

Review: Spencer Lewis and his new guitars

By Art Edelstein

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If you've been following the career of Bethel musician Spencer Lewis then you've watched this multi-instrumentalist, singer-songwriter build an impressive catalog of 18 CD albums over a career that spans 25 years. You've seen a musician work really hard as he followed his inner muse, creating music that has a signature sound and a definitive imprint that always says "Spencer Lewis" whether it's an instrumental or vocal project.

His recently released "The Highest" is an album that takes Lewis in a somewhat new direction.

Lewis is known for his New Age approach to composition and recording. Many of his albums feature layered violin, almost always in a major key, with folk themes, and flat-picked guitar parts that underlie the violin work. He has developed guitar riffs that are instantly recognizable and a violin sound and approach that has come to define his recorded and live sound. On his songs we hear a composer who owes much to the music of icons like Woody Guthrie. These are simple, heartfelt story songs of real people from rural America.

Recently, on a demo with bluegrass singer-songwriter Carol Hauser of Montpelier, Lewis showed his strong bluegrass and country instrumental guitar chops and singing. A most talented man he is.

"The Highest," a nine-track album, seems inspired by new instruments, namely guitars Lewis has acquired. He recently began playing a Froggy Bottom guitar built by Michael Millard of Chelsea, and a Taylor T5 electric. These instruments apparently got Lewis' creative juices flowing as he uses them extensively on this new, all instrumental album.

Also appearing is his sometime musical collaborator Dan Haley on mandolin and guitar. Mark LeGrand contributes bass on one track and Barry Vermont Miller adds some percussion.

Musicians will tell you that new instruments can be influential and even transformative to their playing. This seems to be the case here. Lewis seems enamored with the sounds he can pull from the Taylor played into a guitar amplifier, and the tonalities and overtones the highly prized Brazilian Rosewood-bodied Froggy creates. As a result we get several very long tracks of somewhat experimental music as Lewis plays with these new musical tools.

Lewis isn't yet delving into rock but his simple folk-themed melodies definitely have an edge that wasn't there on previous albums. Enamored as he is on this album with guitar sounds, there isn't as much violin as we've come to expect, although it does appear on several tracks: Track 4, "Confluence"; Track 5, "820"; Track 7, "Tuesday Sunshine"; and the final track, "Falling Free."

There's also some nice guitar work from Lewis and Haley for example on Track 6 "Rapids." We hear percussion, mandolin, and several guitars on the nearly 11-minute Track 8 "March is a Long Story," as indeed it appears to be.

"The Highest" is an album that gets the listener, especially longtime fans of Spencer Lewis, thinking about what we expect from our musicians. Certainly, we became fans because we liked what we were hearing and want more. But, should an artist continue to create those same sounds, ones that may eat up the creative juices, simply to keep his fan base happy? Or, should he explore areas that are new as a way to expand his musicality?

This is the question posed by "The Highest." While I have some issues with Lewis' movement toward experimentation with electric instruments, I certainly understand that an artist of his talent and sensitivity can't play the same old, same old forever and this album is, in essence, a breaking away from some previous constraints. Only artists with a strong sense of self, and confidence in their abilities forge beyond what's familiar and easy. Spencer Lewis has done this on "The Highest."