



Idlewheel

A two-lane highway can unfold like a book of stories as the miles flash by. Idlewheel's music has the same sense of discovery to it – carried along by easy-flowing rhythms are flashes of personal revelation and homespun irony, speeding past you like an oddly familiar (or familiarly odd) small town.

Craig Bickhardt and Jack Sundrud do it all with a wry nonchalance that belies their uncommon craftsmanship. These guys know the high road of country-rock better than most. Their credits are solid and sterling. Bickhardt was a member of renowned Nashville group SKB that enjoyed country radio success with hits that included Bickhardt and Schuyler's "This Old House". He has also penned songs for Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Martina McBride, and B. B. King, and wrote and sang the closing theme for Robert Duvall's Academy Award winning film *TENDER MERCIES*. Sundrud cracked the charts with Great Plains (Sony Records) and now plays bass in the pioneering country- rock group Poco, whose 40-year roster reads like a who's-who in the genre. His songs have been recorded by Kenny Rogers, The Judds, The Persuasions and others. Together Craig and Jack wrote Ty Herndon's mega hit "It Must Be Love".

But really, Idlewheel isn't a spin-off of any of these projects. It's more the product of afternoons spent swapping stories and woodshedding songs, of testing each other's creative limits in defiance of Nashville's prevailing conservatism.

The creative sparks that flew between Craig and Jack during their writing sessions glow brightly on their debut self-titled CD. The two of them have a knack for unreeling vignettes and painting miniatures within a pop song structure, displaying a keen eye for the telling lyric detail. Tunes like "Sweet Sadness" and "When I Tell You I Love You" have the acute veracity of life lived, not imagined for radio consumption. Their collective viewpoint is tempered with a sharp edge – "Mona Lisa's Frown," for one, is surely one of the great put-down songs of our era. They combine intimacy and grandeur in "I'd Move Heaven and Earth." And with "Invisible Hope," they achieve a moral subtlety worthy of Sherwood Anderson or Raymond Carver.

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The incisive lyrics are framed by a stripped-down production approach, rendered with snap and bite. The duo's vocals have a rough-hewn, unvarnished quality, with Jack's emotive higher-end tenor and Craig's evocative lower-range vocals balancing nicely. The sound conjures up memories of the feisty, unfettered spirit of early Southern California country-rock, with a dash of the Everly Brothers thrown in.

The same spirit of camaraderie and songcraft that informed Idlewheel's debut album is very much in evidence on *The Old Roots*, a six-song acoustic EP that touches upon themes of family, change and hard-won wisdom. Craig and Jack trade acoustic guitar licks and match voices in harmony as they offer Celtic-tinged wedding toasts ("Step Between the Shadows"), deliver kiss-offs to bad relationships ("Pebble in My Shoe") and celebrate the joys of being fully alive ("Thrive"). The title track is an especially rich and vivid number, embracing the spirit of place with a hint of Van Morrison-style soul.

Idlewheel makes perfect music for a journey into the heartland. But you don't need to hit the road to let them take you places. Either disk of their celebratory and bittersweet songs is all that's required.

- Barry Alfonso

www.idlewheel.com



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Booking inquiries & Publicity: Larry Ahearn – (610) 574-6276 or
larrya@trespassmusic.org