

DREW NELSON REVS UP TO RELEASE *TILT-A-WHIRL*

| by John Sinkevics

PHOTO: RODNEY BURSIEL

SURROUNDED BY SAWS, DRILLS, wood-benders and other tools of the guitar-making trade in his basement, Drew Nelson held the mahogany panel next to his ear and tapped it with his fingers.

"It really rings," he marveled. "It has a character and a sound to it."

That handsome slice of wood soon will become the top of another Nelson-made acoustic guitar, forming the vital soundboard that distinguishes each instrument, giving it a distinctive resonance.

Perhaps it's only apropos that the veteran Grand Rapids singer-songwriter has turned some of his musical passion toward making guitars the past four years: He's long been a lyrical soundboard for Michigan's rough-hewn common folk and its inspiring natural beauty.

Now, he'll share that poetic vision on a bigger stage.

Signed last year to a three-record deal with Minnesota's Red House Records, Nelson officially releases his fourth full-length album Feb. 14, with a pre-release show in Grand Rapids Feb. 3.

Unlike his earlier albums, Nelson's new release falls under the auspices of a national label with a reputation for fostering some of the country's best Americana artists: Greg Brown, Eliza Gilkyson, Loudon Wainwright III, John Gorka, Danny Schmidt, Lucy Kaplansky.

It's the sort of credibility and backing sure to spark broader radio airplay and ramped-up touring across the United States and overseas. (Of Irish and Scottish descent, Nelson already has cultivated a following in Ireland where he's performed previously; he'll tour the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands this fall.)

Alerted to Nelson's music after 2009's independently released *Dusty Road to Beulah Land*, which won a host of local awards, Red House executives snapped up the new album, *Tilt-A-Whirl*, that Nelson recorded last winter at Grand Rapids' Mackinaw Harvest studios

"This will be the record to open some doors," Nelson said, buoyed by the notion that a widely respected label had "taken the time to sift through X amount of people" and put him in their stable of artists. "The goal is to tour for the next 12 to 15 years."

DREW NELSON *TILT-A-WHIRL* CD RELEASE

Ladies Literary Club,
Grand Rapids
Feb. 3, 8 p.m.
\$15 advance, \$17 day
of show
calvin.edu/boxoffice,
(616) 526-6282

Tilt-A-Whirl also marks a shift in sound, with instruments such as a Hammond B3 organ, by an artist who isn't content to stand still in the singer-songwriter genre.

"I got real comfortable with rocking out a bit more," Nelson said of the album recorded mostly live with Grand Rapids producer Michael Crittenden. "I think the writing's better, more concise."

The "gritty" album – mastered in Colorado by the Grammy Award-winning David Glasser – still tells the stories Nelson has told so well

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—Drew Nelson, on his new album

for years: poignant love ballads, rustic tales of the downtrodden.

A few rock-edged tracks boast blistering electric guitar work by Crittenden and Brett Lucas (guitarist for Detroit soul singer Bettye Lavette). Nelson also called on veteran Michigan musicians Mark Schrock, Drew Howard, Brian Morrill and Jen Sygit to back him on the project. They holed up for more than week in the studio amid a snowstorm, Crittenden recalled, "with the fireplace running full tilt, candles burning, lights down low and a great group of musicians who all understood our vision so well."

Crittenden, among the first to encourage Nelson to pursue and record his music more than a decade ago, sounds like a proud father these days.

"It has been rewarding to see Drew grow into a songwriter who can get deep inside the experiences of the wealth of characters he sings

about," he said. "He has become a master of singing from their perspective."

That perspective has roots in a humble upbringing near Kent City, where Nelson learned to appreciate the hard work put in by his electrician father, local foundry workers and farming neighbors, where he found joy sitting on the porch listening to folks churn out songs.

His life experiences since have grounded his music even more: a stint in the U.S. Navy, working construction and odd jobs, embracing traditions of the Native American community thanks to Two Dogs, a friend he's known since age 3.

"I get a lot of strength from them and so much love. It really resonates with me," said Nelson, who lives in Northeast Grand Rapids with his wife, Nicole.

It's all made the budding luthier with long, dark locks a colorful and outspoken artist, Schrock said.

"Honest, a little gritty, a little sentimental, a little populist," Schrock said. "Suffice it to say, Drew Nelson is the real deal."

Nelson also is eager to finally unleash *Tilt-A-Whirl* on the world, more than a year after writing and recording the album.

"I'm ready for this to get out," he said. "It's not about me, it's about the material and getting it out in the best way. I'm aching to share it with people. I'm itchy to let it be alive." ■