

LARS BYGDÉN – biography 2012

If you're a latecomer to the story of Lars Bygdén, don't worry – you arrive at the most exciting chapter yet. The Stockholm-based Swede's third solo album to date is his finest and most definitive work in 13 years as a recording artist. He believes in it so much that he's titled it with his initials. "Maybe a glimpse of my diminishing imagination," Bygdén muses, "or maybe a way to challenge yours."

Lushly expansive of arrangements, gorgeously warm of feeling and disarmingly honest of sentiment, *LB* is the ideal introduction to an artist whose career arc to date brings to mind a kind of Scandinavian Ryan Adams: talented singer-songwriter and guitarist from small town back of beyond cuts his teeth with critically acclaimed alt-country band, spreads his wings as a solo artist, makes a string of eclectic, heart-on-sleeve albums ploughing the deepest depths of a troubled soul and embracing an expectations-confoundingly broad spectrum of American roots music, from country to folk, blues and rock. Sure, big sales and worldwide recognition à la Adams haven't come Bygdén's way yet. But with *LB*, an international breakout is surely long overdue for one of Sweden's best kept secrets. Especially with such a treasure trove of a back catalogue as his awaiting to be unlocked too by way of a bonus (Bygdén's career-spanning 2011 double compilation album *Songs I Wrote* being a good starting point).



Born and raised in the typically northern working-class Swedish city of Sundsvall, Bygdén had his first taste of playing music in his teens with Magic Broom and later Shades of Orange, two locally feted psychedelic rock bands both stylistically indebted to the baggy Madchester sounds so in vogue in the early 90s. But via his discovery of Lynyrd Skynyrd and southern rock, the young guitarist was clandestinely cultivating an unfashionable love for Americana that would eventually switch him on to Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, and the music that speaks most to his heart and soul. When Bygdén moved back to Sundsvall after university in the late 90s, he knew exactly what kind of band he wanted to form next – all he needed was the right players to help him realise his dream. "There were no musicians my age that knew how to play country music," he says, "so I hand-picked the finest of them so they could learn."

Lauded by the Swedish music press and financially backed by Peter Svensson from The Cardigans, The Thousand Dollar Playboys were a modest sensation that burned suddenly and brightly, before fading away almost as quickly. With 1999's *The \$1000 Playboys* and 2001's *Stay* – both released, like all of Bygdén's material so far, on Sundsvall label Massproduktion – the quintet were widely credited with being the first band to bring alt-country to Sweden in a serious way, and left behind what Bygdén believes to be a lasting imprint on the country's music scene: "If you listen to Swedish music nowadays, there are many parts of country that you can hear that you couldn't hear in the 90s." As with so many young bands labouring under immense weight of expectation, personal and professional relationships became strained as commercial success proved evasive, and the group effectively dissolved in 2003. But the experience had endowed Bygdén with enough confidence in his abilities as a songwriter and arranger, not to mention a deep hunger to bury the disappointments of the past, to launch a solo career. "It was so natural that I did it," he says. "I remember having been quite tired being the leader of the band. It was liberating," he adds, with a laugh, "just to have me as the only problem."

Bygdén's debut solo album *Trading Happiness for Songs* was released to a warm critical reception in 2005. But it was with 2009's *Family Feelings* that he began to find a truly unique voice, and under the

most challenging of circumstances. In the late summer of 2007, Bygdén's long-term girlfriend was diagnosed with cancer; that autumn and winter as she underwent treatment was one of the bleakest periods of his life, and it inevitably bled into his song-writing, which became a kind of coping mechanism. "It was a really terrible time," Bygdén recalls solemnly. "The whole vibe of the album is really dark." Try listening to the harrowing 'CT-Scan' for proof – a heart-rendingly literal articulation of the pain and uncertainty of standing by in futility as someone you love goes through cancer treatment: "Watching you helplessly/visions I don't want to see," he sings, in a trembling throaty burr, "full of life/afraid to die."

Mercifully the treatment was a success, and once Bygdén's girlfriend was given the all clear they didn't waste time in starting a family together. Speaking in the summer of 2012 as sun pours into his Stockholm apartment, flushed with the joy of fatherhood ("the most positive thing that's ever happened to me") Bygdén is undoubtedly in a brighter place than ever right now. But he carries over from those dark days surrounding *Family Feelings* a certain fearlessness to explore the deeper, shadowier recesses of his personality and experiences. "At least two thirds of the new songs are in minor keys. It's how I've started writing songs now – as soon as I pick up a guitar there's a minor chord there."

The fact of it being produced by Tobias Fröberg – an esteemed Swedish artist and studio master more closely associated with alt-folk and indie-pop than alt-country – is just one among many ways in which *LB* challenges common but imprecise perceptions about Bygdén as a musician. "Since I started up in the Playboys I've been labelled alt-country," he says. "But if you listen to my music you might hear that I've listened as much to Nick Cave and David Bowie as I have alt-country," he says. Sure, there are two duets with the golden-voiced Sharon Vaughan – a Nashville legend, author of Willie Nelson's number one hit 'My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys', now resident in Stockholm – including the duskily majestic 'Nothing To Say,' perhaps *LB*'s standout track. But those songs stand side-by-side with a choice of cover linking all the way back to Bygdén's teenage psychedelic rock days, in the shape of a sensational, transformative take on Syd Barrett's 'Dark Globe'. "A band we mentioned a lot through the recording process was Pink Floyd," says Bygdén, proudly showing off the Syd Barrett T-shirt he's wearing, "and we thought about their sound quite a lot. They were inspirational sound wise."

A very down-to-earth kind of guy – and this is where the Ryan Adams comparisons wear thin – Bygdén stakes no claim of entitlement to greatness and success. He's happy to discuss how *LB* had to be financed with sponsorship from friends and admirers, and divulges his biggest ambition to be a humble one: recognition in America sufficient for him to tour and pay homage to a country that's given him so much as a musician and music-lover.

A Swede taking Americana back to the USA? It sounds crazy, but why not? While the form of Bygdén's music might be inherently American, the content is all his own and comes from the most fundamental and important of places, in a totally earnest manner that country music fans more than many must surely appreciate. "I always write from the heart," states Bygdén. "I think it's the only way I can do it."

Malcolm Jack

Contact: John Cloud cloud@playgroundmusic.com Tel. +46703755090
www.playgroundmusic.com