



© Photo by Ray Kennedy

# Delivering The Whole Truth

Malcolm Holcombe believes that life on the edge is the only way.

**F**or someone who looks as though he just rolled out of an open boxcar, Malcolm Holcombe's two addictions – nicotine and strong black coffee – do seem pretty tame. But as you might expect of a man raised in rural North Carolina with an uncle who was a Southern Baptist preacher, Holcombe's live performances have to be seen to be believed. Rocking the front legs of his chair, his eyes rolling, and shaking his head like a man possessed, he's in the habit of suddenly lurching to his feet mid song and bending over like he's got a bad case of the shakes, before returning to his perch, affixing the audience with the kind of malevolent stare that could strip varnish. Never missing a beat, his crazed guitar playing at times putting you in mind of *Lightnin'* Hopkins tangled up with delicate country picking that he

can obviously pull off blindfold, his gravelly nicotine-stained voice rasping out songs that are at one moment frightening in their intensity, the next tugging your heartstrings, Malcolm Holcombe believes in delivering. 'Music needs that edge and so I try ... when I eat ice cream ... to eat ice cream!'

And as his rugged careworn face suggests, Malcolm Holcombe's more than qualified to know about being on the edge. He's survived his own demons – a dark period of his life which he only hints at – and aborted record deals, the Nashville rhinestone circus and everything else that life's thrown at him. Along the way he's achieved what for some would be regarded as an enviable notoriety. Even Steve Earle – never a man noted for abstinence himself – once famously noted: 'Malcolm Holcombe is the best songwriter I ever threw out of my studio ...'

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'When I eat ice cream – I eat ice cream!'

We sat down the day after his show, and far from being the crazed bastard son of Tom Waits that I might have expected, he clearly approved of the rural ambience of the writer's home – 'Kinda like where I grew up ...' – and after a few slugs of coffee he quietly told me the story of Malcolm Holcombe. 'I was raised Southern Baptist, and from that I always knew that when we play or listen to someone you should always expect them to do their best. So I'm trying to deliver the

goods the best way I can, and doing whatever it takes these days to get the point across. Otherwise it's like talking to someone and not looking into their eyes; God gave us two ears and one mouth and you should use them all.

'I grew up listening to the Southern gospel records my uncle made with his family, and my mama played a little French harp, so I got to hear all the old tunes early on – Flatt and Scruggs, Grandpa Jones – bluegrass music. Then I started out playing guitar when I was 12 or 13 – had an instruction book from Mel Bay

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with pictures showing where you should put your fingers. I got to about page 57 and then it got complicated,’ he chuckled. ‘So I used to knock around with the kids in the neighbourhood that played guitar, get together and try to play the stuff we heard on the radio – Beatles; Rolling Stones; Peter, Paul and Mary. The local stations only had limited power, but there were a couple of radio stations out of Chicago that would broadcast at about 100,000 watts at night, so in the mid 60s whatever they played I could pick it up on my little transistor radio. I got to hear rock ‘n’ roll and the British invasion, but at low volume!’

After producing a vinyl album Malcolm began performing around the Appalachian and Smoky Mountain area. Then, in 1990, he made the decision to relocate in Nashville. Wasn’t he worried about the competition? ‘If you’re in it to make money or worry about that kind of thing, then that’s fine, but I can’t think that way. I didn’t move there to write hit songs, get them on the radio and wear a fancy hat and clothes – I abhor that mentality,’ he snorts. ‘I’ve always thought that if someone offers me \$100 for a gig or wants me to play in a radio station, make enough money for my gas, then anything else’s just a by-product; we’d play music whether we needed money or whether we were sitting on a couch or under a tree. For most of us that have been playing a long time, it’s just what we do.’

Malcolm stayed in Nashville – an event he acknowledges was a turning point in his life – for eight or nine years, meeting many successful songwriters. ‘There were a lot of different influences around – people like Tony Arata, who was a very genteel passionate



friend and very encouraging, Pat Alger and David Olney. A lot of those people could write songs just like breathing.’

The exact details of Malcolm’s time in Nashville now seem obscured by the mists of time, but at a certain point he did come to the attention of Geffen Records, for whom he recorded one album, *A Hundred Lies*. ‘The album got shelved and a lot of folks got axed; people were just moved around the chequerboard,’ he said. ‘I moved to Johnson City, East Tennessee, met my wife, put out a couple of little independent projects, did some travelling up to New York City and played all around the South, indulging and tripping with a habit. Before that I’d made a deal with some other folks in Nashville and was on a songwriter’s draw, a publishing deal. I was making \$300 a month, plus I worked my jobs in Nashville, so I could make enough money to

keep a roof over my head, food on my table and clothes on my back.

‘But it’s like a runaway train – when the train goes too fast you derail. The songwriting deal fizzled out when I had the Geffen thing; all the time you were just being groomed to get a record deal so they could get their money back. At the time I was pleased to get the deal, but there are always people on the lookout to exploit the cotton pickers,’ he laughed. ‘They see someone out there a little special and they’re always ready to put him in a cowboy suit, get him a Cadillac and fill him up with drugs like Elvis Presley. That way the money keeps rolling in.’

‘When it comes to the part I know, I play the hell out of it ...!’

For anyone new to his music, Malcolm’s latest album, *To Drink The Rain*, is as good a place to start as any. Recorded in Austin in just three days, the 12 tracks see Malcolm accompanied by a bunch

of hotshot musicians, including his long-time sideman Jared Tyler on dobro and Dave Roe – a veteran of Johnny Cash’s band – holding down the bass duties. Like his live performances, the album kicks off with a breezy ragtime tune, but by the title track, weighing in at number ten, the man’s in full sanctified holler mode.

Full of Holcombe’s homely wisdom, songs like ‘Mountains Of Home’ and ‘Down In The Woods’ eulogise the simple pleasures of life and speak volumes about a man who’s finally found his feet after the maelstrom. ‘I was always too scared to ever think of myself as a songwriter,’ he laughs. ‘And still am! We’re all influenced – I always like Jim Croce and James Taylor – and in my songs I try to find the middle ground, deliver the moment and the emotion, all encapsulated in what I feel should be presented at that time.’

For a man who puts on a startling show, he admits to always being nervous before taking the stage. ‘Sure – I’m always on the edge; the whole thing’s a kind of mental crapshoot, and trying to overcome that fear is all part of the process of being a performer, and a challenge. Being overconfident, egotistical and arrogant are all the darker side of presenting yourself for others, and it can be a difficult line to walk. But there’s a whole lot more to life than just waving your own flag; there’s plenty of room on this planet for everybody.’

Malcolm plays a well-used Martin Shenandoah, the neck repaired at the back of the headstock where it snapped after a particularly exuberant outing. ‘It’s just a tool and a very inexpensive guitar that I got from a family member. It doesn’t matter if it’s a Rolls-Royce or an ox and cart, you don’t want a Stradivarius that if you drop will bust your wallet. I play hard but I always remember Lonesome George Gobel who used to play on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. He used to have a whole orchestra behind him but would just be beating up on some old f-hole guitar and go to that microphone and say, “When it comes to the part I know, I play the hell out of it ...!” That suits me.’

**Julian Piper**

*To Drink The Rain* is out now.  
Info: [www.malcolmholcombe.com](http://www.malcolmholcombe.com)