

THE HISTORICAL CONQUESTS OF JOSH RITTER BIO & PRESS RELEASE -

"How refreshing and inspiring it is to encounter a young artist whose achievements match his ambitions."—Washington Post

Over the clatter of piano and strum of an electric guitar that opens his fourth studio album, Josh Ritter leaps into rapid-fire lyrics that reference Joan of Arc, Calamity Jane and Florence Nightingale, all of whom seem to be stuck together in the belly of a whale. As the follow-up to last year's critically-acclaimed album *The Animal Years*, *The Historical Conquests of Josh Ritter* is his most adventurous, fresh, and freewheeling work to date.

Ritter is clearly having fun—and you will, too—but there is a method to his madness. Those legendary heroines he name-checks were each responding to an inner voice that pushed them toward some extraordinary mission, one both noble and a little foolhardy. “Those voices can be pretty confusing,” he says, “but there is no doubt that if you follow your two a.m. voices you’ll end up someplace fairly extraordinary.”

And Ritter did follow those late night voices. While *The Animal Years* was a meticulously crafted and stately paean, for *Conquests* the artist radically revamped his working methods and his sound. “I needed to be somebody different,” the singer says. “The air of gravitas around me was getting oppressive. For some reason it seemed like there was a premium being placed on earnestness and that can be pretty stifling. There was a lot of talk about true love and righteous indignation. I wanted to write about gunslingers and missile silos.”

But it didn't start like that. “I was tired of writing with the guitar,” says Ritter, who began writing *The Historical Conquests* by committing to tape wordless tunes and melodic fragments, certain that the lyrics and thematic ideas, whatever shape they might take, would soon follow. Setting aside the guitar, he began writing on an upright piano some family friends had given him—an instrument, he admits, he didn't actually know how to play.

The result is an often raucous, occasionally dizzying affair, with pounding keyboards, strings, horns, and his new producer and long-time collaborator Sam Kassirer, leading the charge. About the recording conditions in the Maine farmhouse where the record was made, Ritter enthuses, “You should have seen it up there. It was January and twenty below. We had horns in the attic, we had strings in the barn, we had a gaggle of people shooting targets with bb guns in the woods. It was a full house and everyone was there to throw themselves at the music. There was no holding back.”

As he says in the drum and Steinway-driven “Rumors,”

My orchestra is gigantic.
This thing could sink the Titanic
And the string section’s screaming
Like horses in a barn burning up.

Giving the project a literal go-for-broke feel was the fact that his then-label, V2 America, had just fired the entire staff. “They went under the night we performed on Letterman!” laughs the songwriter. “It seemed me and my band were pretty much storming the heights of irony that day.” The situation emboldened the self-reliant artist; after all, Ritter had launched his career DIY-fashion with his self-titled 1999 debut and released its 2001 follow-up, *The Golden Age of Radio*, on his own, before finally signing with an indie label. When he rushed back into the studio in early ’07, after another year of worldwide touring, it was on his own timetable. “One thing I’ve realized is that at the end of the day, you’re on your own. There isn’t a song, a record or a record label that can teach you how to swim or how to keep your head above water,” Ritter says. “You have to be the one getting out of the boat and taking your chances every day. In what you write and in how you play. If not...”

The artistic leaps Josh Ritter displays on *Conquests* are not without their stepping-stones, however. On a conceptual level, Paul McCartney’s *Ram* served as an ever-present reminder to enjoy the process of writing. Ritter was attracted to the free-spirited quality of the solo album McCartney made at his own farmhouse—amidst the Beatles’ tumultuous breakup: “It sounded like he had something to prove, but also like he didn’t really care. In terms of my favorite records, *Ram* is more about the philosophy. If this guy can do this after what he came through, then, okay, maybe I could try something like this too. It really loosened me up.”

Stepping farther back, he sites Buddy Holly’s apocryphal *The Apartment Tapes* as a major influence. “A friend passed me Buddy Holly’s Apartment Tapes. The tapes are plain and genius. Buddy sang ‘Learning the Game’ and ‘That’s What they Say’ in his apartment in New York City and you can hear his wife bumping around in the kitchen and the whole thing feels clear but not simple. Those recordings feel like a Raymond Carver story. I listen to him and remember that it doesn’t have to be all nine-minute songs. That guy can get more across in a couplet than some people are lucky to learn in their whole life.”

With a new approach, a new producer and a new location, Ritter got underway in earnest. “I shaped the songs and recorded a basic shell with Sam and then asked my bassist Zack Hickman and my new drummer Liam Hurley to come on up.” Skeleton tracks in hand, Ritter collaborated further with his band mates and a group of assorted musician friends he dubbed The Great North Sound Society Orchestra, who were clearly up for trying anything.

The results speak for themselves. The upbeat, vintage “Right Moves,” the Liberty Valance standoff “Mind’s Eye,” the pre-(and possibly post-) apocalyptic love song “The Temptation of Adam” and the Robert Altman era “Next to the Last” combine to hold a kind of punk-meets-Peckinpah fiesta.

Says Ritter in summary, “On my last disc, *The Animal Years*, I went pretty deep inside the gears of what I do. I knew where the words fit and how the songs dovetailed with each other.” He adds, however, “If I hadn’t approached the writing that record on such a clockmaker’s level, I may not have decided to step back and try shooting the clock to pieces on *Historical Conquests*. I’m glad we did though,” he adds. “I wanted to blow something up.”

Given the new lyrical and musical trails that he is blazing, *The Historical Conquests of Josh Ritter* proves that one can still cross any number of Rubicons all the while not taking themselves too seriously. Historic indeed.

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