

Music Review

Title: *Odd Birds*

Artist: The Raventones (Randy Hamme & TR Kelley)

Producer: TR Kelley/Darkwater Music, 2003

Title: *Starstruck Enterprise*

Artist: The Raventones (Randy Hamme & TR Kelley)

Producer: TR Kelley/Darkwater Music, 2006

Website: <http://www.raventones.com/>

Reviewer: Kevin Dierks

Odd Birds and *Starstruck Enterprise* are the first and second musical CDs created and released by The Raventones, a “neurodiverse” band out of Oregon. The Raventones is comprised of two musicians, TR Kelley and Randy Hamme, who are responsible for playing and writing nearly all of the songs. TR Kelley is a lifetime musician who has demonstrated her musical talent from a very young age. She has released two solo CDs and played with “Jellymoon” after becoming famous in the 1990s as part of the band “Babes with Axes”. Her talent for stringed instruments can be heard in the guitar and bass performances on these CDs. Her vocal performances show her wide range and her lyrics are poetic, emotionally charged, and moving. And one other thing, TR Kelley was diagnosed with Autism, or more specifically Asperger’s Syndrome.

She was diagnosed late in life, and as a result was able to give a name to her “lifelong oddnesses”. She has used this information to become an advocate and an ambassador for people with Autism. When she leaves the comfort of “LeisureLand Community”, a community of people with Autism and understanding NTs (neurotypicals), she helped create, she can be seen presenting and performing to increase awareness and understanding of Autism. She recently presented at “Autreat 2006” in Philadelphia. In The Raventones, she has partnered with Randy Hamme whose talent on drums and percussion bring a backbeat that was not present in her solo CDs.

Odd Birds will be found in the folk music section. It starts off with a strong rhythm with a blues rock feeling. TR Kelley’s vocals are strong, moving, and at times march in step with the blues foundation, before floating off in their own powerful direction. TR Kelley’s vocal range is incredible and she uses it effectively. At times she sounds remarkably similar to Tracy Chapman, and at other times she evokes images of a jazz lounge singer, a southern rocker, and a gospel singer respectively. The middle of the CD migrates into moving riffs and tunings with less rhythmic dominance and a more melodic styling. Here her vocals really stand out and carry the listener on a hypnotic wave. As it gets near the end, *Odd Birds* takes you back to the basics with some more hard core blues rock.

Their latest release is *Starstruck Enterprise*, another folk CD. This album is very similar to their first, but in many ways comes across as more matured and developed. It can also be described as frenetic at times. The music changes direction in surprising and moving ways. The songs on this album seem more exposed, and it feels like TR Kelley has become more comfortable sharing her view of the world. Like its predecessor, this CD starts with grounding bass lines, and familiar rock and blues beats. Then once again it takes a turn where you are floating on a foundation of cosmic sounds, led by vocal melodies through what, at times feels like a space voyage, enhanced by the Star Trek like dialogue in the background. The beat no longer supports you, and you are floating at the mercy of Kelley's vocal talents and manipulations. Occasionally, a familiar beat creeps in, but then the vocals take over again and carry you off on a moving foundation of bass and guitar chords.

Overall these CDs both convey a serious, contemplative mood, dealing with themes of love, life, humanity, pain, struggles, and relationships. It is easy on the ears and stays primarily in the low end of the sound spectrum. The music is moving and powerful. Knowledge of the fact that TR Kelley has Asperger's Syndrome is irrelevant to enjoying and appreciating the quality of this work. Her songs at times hint at her different perspective and her sense of advocacy, such as this excerpt from "Shades of Grey":

*Let me think for my self, cause my brain is working.
Let me make my own mistakes, at least they will be mine.*

How many colors does the rainbow have, and can you see boundaries between them?

In "Hush" a picture of intimate human communication is painted:

*words are hard to find
they just get lost
inside my mind
anyway
light year skies
starry eyes
no surprise
but I never knew
light year skies
shine in your star-struck eyes*

The Raventones' view of the world provides fertile material for the neurotypical mind and is sure to rearrange a few neurons for any listener. Whether or not you are familiar with T.R. Kelley's earlier work, you will probably find these CDs enjoyable. Give them a try.

Kevin Dierks has been working professionally helping people for over 20 years. He has worked assisting and supporting people with developmental disabilities for most of this time. Through this work he has been taught many things by people with disabilities, and has developed a personal philosophy and professional approach of partnering with people and communities to identify life solutions, options, and actions. He currently works for the Hawaii Department of Health/ Developmental Disabilities Division where he supports innovative approaches and

systems changes in an environment of continual improvement in the quality of life for people with developmental disabilities.