

"Look at all that washed up on the shore / from all the shipwrecks / sea glass like sapphires, / the golden driftwood, / but now all the fog is gone. / My love for you goes on and on."

David Berkeley, "Broken Crown," from *Cardboard Boat*

It began with the brontosaurus. While living in California several years ago, David Berkeley came across a strange sculpture of a dinosaur in front of an otherwise handsome home. "It was a pretty unattractive piece of lawn art," the critically acclaimed singer/songwriter/author remembers. "But it spun me into thinking about people's different appreciation of beauty. I began imagining a story about an eccentric guy who is totally taken by this thing. Maybe the people in the house happen to be getting rid of it (understandably), and so this man takes it home."

From this seed a strange adventure grew, culminating in Berkeley's latest achievement: a set of interwoven stories offered in his second book, *The Free Brontosaurus*, and a batch of accompanying songs on his sixth studio album, *Cardboard Boat*. The stories are masterfully intertwined, characters meet in each other's stories, and the songs on the album are sung from the perspective of each story's main character. The releases are a rare compliment to each other, but with a degree in literature from Harvard, over a decade of touring under his belt and a stage show that melds profound songs and hilarious anecdotes, Berkeley is uniquely positioned to be able to pull off such an ambitious project.

Berkeley has amassed a dedicated and widespread following who fully funded the creation of this new album and book. He's been a guest on *This American Life*, Mountain Stage, World Café, CNN, XM Radio's Loft Sessions, WFUV, NPR's Acoustic Café and many more. He won the 2015 Kerrville New Folk competition and ASCAP's Johnny Mercer Songwriting Award. Called "a musical poet" by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "sensational" by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and "spellbinding" by *Blurt*, critics praise Berkeley's carefully crafted philosophic lyrics and soulful baritone, which at one moment resonates richly only to swoop into a fragile falsetto in the next.

Though he now calls Santa Fe home, where he lives with his wife and two young sons, his explorations have taken him from busking in Harvard Square to the mountains of Corsica, from the back roads of Alaska to the crowds of New York City. Each port of call opened him to new experiences, as a public school teacher in Brooklyn, a river rafting guide in Idaho and, always, a chronicler of life as he observed and embraced it.

This isn't the first time Berkeley has paired songs and stories. In 2010, upon returning from a year on the island of Corsica, Berkeley released his initial book/album combination: *140 Goats and a Guitar*. That book comprises thirteen stories, each of which sets up a song on his fourth album, *Some Kind of Cure*. "With *Goats*," Berkeley explains, "I told the stories that led to the writing of that album's songs. The book is a lot about becoming a new father and the craft of songwriting. My new project, though, feels like the proper way to weave stories and songs." From the start Berkeley envisioned the book as a "fictional story cycle," with different narratives overlapping and emerging as the brontosaurus moves between characters, and as minor characters in one story become major characters in another.

"I took it as a challenge to see if I could write songs for these characters," Berkeley explains. "I had to figure out how to make the book and the music symbiotic. The book is written in third person, at a bit of a distance, with a reserved style. My songs, though, are first person, very personal and highly emotional. They pick up where the stories leave off."

The album begins with an ominous bowed bass and ends with the ethereal tinkling of metals. In between, we get Berkeley's carefully fingerpicked guitar, banjos, trumpets, organ, string sections, nylon and electric guitars and a whole array of drums and percussion sounds. Always front and center, though, is Berkeley's voice and lyric, supported on five of the ten tracks by the silver throated Sara Watkins of Nickel Creek. Each song is a story in itself, a layered landscape of sounds and textures. "I've always been drawn to blending the organic with the electronic, finding that tense balance where one morphs into the other."

The album has many emotional highs, but its peak is perhaps the instrumental break in the title track, "Cardboard

Boat,” in which an overwhelming and relentless swelling of horns, strings, guitars and hard hit drums vanish into near silence, and one of the album’s most vulnerable lyrics emerges from the rubble: “Are you still listening? Cause I’m still talking to you. / With the curtains drawn, tell me what else should I do. / I’m on a cardboard boat tonight.”

The central musicians on *Cardboard Boat* -- guitarist Bill Titus (Dan Bern, Brother Ali), trumpet and banjo player Jordan Katz (De La Soul, The Indigo Girls), bassist/keyboard player Will Robertson (Shawn Mullins) and drummer Mathias Kunzli (Regina Spektor) -- found the recording experience transformational, according to Berkeley. "If you go about 20 minutes north of Santa Fe, up into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, you come to a little village called Tesuque, which has just a post office and a restaurant inside a general store," he says. "Then you go further into the hills to an old adobe that Jono Manson has turned into a studio. It has great gear, but it feels like you're in an old Mexican house, with vega-beamed ceilings, out in the middle of nowhere. I've been out here for a few years and have begun to get used to the New Mexican palette, but for the rest of the team to live with that scenery and under those skies, it felt like being in a monastery somewhere. There's something about the light and the landscape and the calm and the quiet that's so inspirational."

There, an unusual recording session stretched over a number of days and nights. Before they cut each song, Berkeley would perform an acoustic version. "Then we'd talk it through for an hour or so, sitting around in a circle," he explains. "There'd be discussion about the story that paired with the song and how to relate each character’s struggles to our own lives. We really tried to create distinct musical worlds to match the characters’ worlds. Eventually, each of us would break off, grab an instrument and start vocalizing or playing out ideas we were having. Pretty soon, we found ourselves at our stations with headphones on. After running it through a few times, we'd pretty much nail it."

The results are magical. Very few contemporary albums combine profound songwriting and such an extraordinarily empathetic performance at this level of eloquence. Complex issues unfold, brought to life by Berkeley's insight drawn from literature, poetry and his own experiences. There are references to *Moby Dick* in “Setting Sail” and Norse mythology in “The Wishing Well.” One of the standout tracks, “To the Sea,” is an elegy for an estranged father sung by a prodigal daughter. It’s a prayer for second chances as Berkeley and Watkins sing together “let me be like the leaves on the trees. / They come back in the spring, gold to green. / Or let me be like the stream full of rain. / It comes back eventually to the sea.” Even that brontosaurus, which started it all, appears in the song “Dinosaurs and Sages” as a symbol of impermanence and elusive meaning.

Cardboard Boat stands on its own as a masterwork. It confirms the plaudits earned by Berkeley already, from *No Depression* ("Berkeley's songs are supremely melodic in ways only the most skilled singer/songwriters are able to convey") and *Creative Loafing* ("Berkeley crafts his songs like watercolor paintings") to legendary *New York Times* critic Jon Pareles ("Berkeley sings in a lustrous melancholy voice with shades of Tim Buckley and Nick Drake").

The book ends with the same brontosaurus that began it all. It is placed back on the curb by the same character who finds it in the beginning of the book. In between, he reconnects with his daughter, and the other characters have found connection and redemption through the discovery of beauty in strange and surprising places. In Berkeley’s song “Brighter Day,” he sings “I have tried to look for God in the cracks before the sky.” It seems a good way to summarize what he is up to with these songs and stories, teaching us how and where to look for the divine. This is a surprisingly beautiful project, complex and nuanced, yet ultimately cathartic and revelatory. We come away from it better than we started, full of heightened empathy and a greater appreciation for the magic all around us, not just in the skies but on the sidewalks.

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