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A Full-Time Folkie from Seaford

by **Jim Newsom**

Ron Fetner decided he wanted to be a musician when he was in high school in Northern Virginia. Unlike most folks with similar teenage dreams, he's found a way to make it happen through much of his adult life. He performs at the Virginia Beach Central Library Saturday night on a double bill with Chris Rosser.

"I started playing music really early," he told me when I called him at his home in Seaford, off Route 17 near Yorktown. "My parents made me take piano lessons when I was in the fifth grade. Then I started taking some woodwind instruments and played in the school band. Half-way through high school, I knew that I wanted to do music for a living.

"I went off to Berklee School of Music for about a year, then ended up finding a gig playing with a band that was making fairly decent money. I had a good time being a full-time musician around D. C. I was never a starving artist. I tried to be smart enough that when the rock-n-roll gigs weren't happening, there were a couple of years that I played guitar in a supper club band. I figured my buddies might laugh at me, but I'm practicing every night and getting paid for it while they're wishing they were out playing."

He spent most of the decade of the 1970s playing with regionally popular bands, including seven years with Cherry Smash, the house band at the Bayou, the hottest club in Georgetown at the time. But the rock life began to take its toll, and Fetner decided to resume his studies in 1980.

"I went back to school for a couple of years in Florida," he said, "and then I ended up on the Peninsula. My parents lived in Williamsburg, I was here on a visit and ended up staying."

"When I went back to school, I was actually one of those burned-out musicians because I had been traveling so much. I got out of music completely. I went back to school for aviation, so when I got here I got hired by a company that built wind tunnel models for NASA. It was a fairly well-paying job and they were awfully understanding, so when I got back into music and started winning contests, they didn't mind if I went out on the road for a couple of weeks here and there. And the income allowed me to do my first CD. So there were definitely plusses to that. But a couple of years ago, I decided to go back into music full-time."

He recorded that first CD, *This Box I'm Looking Through*, in 1996, and his songs began to garner favorable notice on the national folk and acoustic music scene. Five years later, he won the "NewFolk" award at the 2001 Kerrville Folk Festival. He also placed second in the gospel category at Merlefest that year for "On the Road to Chestertown," the leadoff track on his second album, *Turning for Home*.

Last year he put out his third disc, the splendidly crafted *Defying Gravity*. It's a collection of thoughtful, melodic songs full of true stories and intellectually satisfying lyrical journeys. And though Fetner declaims, "I'm not really an outwardly religious person," he obviously has his spiritual side, one that's especially evident in "We Have Come" and the hit-in-waiting, "My Name is Justin."

"I was walking through a mall with my wife and there was an angel tree," he explained when asked about the latter song. "And the names Justin and Teresa were names on that tree. I thought what if Jesus' name was on there? Because I was watching people and they would just pick and choose the names they thought were cool. And I thought if Jesus' name was on there, would anybody pick him?"

It's one of those songs that give you chills when you listen to it, one that begs for a cover by some current country star. In fact, the CD is packed with original material deserving of a wider audience. "'61 Comet" is filled with detail and imagery poured over a sturdy rockin' beat.

"That song is almost 100% autobiographical. That was my dad's car. When I was old enough, he gave me that car to drive. It was my first band car that I would go out and play in bands with. I had a job parking cars at National Airport, and I got hit by an Internal Revenue agent. It's a true story. I remember the cops called my dad, and my dad came down. I wasn't really hurt, but the Internal Revenue agent had a passenger who went through the windshield. He tried to buy my dad off, but it was back in the days before everybody did a lot of lawsuits. So they hauled the guy off and whatever happened to him, I don't know."

Though he thinks of himself primarily as a songwriter, Ron Fetner has a fine, weathered voice and is an accomplished guitarist and teacher. Having been born in the small town of Silver Creek on Lake Erie in western New York, and living in Virginia since elementary school, he combines the rich folk heritage of New England with the short-story tradition of the South. You could say he's our David Mallett, as he reminds me of Maine's favorite-son folk songwriter.

Saturday night he shares the bill with Chris Rosser, an Asheville singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist who co-produced *Defying Gravity*. They'll probably play a few tunes together, but mostly he'll draw from his own catalog of original material, songs like "Holes," whose chorus proclaims, "Sometimes we need to slow life down, take a look around, learn to let go...sometimes we just need holes."

“That song,” he said, “I have to thank [guitarist] Tommy Emanuel for. Three or four years ago, some friends of mine had gone to see him and they were raving about how fast he was and how great he was. I said, ‘You know, what’s good about Tommy is that he knows where to leave holes in to make it musical.’ And I thought, ‘that’s the same thing about life.’”

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