

When Demon Records released the Patricia Hardin-Tom Russell album, *The Early Years (1975-79)*, earlier this year, reviews varied between vague and totally inaccurate, while overall reception of the teaming could at best be termed lukewarm.

Reissued recordings should be viewed with a historical perspective and honesty, which *The Early Years* was not. What follows is the real story of Hardin and Russell, from someone who was there for the duration.

Born in Waco, Texas in 1943, Hardin describes life growing up in the late 50s and early 60s as "like that town in American Graffiti. On the jukebox, Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly. I was serious about classical music and afraid to let it be known that I was really nuts about The Platters and Elvis Presley. I was



Lest legend overtake fact, this band only lasted six weeks. The lead guitar player had just given notice, when Tom Russell entered the picture.

"He had just moved to Austin from Vancouver and was looking for a band. We were playing the Broken Spoke one night when Tom walked in and approached me after our first set. I invited him to our next rehearsal. He showed up and knew every country song we could name and a thousand more. It was obvious he was a good writer and knew something about the business. Everything clicked. Randy, our guitar player, was out and Tom was in."

Sharing the view that a repertoire that included original songs was the way forward, Pat and Tom resolved to work as a duo, and became "Hardin & Russell".

"Tom introduced me to Woody

Patricia Hardin

talks about her career before and after "The Early Years" with Tom Russell

the all-American girl, church pianist, homecoming princess, class officer and drum major of the McGregor High Band."

Hardin's home was always full of music of many types. "My mother singing German songs, playing violin and sometimes a bit of barrelhouse piano. My father whistling out of tune. Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys on the radio, and my favourite, Schubert's Symphony No.8 on the record player."

Hardin began piano lessons at the age of five, and through her teen years was a regular performer in the statewide Young Artists series. She entered university in 1963 and continued with her music studies. However, when she failed to win a concerto competition in Amarillo, she vowed never to play piano again, and for seven years kept that promise.

Then, following marriage and the birth of her daughter, Patricia yearned to return to the instrument, albeit in a new musical direction.

"I began to improvise with blues and pop, music by people like Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Paul Simon and The Band. Spent hours playing along with favourite records that had or could use a piano part."

In 1972, she moved to Austin where she took a secretarial job at the University of Texas. During her breaks, she concentrated on her songwriting until she felt confident enough to make her first public performance.

"I met Wayne Gustafsen who was looking for a piano player for his country band, Happy Daze. Newly organised, they already had bookings so I auditioned and they signed me. The sappy band name bothered me a lot. I painted a big poster to hang on my piano that read '... and The Great Depression'. With the band poster at centre stage and my poster at stage right, the name read 'Happy Daze ... and The Great Depression.' Now that, I thought, had a ring to it!"

Guthrie and Hank Williams. I introduced him to Bach and Franz Schubert. That's partly why our songs had that strange blend of folk, country and classical. My artistic concept has always been to create something unique and honest that will stand the test of time. That's exactly what Tom and I accomplished with those early recordings. I'm sure that's what we're each doing today, separate and apart."

Individually, Hardin and Russell took New Folk awards at the 1975 Kerrville Folk Festival, while in June of that year Hardin won the Grand Prize at the Kerrville Country & Western Songwriters Competition. Russell was a semi-finalist.

In 1976, the couple cut their first album, *Ring Of Bone*, in Austin. Patricia recalls, "Between high hopes and a low budget, we pulled it off in three days. Mike Mordecai, now a big name in the Austin music scene, helped us put together the right local musicians."

As for the album title, she explains,

"Lew Welch, the mystic poet of the Beat Generation, wrote a collection of poems called *Ring Of Bone*. The preface gives some clue as to what he was after: 'The shape of *Ring of Bone* is circular, or back and forth.'

"What Tom and I did in our song, *Ring Of Bone*, and in the concept of our album, was to bring to life, lyrically and musically, some of the possibilities in that image. Circles, cycles, birth and death and rebirth."

Patricia's compositions included *Coffins On The Brazos*, which told of the Texas floods of 1957, and *Look At Us Now*, while she also penned the music for a number of Tom's lyrics.

The initial pressing of *Ring Of Bone* sold out quickly. Chet Flippo of Rolling Stone magazine had described it as "A miracle!" and further favourable reviews appeared in other magazines including *Billboard* and *Crawdaddy*. The pair decided to move base to San Francisco in order to put a band together and gain a wider audience.

"It was an attractive alternative to living in L.A. but close enough to allow us to pound the pavement there for a record deal. Performance opportunities in the Bay Area were very good. We played everything from steak and lobster houses to The Great American Music Hall."

In 1977, Vanguard Records offered them a deal but disaster struck when their own lawyer endeavoured to alter a minor point in the contract and the label pulled out of the deal. Devastated, Pat and Tom elected to cut their second album, *Wax Museum*, for release on their own label.

"We wanted an outside producer, a full backup band and no investors. We got all of that and I financed the entire album. A recent reviewer commented it was 'unfortunate' that I sold my 'family farm' to do it. That's an unkind exaggeration. What I actually sold was a few acres out of one of the farms my paternal grandfather left me in his will, and I've never regretted it a day since. You'll notice on the back cover of *Wax Museum* the 'special thanks to Charlie Matilage and the Burton Place' - that's my grandfather and the farm I'm referring to."

Wax Museum was produced by Bernie Krause, formerly of The Weavers. Lyrically eclectic as ever, Hardin's material included *Who Is Franz Rummer?*, a song about an English concert pianist, the Western-flavoured *Stampede*, and *The Phantom Of Balance* which was inspired by Ringling Brothers trapeze artist Elvin Bale.

Patricia Hardin and Tom Russell split up in 1979. "The loss of the Vanguard

contract had taken its toll on both of us," explains Hardin. "We worked harder than ever, recording the second album, touring, putting a band together.

"The main problem was I never got any rest. I was a divorced single parent. Between the rigours of my career and the responsibilities of being a good mother, I don't know when, if ever, I slept. In the spring of 1979, I finally had a total collapse from physical and emotional exhaustion. My doctor gave me two choices: stop and rest, or keep going and die."

The band dissolved a month later.

Following a period of recuperation, Patricia headed for Nashville. Accompanied by her daughter and their dog, she crammed everything she owned into a U-Haul trailer. Her plan was to focus on songwriting and publishing.

"I managed to place several songs under publishing contracts. Ironically, the song no publisher would take was the one that got cut - by none other than Ronnie Dunn, now of Brooks & Dunn. *Somewhere Tonight* had previously won me an award at the American Song Festival. Dunn was recording an album for Churchill Records and my song was to be the single. Somehow his record deal went down and with it my song."

In 1981, Patricia remarried and moved to Chicago. "I went into self-imposed artistic seclusion. Wrote a ton of stuff, dark poems and short stories. Composed songs of all sorts, from blues and country to art song. During this period, I began choral composition. When a nun's choir in Cologne performed one of my choral pieces, friends joked that as a songwriter I have one foot in smokey bars and the other in cathedrals."

In the spring of 1987, Pat and her husband relocated to Austin, Texas. The following year, she undertook her final public performance. "It was with Peter Yarrow on the steps of the State Capitol here in Austin. Peter accompanied me on a song I wrote for the children of war-torn Nicaragua."

While public appearances were now a thing of the past, her compositions occasionally appeared. The nine-minute musical poem, *Bald Eagles At Buchanan Lake*, was one. "Charles Tischler was planning a documentary on the migratory bald eagles and asked me to write a song. I came up with a narrative poem to be read conversationally to a music track."

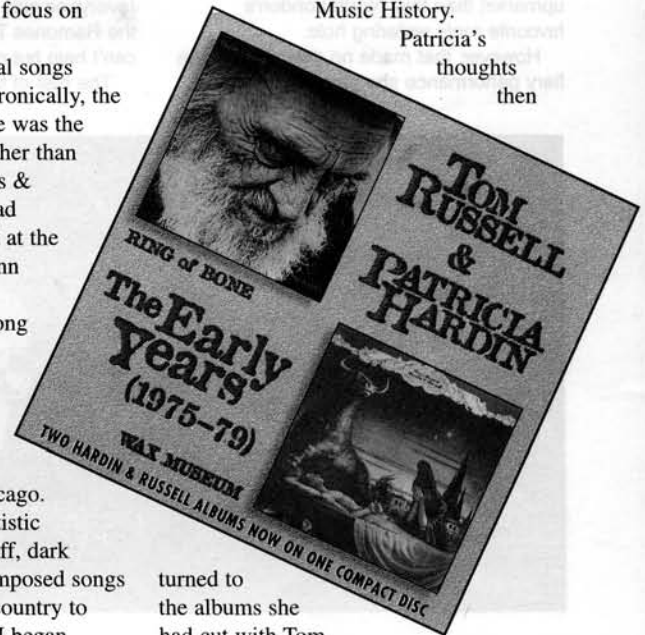
Unfortunately, funding for the

documentary fell through, so Hardin decided to produce her piece as a recorded work with Stephen Fromholz narrating. As Patricia recalls, "I had everything in the can except for some overdubs and the mix when I was, you might say, rudely interrupted."

The *Bald Eagles* tape was finally released in 1992, two years after Hardin began work on it.

The "rude interruption" to which she referred was her battle with breast cancer. Following a year of therapy and surgery, she was pronounced cured. Lacking physical stamina, she decided to work harder with her mind. In 1994 she took up studies at the University of Texas, becoming a music major, and has begun working towards a master's in Music History.

Patricia's thoughts then



turned to the albums she had cut with Tom Russell. "I tried to put this early music to rest years ago, as did Tom, when we began heading in separate directions. By 1994 I had only a few of the original vinyl albums left. The master tapes were deteriorating. Once the vinyl and the tapes were gone, there would be nothing to show for that period of hard work. My main reason for putting the albums on CD was a practical one, simply to preserve them as a historical record."

The Early Years (1975-79) encompassed both vinyl albums less one composition each by Hardin and Russell. Initially available in 1994 through Tom Russell's management, Dark Angel, the historic recording was released in the UK by Demon at the beginning of 1997.

Hardin is currently composing a choral/orchestral work to celebrate the Millennium, and this may well be her next CD-length recording. ■