Farrar, Jay and Benjamin Gibbard. *One Fast Move or I'm Gone: Music from Kerouac's Big Sur*. Atlantic Recording Corporation, 2009. CD

Reviewed by Tom Pynn

*and I'm lost among strange agitators of the heart. . .*

—*Big Sur* by Jack Kerouac and *"San Francisco"* by Jay Farrar

On hiatus from Son Volt, Jay Farrar tells us that he wrote "the bulk of these songs over a 5-day span with minimal revisions" combining his unmistakable vocalizations of alternative country melodies with the words of Jack Kerouac's *Big Sur* (1962). Benjamin Gibbard of Death Cab for Cutie joins him on several of the tracks, his tenor voice reaching as far into the skies as Farrar's baritone grounds us in the earth. Indeed, their collaboration is one of the recording's high points. While this project is to be judged on its own merits, it is also serves as the soundtrack for Curt Worden's documentary about Kerouac's last great novel, *One Fast Move or I'm Gone: Kerouac's* big sur (2008).

Some may be surprised that Jay Farrar's original score was chosen for the film because it embodies the Americana sound Farrar has been developing in his career with both Uncle Tupelo and Son Volt and not the jazz traditions of bebop, hard bop and free jazz that was the musical anchor of the circles within which Kerouac moved and during which the events of the novel and most of Kerouac's corpus take place, i.e. 1945-1959. Farrar acknowledges this element of Beat culture's musical history as he writes in the soundtrack's liner notes, "Jack Kerouac was synonymous with jazz. His improvisational, loosely structured prose often read like jazz on the written page." Farrar shows us that while Kerouac's style is bop prosody, it's inclusive of all the sounds of America. In the same vein as Walt Whitman's poetry, Kerouac's prose contains multitudes.

The only jazz musician mentioned by name in *Big Sur* is Stan Getz, who, at the time of Kerouac's composing of the novel was himself opening new pathways with his introduction of the Brazilian Bossa Nova style to American listeners. It's also the case that there is a brief reference to hearing blues on the radio in Neal Cassady's vehicle, Kerouac crooning Ron Blake's "Sweet Sixteen," and the mentioning of Wagner's tragic opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Farrar adds that "[f]inding out that Jack actually accepted and appreciated folk music (as in the novel *Big Sur*) and the cowboy/folk of Ramblin' Jack Elliott (as in *Book of Dreams*) brought about the convergence of purpose and idea into a rolling inspirational focus—to write songs for this project using lines from Jack's poem." Yet Farrar's compositional strategy is not literal; he doesn't just steal whole passages off the page and put them to music. Sentences, lines, and phrases from

different sections are woven together in a seamless garment so that they seem, as is, straight from the text.  This strategy demonstrates not only Farrar's familiarity with *Big Sur* but also his dedication to bring the words alive in this new context.

Farrar's strategy may also seem a bit odd until we remember Ginsberg's recording of Blake's poetry.  In Worden's documentary, Tom Waits reminds us that what has attracted musicians to Kerouac is the musicality of the writing.  The effect of Farrar's work is impressionistic.  Farrar assembles these songs from phrases that evoke things, moods, and feelings thereby bringing out the poetry in Kerouac's syntax.  Combining music with words is not new to those familiar with Kerouac and other Beat Generation writers.  In the mid-fifties, several poets including Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, ruth weiss, and Kenneth Patchen were experimenting at places like The Cellar with what Lawrence Lipton called Jazz Canto, the merging of improvisational jazz with poetry.  In *The Holy Barbarians* (1959), Lipton was adamant that Jazz Canto not "be limited to jazz music. In Jazz Canto several types of music are employed" (224).  Farrar's work demonstrates a continuity in the on-going artistic experiment of combining words and music such that they enrich each other and free both music and word from the written page. (To this end see YouTube for performances of Farrar and Gibbard on their recent tour.)

In many respects the tension between the exuberant and the melancholy is a hallmark of Kerouac's style and is the anchor of the album, but this tension is not presented in the same way. These are Kerouac's words, but Farrar makes them his own.  Thus, the album, unlike the novel, begins with the bright and bouncy forward looking and even optimistic "California Zephyr." Followed by "Low Life Kingdom" these two opening tracks set the tone for the rest of the album, alternating expressions of what Aram Saroyan in the documentary calls "the mortal taste" recalling Blake's observation in *Auguries of Innocence* that *man was made for joy and woe*.  As "California Zephyr" has the author transcontinental . . . watching America roll by,"  "Low Life Kingdom" pleads for heaven to "send illumination to our drowning brains." Like *Big Sur*, the CD's third track, "Willamine," "talks with a broken heart." What Kerouac, Farrar, and Gibbard all know and that the critics of Kerouac's day denied is that

> nobody ever dares to write the true story of love
>
> hiding under buried junkyards throughout the world. . . .
>
> nobody ever dares to write the true story of love
>
> the secret underground truth of desire
>
> never mentioned in the newspapers.

Yet, we die every day for lack of it.  As in Blake's London, Kerouac's San Francisco, and in our own time. commercialism threatens artistic vision, prophetic voice, and the honest tenderness of the human heart.

Just as the almost idyllic beginning days in Bixby Canyon are interrupted by the terror overwhelming with sea crash surf smash against the rocks of the world mountain Mien Mo, "breathe our iodine" with its sinister sounding dark blues hook interrupts the previous songs and we sink into "the horror of an eternal condition of sick mortality." As this song creeps up on us, however, "These Roads Don't Move" arrives like a burst of sunlight with its bright pop rock optimism of "Golden Eternity blessing all" and "it will all be like it was in the beginning" followed by the refrain's pithy observation that "these roads don't move, you're the one that moves.". One of my favorite tracks is "Big Sur," an ode to the setting of the novel. "The peace you're looking for, the peace you'll find" involves both the "rapturous ring of silence" and "Pacific fury smashing the rocks sea shroud towers" an awareness of impermanence within which "the best thing to do is not be false." So it goes: a tragic sense of life mixed with unanticipated moments of hope with a tragic wisdom emerging out of the experience. As Patti Smith writes in the liner notes: "He was not a perfect man, but he had moments of perfect clarity."

The themes Farrar has chosen are familiar to readers of Kerouac and listeners of Uncle Tupelo and Son Volt: love without stability, absence, the melancholy ring of silence in the heart of social activity, lack of interpersonal and communal connection, and that most American desire of all: *motion*. All of these themes are implicated in the repeated phrase, "One fast move or I'm gone." Before and since Huck Finn lit out for the territory, Americans have been moving. Yet, unlike Finn's unassuming optimism, Farrar's title track grievously avers, "This river of road it don't flow like it used too, / but it's more of a home than any where that I've ridden it too."

Viewing/listening to the film there is no dissonance, no dissociation between what Kerouac writes, what John Ventimiglia narrates in the documentary, and what Farrar sings and plays. Kerouac is as Americana as Farrar – Farrar is as Americana as Kerouac. Farrar's work should also clue in Beat and other literary scholars to consider the serious dimensions of popular culture in relation to Beat culture. The contemporary musical genre of Americana, mixing blues, folk, country, and rock, is parallel to Beat culture artists' desire to envision and inaugurate a new vision of America as well as opening up Americans' eyes to the reality of the inter-ethnic context of American culture, to new and deeper democratic vistas.

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