

# Mr. Newman's Music

*One Composer to Another*

The American composer, taught to absorb all influences that surround and appeal, hopefully learns to create work that in one way or another can answer the simple question, "What does your music sound like?" This level of distinctiveness is perhaps more often honored than achieved, still the most unique and interesting American composers do sound like themselves – unquestionably American and, if you will, secure in their rugged individualism. Think of Foster, Ellington, Copland, Gershwin, Joplin, even Guthrie, and others who are perhaps more reflective of that American tradition of restless and maverick invention, like Ives, Cowell, Cage, Nancarrow, Mingus, Zappa.

Randy Newman is a composer's composer – musicians love to play his music, and his music does indeed sound unmistakably like Randy Newman. How? One trick, perhaps, is that you never catch him looking down or laughing at any of his musical notions; they all sound full blooded and honest. In the early "Davy the Fat Boy" he moves from an almost operatic opening with well written classical harmonies and a vivid use of dissonance, to a simple Fats Domino rock and roll lick, then on to the almost polytonal accompaniment to the vocal line that introduces a simple, elegant rag-like dance that circles around Satie – all written years before anybody called anybody post-modern. Randy effortlessly moves from

one section to the next and the seams don't show. And though the song has Randy's trademark wit, not one musical gesture seems thin or dishonest, as if he were somehow guying or musically kidding us. Other examples abound of course. In the more recent "Real Emotional Girl" Randy combines chorale-like voice leading with an effortless use of his own pop harmony and phrasing to create a musically sharp but exquisite portrait of a strange love affair. Indeed, it is perhaps the song's classical structure that creates the tension that makes it so deceptively moving.

As a songwriter, I would enjoy placing Randy's catalogue on the same shelf as Ives and Foster in its celebration of our country's musical personali-

ty: on the one hand a thorough enjoyment of the freedom of freewheeling dissonance, on the other a genuine appreciation and love of the traditionally fabulous C major triad, especially when you've earned it. However, mind you, composing isn't a horse race – it is ludicrous to imply that Randy could ever beat or even tie Ives at his game, or that he or any other composer would want to (well, maybe late at night sometimes, but come the morning...). He is one of our best though, each note is an honest one, and that is quite something.

– Michael Roth



CHRISTOPHER GROSS