

## Tangled up in blues, playing from the heart

by Jackie Rybeck

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ALBANY - Brad Hooper may not have been born with a guitar in his hand and a harmonica in his mouth as Arlo Guthrie claims, but he sings of laughter and loss with all of his heart from the depth of his soul.

Hooper, long time member and lead vocalist for the Ball Brothers Band, has just released his first solo album.

"Midnight at the Hilltop Hotel" is comprised of songs, which have been played in kitchens and other places around the area for as long as 20 years.

Hooper's company, Squintwood Productions, recently released the CD which is full of songs that reference the small town, working man's stories in an edgy, often brutally honest venue.

Hooper explains the CD name's origin.

"The Hilltop Hotel was a place where we gathered to make music in Bryant Pond," says the singer songwriter. "We would party and jam sometimes for days! The Hilltop was really an attitude and a feeling more than a place. Those who were there will know what it was all about and those who listen to the lyrics and tales will understand better afterwards."

Reviews have compared Hooper's talking-blues style to artists such as John Prine, Arlo Guthrie, Steve Earl and Bob Dylan.

As a singer and songwriter, Hooper is quite humbled by being compared to such greats.

"John Prine is my hero. To be spoken of in the same sentence as John is a greater honor than you can imagine. I have traveled as far as Telluride, Colorado, to see John play," says Hooper. "If I can draw a single tear or make someone laugh out loud, like he does to me, then I have done my job."

"I started singing, probably by the age of six," says the artist. "I was raised on country - back when country was Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard and Kitty Wells. I would lie in bed and put my finger in the air like the stem of a record player. My brother, Jeff, would choose the 'next song' and I would sing it. I sang him to sleep many nights."

Hooper describes his singing as a gift, a gift which over which he has no control.

"Since I have no formal musical training I really can't tell you where the songs come from. I never sit down and say, I'm going to write a new song; it doesn't work that way. I like to think that somewhere, way up there, there was a meeting and the gods said, 'Let's make him suffer and

laugh and cry so he will be humbled and compassionate. Then we'll send him the songs."

"The songs really write themselves," he adds. "The people around me give me the lyrics. I just write them down, observe people and keep them until all the parts come together. When I was stumped on 'Laughter and Destruction,' my son wandered by, munching on something, and said - through a mouthful of food - 'lonesome and relying - try that dad.' Those three words finished the piece. See! Just gifts."

His album, "Midnight at the Hilltop Hotel" holds the tales of a "guitarman spilling his guts" and all you will hear is the sound of his guitar, harmonica and

voice, which, to Hooper, is the essence of the blues.

To Hooper, singing cover songs was only to give him the opportunity to bring people to his music, but a CD of his own music is a dream come true.

"I always wanted to record original music. I was tired of playing cover tunes and having all my lyrics and music floating around in my head," he explains. "Jimmy Green (Spoons) told me to let my heart free and the people who cared would nurture and take care of it; those that didn't would teach me to know the difference."

When people listen to Hooper's music they will hear

"It is a wonderful studio and Alan Bean (Doc) is awesome to work with." It was very comfortable."

"The next CD will have some of the 'basement tunes' we played while in the Ball Brothers Band," he says. "I will be recording the rough tracks as soon as I can afford it. There were four cuts that didn't make this album and at least two CDs worth of music still on the sheet or in my head. I have already contacted 'the boys' because the next CD will be plugged in for sure."

Hooper has started bookings performances after many years of occasionally hitting some open mics in the area.

"I am taking it slow at first, carefully picking and choosing where I accept offers to play. The late night gigs are so disruptive to family life. I played several Apres ski gigs late winter at the Shipyard up to Sunday River and I work as the 'Singing Ski Check Dude' at the Grand Summit Resort. I hope to have many performances this next winter season on the mountain."

"I will be performing entirely acoustic at the Frost Farm Gallery on Pikes Hill in Norway, on the first Friday of the month from June through October from 6 to 8 p.m. This is a very intimate and personal set of shows. I will be selling and signing CDs after the show for anyone who wishes.

The entire project is Maine-made including the custom CD cover, including it's design.

"I have been in printing all my life and I was looking for a quality solution to a plastic CD case. I wanted something that used less plastic, could be put together at home and would allow other local musicians to tap into a less expensive venue for getting their music out there." All of a sudden it came to him.

A die-cut idea came to me - another gift- on my way home from work one day," says the singer. "I pulled over immediately and chicken-scratched out a drawing. I purchased the die and went to work doing the layout and design myself. It is specifically designed to be digital-printer friendly allowing less overhead cost and I put each case together at home in the kitchen.

"My daughter, Angela, who is studying the arts at UMF took the photos (for the cover) in an impromptu session one night a few weeks ago right out to the farm."

"Midnight at the Hilltop Hotel" CDs are currently on sale at The Village Gift Barn on Main Street, Norway; The Lake Store, in Norway; The Good Food Store on Route 26, Bethel; Books and Things on Main Street, Norway; The Amine Bookstore on Rt. 26, Norway; Breaux's Too on Route 26, Bryant Pond and Bullmoose Music in Portland, Scarborough and Lewiston/Auburn.

If anyone wishes to buy or sell Hooper's new album, they can contact him by going to [www.squintwood.com](http://www.squintwood.com). All the contact information is on the website. He can also be reached by cell; 207-418-8125 or by writing to Brad Hooper, c/o Squintwood Productions, 103 Andrews Road, Albany, Maine, 04217.

In addition, Hooper's business card is included with all his CDs because he is looking for places to play and he says he is flexible with pricing to get his music heard.



**HILLTOP HOTEL** - Brad Hooper, of Albany, just released his first CD. His solo album, *Midnight at the Hilltop Hotel* is filled with lyrics based on area faces and places. (photo by Jackie Rybeck)

the truth from a soul that's just a deeper shade of blue.

"These songs are about 'my people'. It's workin' man's music and very rooted in the everyday. I hope to have brought to the table the things we all experience and understand. I have begun to compile some photos of the faces of 'my people' on the website so listeners will understand that these songs are truthful and about real people who have made a difference in my life.

"I will add some gig shots as things move ahead, but it is really about the people around me," he adds. "I don't know if they understand, but they say things and I listen. They turn into ideas that eventually become the music.

"In fact, the saying on my business card was given to me just a few weeks ago and I loved it. It is: 'Good times are spent with people whose sense of time is even more vague than your own.' I find total truth in this, because there were even a few times when I forgot to come home. (Love you, honey!)"

The recording of *Midnight at the Hilltop Hotel* was recorded at the Baked Beans Studio in Harrison.

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