**M. WARD’S “SUPERNATURAL THING” DEFIES THE PASSING OF TIME**

by James Cushing

Several times, as I listened to M. Ward’s *supernatural thing*, I asked myself what year it was. Was it 1952, and was I listening to a track from the Harry Smith Anthology? Was it 1972, and was I eavesdropping on the recording session for *After the Gold Rush*?

No, it’s 2023, and M. Ward is one of the special contemporary artists who invite such questions. Ward has clearly mastered the whole vocabulary of American popular music and made serious decisions about how to employ it for his own ends. What Ward shares with Harry Smith’s artists and Neil Young is a context of musical and human values: authenticity and intimacy. *supernatural thing*’s original songs sound freshly pulled from the ground, with a little earth sticking to them. Ward’s lyric delivery has that slight rawness the ear loves, and his voice has quiet dignity and great tenderness. *Supernatural Thing* is an open-hearted, inviting album.

The album’s guest stars — First Aid Kit, Shovels & Rope, Scott McMicken, Neko Case, Jim James, others — enliven the album with surprises. On “Too Young to Die,” the women’s voices in First Aid Kit spread a light frosting over the melody, and their Beach Boys-like chorus on “Engine 5” makes the song sound like an instant hit. The whole program has a lovely open house feeling, reminiscent of pre-pandemic house parties. It was at such parties in San Luis Obispo in the mid-1990s where I first heard M. Ward’s music. He was still a college student, writing his first songs and learning the vocabulary he uses today with such calm assurance.

I asked him about the title track, in which Elvis Presley appears with a message: *You can go anywhere you please.* “Well, all my songs depend on dream-imagery to some extent,” he replied, “and this was an actual dream I had about Elvis, when he came to me and said that. I don’t know if it’s pandemic-related or not.” This is the song where Ward sings “you feel the line is growing thin / between beautiful and strange,” which I told him I thought sums up the emotional tone of the album. (He agreed.)

“The title *supernatural thing* comes from an early thought as a kid that radio traveled the same airwaves as messages from supernatural things — and music, especially remembered music, is somehow tied up in this exchange,” he continued.

“The sending and receiving of messages from memory and dreams seem to move along this same often broken-up wavelength. In this way and many others, I see this new record as an extension, 18 years later, of my *Transistor Radio* record, but this new record is better because its more concise and has more voices and more moods — the way my favorite radio was and still is.”

I also asked about the guest artists, especially First Aid Kit, a new name to me. "First Aid Kit are twin sisters from Stockholm, and when they open their mouths, something amazing happens,” Ward explained. “It was a great thrill to go to Stockholm and record a few songs there.  The sound from blood-related harmony singers is impossible to get any other way – The Everly Brothers, The Delmores, The Louvins, The Carters, The Söderbergs - all have the same kind of feeling in their vocals."

Eight of the album’s ten songs are Ward originals. There’s an unusual Bowie choice, “I Can’t Give Everything Away” from *Blackstar*, and a live rendition of Daniel Johnston’s “Story of an Artist.” “Bowie and Johnston are constant sources of inspiration for me, have been for I don’t know how many years,” Ward offered. Hearing the Bowie instrumental, so different in feel from the original recording, I was reminded of an evening long ago in San Luis Obispo when Ward, playing solo acoustic in a coffee house, sang “Let’s Dance” as a very slow ballad, revealing the lonely yearning the extraverted original only hinted at.

"When you can’t go out and see it for yourself, radio is still the best way for me to connect with the outside world. Whether it be music or talk or news or politics - FM or AM or satellite – I re-learned this while stranded indoors during the pandemic - It's constantly changing at the hands of someone far away who you don't know and there's a lot in that exchange to be inspired by when it comes to making records."