "Drifter," a live performance from last year's First Night Montpelier, and "Up on the Mountain," which includes cello accompaniment to his guitar and violin work. In all, the Lewis catalog now contains 19 CDs, a prodigious number for a musician whose performance schedule is fairly slim and limited primarily to Vermont and frequently only at craft fairs.

Lewis, whose early work — more vocally driven and folk music inspired than in later years when he has concentrated on instrumentals — has followed his muse to a successful yet quiet career. He's probably sold more CDs than most Vermont performers, but because he limits his performances, few outside his dedicated fan base have heard him play live.

He is probably best known for his many CDs featuring violin and guitar. His style includes simple major-key melodies, which he records on violin, overdubbing many tracks. His guitar becomes the rhythmic underpinning for the music, but also plays an essential part in his musical landscape. This approach gives Lewis' recordings a string quartet feel.

Lewis' music has a lushness of sound, and also a dreamy haziness. There are two ways to listen to this music: Through speakers one hears the fullness of the recording, but with ear buds the many separate tracks in each recording become evident. It's like listening to the branches of a musical river merging.

"Up on the Mountain" is such an album. The innovation here is the cello work of Nathaniel Parke, whose contribution adds the lower range of string sound previously missing from Lewis' work. Together the two musicians achieve an aural balance that fills both speakers and ear buds with attractive and soothing music.

Lewis' music has never been beat-oriented. His is a mostly contemplative approach, great for reading or studying to. His music is excellent as the musical course at dinner or backdrop to yoga practice or a romantic encounter.

"Up on the Mountain" adds an extra element to Lewis' oeuvre with the cello. This album is gorgeously produced and recorded. This is music to calm an uncalm world. The seven-track, 54-minute performance fits well within the catalog of work he has produced in his two-decade career.

"The Drifter" is a departure for Lewis. This is his only live album and it shows him in a very different light. Here there is more emphasis on his guitar playing and there are several vocals. The album was recorded in Montpelier's Christ Church by Josh Neibling and is generally first rate.

Lewis' Taylor guitar sounds a bit too electric for my taste, but there are also a lot of guitar effects employed, especially reverb. The guitar playing is very idiosyncratic. He has developed a set of guitar riffs that define his sound, and once heard you know Lewis is playing. On this CD he managed to keep the interest going by playing to looped guitar tracks that he recorded only seconds earlier with his looping effect box as many of his compositions require more than one instrument to fill in the otherwise simplified compositional style.

Lewis is a very good singer and his vocal style and guitar playing in the songs is basic folk with lots of Woody Guthrie influence. We hear vocals on "Punch Line," "Stones of Gilead" and "This Land Is Your Land."

Lewis doesn't say much on stage but his singing and instrumental playing are very engaging. There is sincerity in his voice that gives great authenticity to his songs. Closing with the Guthrie opus seemed a fine way to end 2007 and usher in 2008.