

Mike Schikora: ridin' and singin'

By Jerry L. Wheeler

Move over, Kenny Chesney, and get outta the way, Toby Keith – there's a new cowboy crooner in the wings and his name is Mike Schikora. Vetted in Nashville as a staff writer on the Row, this local boy has the talent and the connections to go far in the industry. His debut CD, *What's Old is New Again* (reviewed in *OFC's* October 15 issue), is getting airplay from Texas to Australia, but he's not stopping with just one. I caught up with him between sessions for his next CD with legendary Nashville piano player Hargus "Pig" Robbins.

Jerry L. Wheeler: What was being a staff writer in Nashville like?

Mike Schikora: It was pretty cool. I landed in Nashville after I graduated college, doing an internship at RCA Records. I finished the internship and couldn't get arrested gettin' a job, so I decided I wanted to try writing to see if I could get in, and I read about Lyle Lovett going to ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), and they in turn took him to a publishing company, which led him to a deal, so I tried the same thing. I learned a lot about writing and the way songwriters worked then versus now – which is completely different in that town. Most of the artists write their own stuff now, and back then a lot of the artists didn't do their own material. So that piece of the industry has changed dramatically. But I still utilize my contacts to get my songs pitched today. Everything's for sale (laughs).

JLW: So what exactly did you learn while you were in Nashville?

MS: I learned the basics of how to put together a song, and they tried to promote specific formulas or rules, but the only rule I learned is that there are no rules. I write how I write. I think the true art of songwriting is saying what you want to say with hardly any words, and it's a continuous challenge with every song I write – that's probably what I took away from Nashville.

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Photo by: Kenneth Wajda

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JLW: What's your creative process like?

MS: Having been a staff writer in Nashville, your originality gets you in, but then you're handed sheets where people say, 'Look who's cutting this song and this song - so write a song like this. And meanwhile, keep it original.' That gets grueling after a while, and it really killed my creative process where I didn't write at all for nine years. I just had to get back to my roots. I happened to be moving back to Colorado, so I went back to the mountains and eventually decided to not try and force a song, not try and write every day. It works for some people, but it doesn't work for me. I flipped the logic and reasoning around to let it just hit me and be prepared. I've actually written more that way than I ever have in my life because it's without stress and pressure. Some songs take 10 minutes and some songs take 10 weeks or 10 months, but I let it come when it needs to come. At the end of the day, I have to do what makes me happy and what works for me. I'm doin' what I need to do.

JLW: When did you first realize song-writing was what you needed to do to make yourself happy?

MS: There never was a single moment, but when I was a little kid and someone would ask me what I was gonna be when I grew up, I'd answer, 'I'll be a famous singer with horses.' That's what I grew up believing and that's all I cared about. If I could end my days with music and horses, it's not about a successful journey, it's about success in accomplishing all I want to do in this life.

JLW: Would you rather be performing or riding horses?

MS: I want both (laughs). I want it all. I don't like the 'you-can't-have-it-all' attitude - that's bullshit. I think people who believe that set themselves up to fail. Why can't we have it all?

JLW: Is it difficult for you to be an out gay man in the business - especially in country music?

MS: No, but I'm not one to jump on a float and ride in the parade - that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with people who want to do that - but I really don't even think about it as being out and country. I just happen to be gay with a career in country music. I don't even know if my publicist knows. It wasn't anything I brought to the table. They just liked the music and feel that it's marketable, but they know I play the gay rodeos. Who cares who we sleep with? As long as we're happy.

JLW: Would you ever write a specifically "out" cowboy song?

MS: I could. To me, being gay is very personal. It's my lifestyle, and I have songs that reference 'he and she,' which is a true example of the time in my life when I was with a woman. I used to be married, so those songs represent a true and real time for me. Now, going forward, I'm definitely writing songs that reference being with another cowboy, so it just depends on what's called for. I'm not going to write

something for a specific purpose. I just let whatever comes to me, come to me and if it happens to be a song like that, then so be it.

JLW: You had a vocal trainer - what did he teach you as opposed to how you sing intuitively?

MS: The coach was based in opera and jazz - he was a short Italian professor who took me under his wing and really helped me develop and keep this high tenor of mine. It's like horses - you need to do the foundation work to be able to ride in any event. He helped me with my foundation work on how to keep my voice in good tone with good sound. He showed me certain exercises that work well for me, and I've continued to do those ever since college.

JLW: I was reading your bio to prep for the interview and there's a pretty standard list of country influences there - Lyle Lovett, the Judds - as well as Pink Floyd. What do you get from Floyd?

MS: (laughing) Actually, I like them as an opposite from, like, the Judds, but they have the same impact for me - the feel and tapestry of their artistry is different, but it has an effect on me. I can hear *The Wall* and feel totally in an environment - in another world - and that's the same way I feel about the Judds or a song by Billie Holiday. I'm a fan of that piece of it.

JLW: Who would you most like to work with?

MS: I would love to work with Dolly (Parton) or Alison (Krauss), but I'd love to do a session with Chris Isaak. I love his retro feel. If I went more rock/pop, I'd probably be chasin' after his coattails - or even Lyle Lovett. I love the way their music stands out. It's not your traditional, mainstream cookie-cutter music. I hope I can carve my own path in that respect, but those are some people I'd love to gather up - have a barbecue and a few beers (laughs).

JLW: I know you're working on a new album - is it still country, or are you moving in a more rock/pop direction?

MS: Well, *What's Old is New Again* is installment number one of a trilogy project for me. Installment number two is coming this spring and I've written the third record as well, and whatever I write from now until then, I'll put in if it works. But it's gonna be a little more of a swingier country sound with a hint of blues, but I'm still keeping my feet in country. It'll be small combo swing. I'm keeping the same instruments and the same guys on the record.

JLW: Is there anything else you'd like to say to Out Front Colorado readers about you or the record?

MS: Country is alive and well in the gay community. I don't know of a lot of other people doin' what I'm doin', being willing to take that step out in front of everybody, but I think I've got the balls to do it and so far it's working for me. I welcome all the attention I can get. ■

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