

Weathering life's storms

New Orleans-born Austin musician Lee Barber reflects on hurricane, divorce on debut album

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When the storm hit in August 2005, songwriter Lee Barber couldn't predict the depths of his gloom. In a one-two punch to the gut, there was not just the devastation visited upon his birthplace by Hurricane Katrina. Just hours before the levees broke, Lee and Elaine Barber, his wife of 24 years, broke up.

It was at this intersection of storms literal and emotional that "Thief and Rescue," the 53-year-old Barber's debut solo record, was born. It's a brooding album that questions the validity of music during troubled times, then comes to the conclusion that even when a good song is all you have, it can be enough.

"Let's get lost in a song about nothing, sung by no one," Barber intones in a dark and warm voice on the album's final track. The last five minutes of the song are taken over by an improvised instrumental workout, with Craig Ross' curt guitar slithering between drummer Jon Greene's floor tom accents, wonderfully summarizing the communication between musicians on this seemingly charmed project. Matt Sever struggled to hit the crescendo on trumpet, but producer Brian Beattie left it in because it sounded like laughter.

"We didn't know how it was going to end," Barber said of "Let's Get Lost," which was nailed on one take. "We went into the control room and listened and Brian said, 'Does everybody feel like they've expressed themselves?' And we all grinned."

"Thief and Rescue," whose name is from a Barber painting used on the cover, comes out on Monday, not Tuesday as is the norm, because Labor Day seems right for an album bartered for with odd jobs and artwork. The musicians, including guest vocalist Will Sheff of Okkervil River, were paid in oil paintings by Barber.

This labor of love sprung from chance reciprocation. Barber had the songs but not the means to record them. Beattie had a brand-new home studio, dubbed the Wonder Chamber, but he wanted to give it a test run without anyone checking their watches and hearing cash register sounds. A deal was made where little money changed hands. In former Glass Eye bassist Beattie, Barber got not only a producer, arranger and studio time, but a multi-instrumentalist who played toy piano through Leslie organ speakers.

"I wanted the first project to be one where I concentrated on the sound and didn't have to get into the nuts and bolts of the songs," said Beattie, who had produced a 1999 album Lee and Elaine Barber made as the Barbers. "Lee had these fully formed little gems."

"I think every one of us was at the top of our game," said Barber, who works as a draftsman by day. The album was recorded in six days, mostly live, with horn parts layered on later.

The soft-spoken Barber found a polar soul mate in Beattie, who's also produced Okkervil River, Bill Callahan and Shearwater. "I'm cautious by nature and Brian's just got this boundless energy to try different things," said Barber, whose songs crawl out of a dark, Southern gothic place. "I think it worked: opposites attract."

Unlike the records Barber made with the Barbers, which had one member in his 20s, one in her 30s, one in his 40s and one in his 50s, "Thief and Rescue" is a spiritually cohesive effort, sequenced in what Barber calls "an arc of longing." The record opens with "The Mosquito," adapted from the poem "Lullabye" by Peter Everwine, which Barber cut out of New Yorker magazine about eight years ago and kept on he and Elaine's dresser. "I wanted to start at the middle of the arc," Barber said.

The album hits its emotional low points on "The Monkey and the Ass," which Barber said is the song that best describes the breakup, and "1000 Miles," a reaction to the devastation of Katrina. "Everyone has to deal with loss and change of this sort, and the older you get, the more familiar you become with it," he said. "For me, and a lot of us, music makes it easier to negotiate."

Elaine Barber gets in on this musical therapy, playing harp on the album's "Way Back (Shoo-Be-Doo)," a song that traces more innocent times. The couple has two grown children, Hedda, 24, and Wells, 18.

Lee Barber does not write songs quickly or easily. He said his goal as a writer is to compose songs that have staying power, like the hymns he grew up singing in the Baptist church, where his father was a preacher and his mother the organist. He was born in New Orleans in 1956, while his father was going to seminary school, but Barber grew up in Baton Rouge, La.

As a kid, his older sister turned him on to Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and others, opening up a whole new world. When Lee got his first guitar at age 16, he picked up fingerpicking patterns from a Leonard Cohen songbook. He fronted a soul band called the Hounds when in college in Mississippi, where he met Elaine, a classically trained musician. They formed an improvisational band, inspired by Captain Beefheart, Sun Ra and other sonic adventurers. But, Barber said, "I've always returned to 'the song,' to my original inspirations from those records that my sister brought home."

When Elaine got a gig playing harp with the Austin Symphony in 1992, the Barber family moved to town. They also relocated because they heard Austin was a place to grow a band, and the Barbers had gone as far as they could in Mississippi. But after releasing two critically praised and publicly ignored albums in the '90s, the Barbers hung it up and Lee turned his free time energies to painting.

But then when his world turned upside down, he reached back for his guitar. When he ran into Beattie at Zen on South Congress Avenue about two years ago, the two talked about the new songs Barber had been writing. A solo acoustic demo was delivered to Beattie's Travis Heights home a few days later. The timing couldn't have been better for Barber, who thought he'd given up music, but now has his name on one of the best Austin albums of 2009.

"Putting out a record is like giving birth," Barber said, cautiously optimistic about the upcoming release date. "I feel like I've gone into labor." Another reason Monday's the perfect release date.