



ALBUM REVIEW

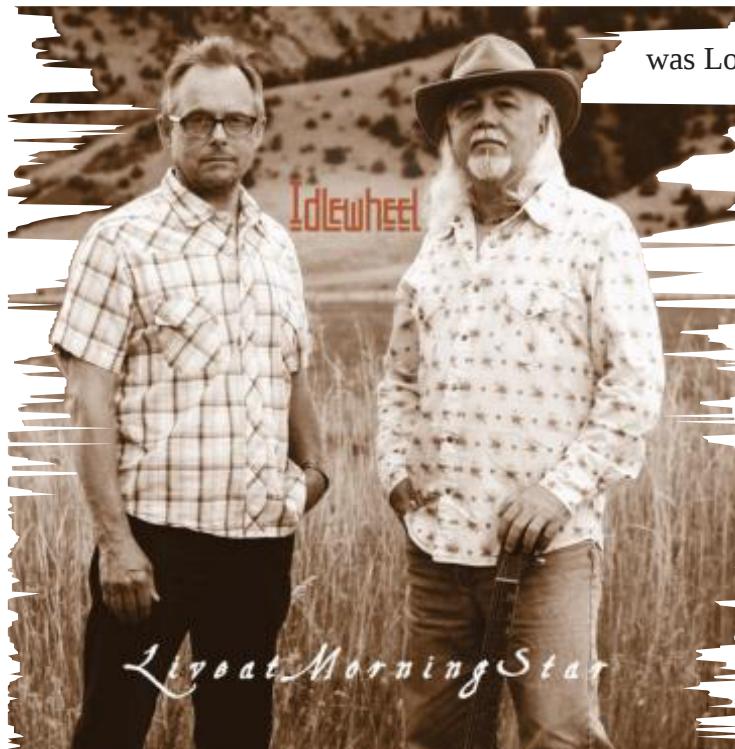
Live In Studio Teaming of Singer-Songwriter Craig Bickhardt & Poco Bassist Jack Sundrud



[Idlewheel - *Live at Morning Star*](#)

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Front Cvr CD Photo: Preston Tate White - CD Back Cvr & Inside
Background Photos: Craig Bickhardt

faith of Lowen and Navarro.

If you're looking for protest folk this may not been your forte. If you are looking for well-written songs, harmonies, wonderful musicianship and songs with drama that are reflective, biting and versatile – this

Several years ago, one of my favorite duos was Lowen and Navarro. Their "Cry," from their album "Pendulum," was a stunning track. With its chiming guitars, steady rolling drums and percussion, an infectious melody with stinging Everly Brothers' influenced vocals this duo was a breath of fresh air.

I miss them because tragically Eric Lowen passed away from complications of ALS at 60 in 2012 -- the duo was no more and for me it left an appreciation hole.

What I find here with Idlewheel – Jack Sundrud and Craig Bickhardt has the same potent musical blood running through their veins. They don't sound like Lowen and Navarro in an imitation sense, they sound like what Lowen and Navarro *may have been today* had they not been interrupted by fate. What is also surprising and intense is how clear this recording is.

Performed before a small live audience at MorningStar Studios in PA. The music, lyrics and showmanship of these two men is uplifting and penetrating and solidly in the

may be an ideal collection. Decades ago some other duos and bands had generous amounts of proficiency with this genre: Brewer and Shipley, Loggins and Messina, Seals and Crofts, Sea Train, Richard and Mimi Farina, the late 60's version of the Everly Brothers (check "*Lord of The Manor*," "*Milk Train*," and the incredible "*I Wonder If I Care as Much*."). This is what continues faithfully in the voices and musicianship of Idlewheel.

What makes this duo's effort



Jack Sundrud,

even more special is that it's not a spin-off of Craig Bickhardt's solo career – there are differences between those songs and the ones found on "**Live at Morning Star**." Craig has credits as co-writer for many songs recorded by The Judds, Steve Wariner and Kathy Mattea among others. But what Craig brings to the table here is a clear example of his musical diversity.

bassist/vocalist currently with Poco is also not sliding his Poco personality into these songs but he's contributing back porch tune-swapping with Craig in his own respectable manner as Jack Sundrud and the tunes have a gratifying sound and because in my ears they have that rich Lowen & Navarro approach to their performance I am thoroughly enjoying their new songs.

It's the most honest compliment I could pay Idlewheel – they don't "sound" like the other band but they do have that tradition rooted solidly and sincerely in the notes they play.

I must take it to another level by saying at times Idlewheel's polish doesn't get in the way of their ability to get grittier than Lowen and Navarro.

"*Noonday Sun*," track 9 on the album is a smoker. The vocals are a little more urgent, striking and the music is edgier. I'm liking this a lot. The song is catchy; the presentation -- brandy set afire on vanilla ice cream. The flavors as contrasting as they are -- work. The lyrics tell a true story about Jack's brief hard time in prison and it has that moonshine kick like a Townes Van Zandt or Steve Earle song with a little Buddy Miller tang. The guitar work is articulate and once it's hammered into your ear it's hard to not want to hear the song through. The arrangement is reminiscent of Lowen and Navarro in its energy with a slight Strawbs-type powerful tight snare over electrifying guitars. Strawbs being a progressive-folk rock band that has an incredible songbook. It's all attenuated beautifully. A right speaker lead guitar solo pours forth with territorial rights and it makes the song hard to ignore. If there were still jukeboxes in saloons this would be on repeat all night. Philly session drummer Teddy Geddes keeps the beat on a railroad spike – now that is originality because you can hear it.

On the other hand, the introductory song is a twangy, rollicking country-rock tune as described in their press release. And it is.

"*Twisted, Tied and Tangled*," is an original song about how a woman can get under your skin like a tattoo. I'll bet Trace Adkins or Toby Keith wished they'd thought of that for a song lyric. The song has bite, a cool melody and some excellent singing by both Craig and Jack. This could easily be a hit for Poco – it has that "*Crazy Eyes*" era in your face swing to it.

On an even more soulful level the duo unravels "*So Bad*," -- sung in a different key with the men's voices complimenting each other with the presence of sadness, strength and sincerity. The vocals are dramatic – but, not overly dramatic. It's all brilliantly balanced. The breezy arrangement, crystal clear guitars assist the imaginative arrangement and it's easy on the ears – yet, compelling. Sometimes simplicity works better than something that's more complicated. Idlewheel makes it all work here.

Again, doing what they do best together, Craig and Jack's vocals intertwine harmonically on "Pebble in My Shoe," and their guitars thread easily through a soft musical fabric. What's to be complimented here is the fine songwriting, the creative lyrics, music and arrangement. Country music today has some wonderful artists yet, the majority of their material is marginal at best. Stories that have been told countless times, subjects that have been sung about ad nauseum. But, Idlewheel manages to cut through this and think, and compose songs with fluidity, intense and embraceable subjects.

"Dust in This Town," walks the tightrope of subject matter that has been sung before. But, not quite. Their song chimes and unravels like a little short story. The guitars suggest driving, speeding along on the highway through a town somewhere *out there*. Somewhere we know. A hometown. Sometimes we leave a place but a part of us is still there and that's the ghost that whispers that we must return and when we do we see all the differences that occurred and it affects us. So, it's really not just a song about a town – but about what has happened to the town and what has then – happened to us.

A spare tune with just some solid drums, acoustic guitars is "These Bones." An enduring melody, "... *these bones know every mile.*" Even The Grateful Dead could appreciate such a wonderfully freewheelin' line. Jack sings with the angst of a Lyle Lovett and with some Willie Nelson vim and vinegar. The song is effective in many ways. The guitars are tasty.

Ty Herndon scored a #1 hit in 1998 with "It Must Be Love," -- a Bickhardt-Sundrud composition. This is one of those melodies that eventually becomes instantly recognizable when played on radio. At this point the duo joins other songwriters who have recorded great versions of their own songs and managed to have a major artist score a hit with their baby. Larry Weiss did it for Glen Campbell when he wrote "Rhinestone Cowboy," and singer-songwriter Ray Kennedy (not the current country singer) wrote "Sail On, Sailor," which was a major hit for The Beach Boys. There's nothing wrong with this practice – it pays the rent and buys the groceries.

As mentioned, this collection was recorded live with impeccable sound. Throughout the performance there was only three musicians: Craig Bickhardt on acoustic lead guitar and vocals; Jack Sundrud on acoustic guitar and vocals and Tommy "Thundersticks" Geddes on drums and railroad spike. The CD was produced and engineered by two-time Grammy-Award winner Glenn Barratt. The CD art is a nice laminated four-page die-cut fold out in sepia tones. Designed by the musicians themselves.



Closing out the eleven song collection are: the prophetic "We Were Only Young Once," – again, subject matter originality. The duo is singing about, reminiscing about their days as young, radical world-shakers who have grown up, aged and mellowed. And now find themselves in defence of their naiveté. Interesting, because time affects us in so many ways. Some subjects are no longer as important as they once seemed. Some things indeed never

change. A reality check. But having tried to change the world can't be all that bad – someday, maybe there will be success. Whether we see it or not, is not for us to judge.

Maybe some things will never change because they weren't meant to change. But this song – like so many other Idlewheel songs – focuses on a subject few singer-songwriters tackle. Maybe they don't know enough about the subject, or don't want to open old wounds. But this is a song that challenges the memory – and it's not such a bad thing to go back and review what attempts you made in an effort to make a difference. Even if after all that time, the only thing you can do is write a song about it.

"Thrive," closes out the collection with wonderful harmonies on an optimistic song. No flag waving, no anthem, no guilt trips – just an optimistic song and a good way to say farewell until next time. Let's hope there is a next time for the deserving Idlewheel that is Craig Bickhardt and Jack Sundrud.

Website: <http://www.idlewheel.com/>

Jack Sundrud Website:http://www.jacksundrud.com/idlewheel_pp.html

FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/idlewheel/>

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