The lonesome road

Like many former major-label artists, musician Peter Case travels quietly below the radar

By Geoff Edgers, Globe Staff, 10/25/2002

TUCSON - Night falls as the troubadour arrives. "I'm Peter," he says, walking into the club with his guitar. "I'm playing here tonight."

Peter Case has recorded nine albums, been praised by The New York Times, and signed by music mogul David Geffen. But he's never played Plush, a lounge-themed club on a dusty corner of this sleepy town. And he's not sure what to expect. The manager offers Case a drink. (Black coffee, please.) He pulls out a write-up from the local newspaper. Case doesn't peek; he's made a pledge not to read his own press.

Which is convenient, because so little has been written about him in recent years. Case exists below the radar of commercial radio, in a space where pop, folk, and country blues meet. To follow him, you would have to read hip magazines like No Depression or be one of the loyalists who show up at club gigs hoping Case will sign your 20-year-old albums. Or, you might be a music critic.

"He can play folk music, he can play blues, he can rock out," says Chris Morris, a senior writer at Billboard magazine and longtime Case follower. "All of these things make it more difficult to say who he is. He's Peter Case. He's an artist unto himself."

He is a throwback, for sure, a man with a record deal who still sells his CDs out of a suitcase. He loves and hates the road, but it is his home 150 days a year. It is how he makes his living, increases his audience, and gets to travel from his home turf of Southern California to Dublin, London, and Paris. Tomorrow night, Case will play Arlington's Regent Theatre. The show is sold out, thanks to the local favorite Case is opening for, Chris Smither.

On a small table next to his microphone, Case places a glass guitar slide and 10 harmonicas. He scribbles another entry onto the list of songs taped to the top of his guitar. As showtime approaches, Case nurses a diet Coke at the bar and counts heads. Twenty-five people, 30 tops. In the early '90s, his major label ego would have had a hard time working a room this empty. Now, he just plays.

"We're recording a live album tonight," he tells those assembled after taking the stage. "It's called, 'Peter Case, 15 fans can't be wrong.'"

He wears his standard stage garb, a sport coat over an untucked, checkered shirt and black jeans. Bottleneck glasses and a floppy hat over his light brown hair complete the look.

Case sways with the music. He plays soft, melodic ballads and grinding, roadhouse blues. At one point, he pulls the plug from his guitar and steps into the audience to sing.

By now, the crowd has doubled. The tables in front are taken, chairs moved into the back to accommodate the minglers from the adjoining bar who have been drawn into the room. A young college student in a tank top screams her requests. A man in his 40s who has never heard Case before leans over to tell his wife he's reminded of Elvis Costello. When the show ends, the man approaches the stage.

"We'd like to get you back to Tucson," he says. "There are bigger venues."
"It doesn't have to be bigger," says Case. "It just has to be more crowded."

One at a time

This is how the troubadour works. One conversion at a time.

He is both world weary and always ready for another ride. Town by town, he puts his guitar into the trunk, throws on a Leroy Carr CD and hits the road. He has songs for every emotion and discs to sell. No show is too small.

Back in the '80s, Case had other ways of reaching his audience. His band, the Plimsouls, was signed by Geffen and toured with Tom Petty. They even played the big screen, performing four songs on camera in the 1983 Nicholas Cage vehicle, "Valley Girl."

That was then. In 1993, Geffen dropped Case after three solo albums. He had to start over. At a festival, he ran into a staffer at Vanguard Records, known for putting out albums in the 1960s by Joan Baez, Skip James, and Mississippi John Hurt. Case told the woman he didn't even know Vanguard still existed. Then he signed.

Every few years, Case releases new work. Last month, Vanguard put out "Beeline," his fifth album on the label. He is not a big seller; his SoundScan figures never reach 10,000. Still, Vanguard President Kevin Welk, Lawrence's grandson, says he has an informal, lifetime contract with Case: You write 'em, I'll put 'em out.

The road almost sounds romantic. It can sometimes be an escape, particularly during a personal crisis. (Case was married to singer Victoria Williams; he's now in the midst of a divorce from his second wife.) On the most basic level, though, the road is a necessity.

"I don't have life insurance, I don't have health insurance, I don't have a savings account," says Case. "I'm 48 years old, paying rent, trying to take care of my kids. I have to keep working."

He left home at 15, a child of the '60s raised on the electric rumble of Link Wray, the Beats, and Bob Dylan. He dropped acid, started a band called Pig Nation and joined a commune. He melted down, dropping to his knees, in tears, to beg his parents for help. They had no idea what to do. He and his father, a high school teacher, began to have fistfights.

"I was a certain kind of person who was being made into another kind of person," Case says. "Basically the message was that you can be anything you want to be except a musician."

After quitting school midway through 10th grade, Case earned his General Educational Development degree and tried a semester at the University of Buffalo. In the winter of 1973, he quit school for good, hopping a Greyhound bus on his way to San Francisco. There, busking and living on the streets, he learned to play.

Case's life as a musician - at least according to every music guide - began in 1975, when a local player, Jack Lee, asked him to join his band, the Nerves. They toured with the Ramones and Devo and recorded several songs, including "Hanging on the Telephone." Blondie's cover version made the Top 10. Case left the Nerves in 1977 and formed the Plimsouls, a band that had one hit, "A Million Miles Away," and earned a place alongside the dB's, Soft Boys, and Mission of Burma: critical faves, gods of the club scene, and commercial flops.

A year after "Valley Girl," Case broke up the band and hung up his skinny tie for good.

He wore baggy suits and a fedora and began to play a new kind of acoustic rock. This was before
Tracy Chapman, and before MTV went ‘‘Unplugged.’’ His self-titled solo debut, on Geffen Records, came out in 1986, drawing praise from the late Robert Palmer, the country’s premier music writer. In The New York Times, Palmer described it as ‘‘the sort of album that’s going to be remembered, and treasured, for years to come.’’ Case’s mother saved the piece. It became the first entry in her scrapbook.

Case does an impression of Geffen. It is used to illustrate, though a series of anecdotes, the absurdity of the music business. This was the mid-’80s, when Whitney Houston and Mr. Mister ruled the charts. Naturally, Geffen’s staff wanted a more commercial-sounding production. They didn’t appreciate Case’s debut and its follow-up, 1989’s ‘‘The Man With the Blue Post Modern Fragmented Neo-Traditionalist Guitar.’’ There were no synthesizers and the songs told stories of homeless people, small-town sprees, and a man trapped in a mine.

More bemused than angry with Geffen, Case slips into the raspy, superslick tones of showbiz talk. When there were no ads for his first album, Case went to the boss. ‘‘Peter,’’ he remembers Geffen saying, ‘‘advertising doesn’t sell records.’’ When there was no single for ‘‘Blue Guitar,’’ Geffen called up a staffer with Case in his office to order one up. ‘‘For once in your life, Peter, take yes for an answer,’’ Geffen repeated.

The single never came out. Soon, Case couldn’t get anyone at Geffen to return his calls.

‘‘That’s when I realized, man, I’m just doing this on my own,’’ he said. ‘‘I’m a solo artist.’’

On his own

On the road, Case is his own manager, booker, and promoter.

His agent calls to let him know somebody is interested in covering ‘‘Coulda, Shoulda, Woulda’’ from 2000’s ‘‘Flying Saucer Blues.’’ (His songs have been covered by the Goo Goo Dolls, Marshall Crenshaw, and John Prine.) There are a few open dates later in the year when he might want to play in Washington. Finally, can he squeeze in a second radio appearance on Saturday? Case’s schedule already calls for a flight into Oakland that morning, an afternoon slot at a festival, and a drive to Berkeley for an evening club show.

As the Arizona desert slides by - the ride from Tucson to Scottsdale takes two hours - Case admits he does get frustrated. He talks about a couple of other acclaimed singer-songwriters, particularly Paul Westerberg.

‘‘Westerberg’s a great songwriter and great figure but he just hasn’t been doing his greatest work,’’ Case says. ‘‘There’s no reason in the world he hasn’t. Tom Waits. He’s starting to repeat himself, too. Maybe it’s the problem of success.’’

Case pauses.

‘‘I have every problem but I don’t have the problem of too much success.’’

Intimate gathering

He’s got a sinking feeling about Scottsdale. He’s never done well in Arizona, not even with the Plimsouls. And none of the local papers have plugged the show at the Kerr Cultural Center. Sure enough, when Case takes to the stage, the room is almost empty, just 35 people in a 275-seat hall.

He soldiers on and, between sets, sits at a table to sign CDs. One guy approaches to get him to sign a vinyl copy of Case’s 1986 album. Another offers an inscribed book of fiction by Breece D’J Pancake, a writer who killed himself in 1979. These fans tell Case how much they enjoy his music.
He says ’’cool,’’ but seems more interested in discussing how to get the word out for when he returns to Arizona.

The second set is a struggle. His voice competes with a cricket chirping in the hall. Case has trouble staying focused. And then there’s the awkward end. After finishing his encore, he tries to leave through the stage door in back but can’t work the handle. He throws up his hands in frustration and heads over the CD table as the lights go up.

A small crowd approaches. One guy introduces his wife, Audrey. Another asks Case to pose for a disposable camera. He does, grimacing.

He’s disappointed. He gives away the short story collection, figuring a book by a suicidal author isn’t the kind of karma he needs. He has a 5 a.m. wake-up call, a flight, a drive, and two more shows. Peter Case barely has time to complain.

Geoff Edgers can be reached at gedgers@globe.com

This story ran on page D1 of the Boston Globe on 10/25/2002.
© Copyright 2002 Globe Newspaper Company.