

New Release Highlight

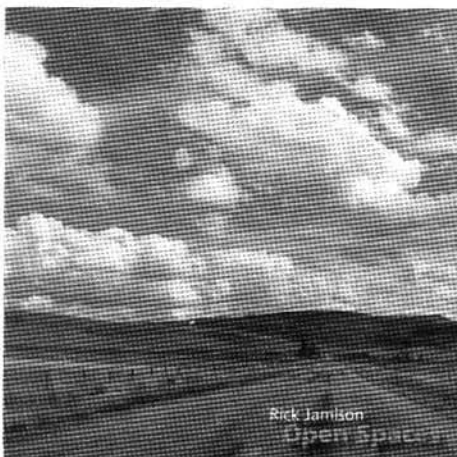
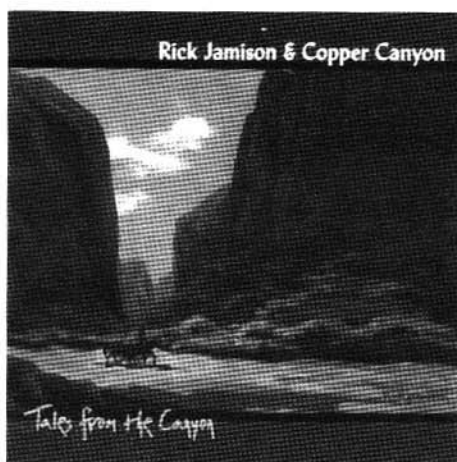
Rick Jamison: *Open Spaces & Tales from the Canyon*

by Chris Thiessen

Although he bills himself primarily as an instrumentalist, Rick Jamison's recent CDs conclusively demonstrate his skills as a songwriter and ensemble guitarist. Curiously, both CDs came out of an oil painting expedition Rick made to Jackson, Wyoming a few years back. "I was focusing on painting, so for this trip I brought my brushes and paints and left the guitar at home," he relates. "My host was very disappointed that I arrived without a guitar, and he called all over Jackson to try to borrow one, without success. But when we got to Big Sandy, our eventual destination, someone there had a guitar they let me play and for the next ten evenings I picked for a lodge-full of artists. I played everything I could think of: flatpick tunes from long ago, original songs I had never before played in public, and even a few tunes I made up as I went along."

At the end of the trip, Rick's host asked whether he had ever considered recording a solo CD. "It was something I had dreamed about," Rick says, but had never done. But that encouragement "got the wheels turning. I pulled together nine of my original compositions, added three of my all-time favorite public-domain tunes, and invited several of my best musical friends to get involved." By 2003, Rick had completed and released *Open Spaces*. But that was only the start. "The experience of producing *Open Spaces* was so positive for everyone involved that it led to the formation of Rick Jamison & Copper Canyon" and the 2004 release of an all-original CD, *Tales From the Canyon*.

As a writer/editor for a corporate intranet, Rick balances his time between working in the bustle of Silicon Valley and living in the rural mountains of western California. His considerable time on the road provides the guitarist-painter-writer Jamison with plenty of time to appreciate all aspects of his life. "Folks thought I was crazy to want to move out to such a rural place," Rick recalls. But those contrasts are inspiration for the tunesmith's spirit. "The song 'Higher Ground' [on *Open Spaces*] rose out of two phrases that just came into my mind: 'no diamond lanes around' and 'gonna pack my bags and look for higher ground.' I've been inspired to write songs based on a meaning-



ful story, a cool chord progression, a strong melody line, a catchy chorus, free-form experimentation, and even combinations of all the above. I've learned to keep my guitar—and paper and pencil—handy."

Regardless of the source of inspiration, Jamison measures his original tunes against what he calls the "memorability test": "can you hum or whistle the melody after you first hear it? That test has led me to conclude that simpler is often better." "Copper Moon" [on *Open Spaces*] celebrates a moonrise observed from the doorway of his Airstream trailer, which was parked in Copperopolis during a weekend pickin' party. Similarly, "Morning in Marin" and "Hilltop Rambler" are deceptively simple tunes, which linger in a listener's short-term memory long after the final note concludes. But Jamison's memorability test applies equally to his guitar lines. "As both a listener and performer, I'm more interested in

a memorable melody line than a solo that is too fussy or notey. I strive for a clean, articulate style that I can deliver with confidence and good volume." That approach is immediately evident in both of the instrumental traditional tunes on *Open Spaces*, "Cattle in the Cane" and "Old Joe Clark" (which we've included on this month's audio CD). "I wanted to keep the powerful melody line of this tune front and center while adding enough nuance and interest to make my version unique," Rick explains. "I tend to think a lot about continuity, variety, dynamics, and the space between the notes as well as the notes themselves. But most of all I think about delivery and execution."

Jamison's conscious artistry comes out of a wide variety of musical influences as well as sheer fingerboard time. After the usual dalliance with rock music as a teenager, he discovered jazz in high school, and while at college began exploring solo guitar. "I wasn't gifted as a natural-born singer," Rick confesses, "so I put all my energy into expressing myself as an instrumentalist. I began critically listening to and trying to interpret what I heard, eventually arriving at a flatpicking style that people seemed to like. Of course, on the way I wore out LPs from Doc Watson, Norman Blake, and Leo Kottke. But rather than learning note-for-note, I found it easier to learn by phrases. I believe that forced me to find my own interpretations of what I was hearing. In 1981 I won second place in the West Coast Flatpicking competition in Norco, California. On a whim, I entered the contest just a few hours before the performance. Standing on stage in front of a large audience hooked me on flatpicking even more."

Although Rick continued flatpicking and joined several bluegrass bands in the following years, music had to share time with marriage, a day job in the publishing industry, and a love for oil painting. "The guitar was always by my side, but these other interests eventually eclipsed music." Until, of course, the oil painting trip to Jackson, Wyoming and a ten-day stay in a cabin without electricity.

The team Rick assembled to record *Open Spaces* included Phil Cornish on mandolin,

Pat Ickes on banjo, Elida Ickes on bass, Rob Ickes on Dobro, and Megan Lynch on fiddle. Three members of that team—Phil Cornish, Pat Ickes, and Megan Lynch—subsequently formed the core of Rick Jamison & Copper Canyon. Jerry Logan picked up bass duties, and Phil Cornish assumed the role of lead singer. (Incidentally, Rick's brusque solo baritone has a Gordon Lightfoot-esque quality, which complements ballads and story songs like "Where Peaceful Waters Flow," a musical interpretation of the story *A Perfect Storm*).

Shifting from the guitar-up-front format of *Open Spaces* to the more traditional bluegrass *Tales from the Canyon* provides further evidence of the quality of Rick's flat-picking style. "When I'm playing rhythm behind a vocalist or another soloist, what can I do with the guitar to support them and

bring out their best?" Rick asks. "How can I add layers and fills and interesting chord changes without dominating the overall sound?" In the context of the ensemble where balance is critical, Rick's rhythm work subtly surfaces and submerges behind the other solos. "Somethin' He Done," the first cut on *Tales from the Canyon*, sets the tone: his 30-second solo elegantly restates the melodic line without being either fussy or too notey. That's immediately followed by another Jamison original, "Two Hearts Broken," for which Rick provides a perfectly paced opening. "Snowfall on Cedar" a Jamison-Cornish collaboration, recreates a playful puppy's first snowfall as a three-part instrumental.

Throughout the remaining nine all-original cuts on this CD, Jamison and the rest of Copper Canyon dispense high-qual-

ity original bluegrass, with Rick's solid rhythm and tastefully phrased solos much in evidence. Unfortunately for the East Coast, Rick Jamison & Copper Canyon seem currently locked into performances solely on the West Coast; their website lists no East Coast appearances or tours. Fortunately, however, Rick is already writing new songs for yet another CD project. If *Open Spaces* and *Tales from the Canyon* are any indicators, we flatpickers can look forward to more examples of Rick Jamison's excellent guitar work in the future.

For this article, we've tabbed out Rick's arrangement of "Old Joe Clark" from his *Open Spaces* CD. For more information on Rick Jamison or Copper Canyon, go to www.rjamison.com or www.coppercanyonbluegrass.com.