

# Tommy Womack Returns to 30A Songwriters Festival Next January with a Hundred or So of His Close (and Soon-to-Be) Friends

By Christopher C. Manson

"I try to answer emails and give people as much time as they've given me. I feel like a minister sometimes, and this is my ministry."

- Singer-Songwriter Tommy Womack

Like many of the folks visiting 30A next January for the fourth Songwriters Festival, Tommy Womack calls Nashville home. I spoke to him by phone as he was coming down from some recent gigs with Duane Eddy and E Street Band bassist Garry Tallent. Despite some wonderful performances by Rodney Crowell and Mary Gauthier, for me, the highlight of the 2011 festival was hearing Womack sing "Alpha Male and the Canine Mystery Blood," a standout epic track from 2007's *There, I Said It!*

## ON THE 2011 30A SONGWRITERS FESTIVAL

The place we stayed was the lap of luxury. The gig actually pays well. You don't get "officially" paid, but you get a travel stipend and travel accommodations. It was more than I get for most gigs.

I went to a couple other songwriter shows. My favorite was David Olney—he's a national treasure—and this young, sort-of famous guy whose name I don't remember... I don't follow contemporary music much. I buy Muddy Waters records.

You might say I enjoyed the camaraderie backstage with Rodney Crowell and Gretchen Peters. It was a big thrill to meet Mary Gauthier and her delightful fiddle player and hang out with them. It was a wonderful time, a lovely festival. It really catered to the songwriters and gave us a lot of respect.

## ON RETURNING TO 30A NEXT JANUARY

I needed no persuasion whatsoever! It's all about the music. The artists are not an afterthought. The total focus of the thing—it's really cool when the songwriters are getting honored for the craftsmen and artists we are. It's like a tribute gig for all of us. And when is it not great to get down to Florida?

I love seeing people I've never seen before and making a new discovery. If Rodney's back, I'll be thrilled to see him.

## ON "ALPHA MALE AND THE CANINE MYSTERY BLOOD"

It's a very personal song. It hits hard with people who

are struggling for their right to exist everyday, searching for their place in the world. It's hard to stand on your own two feet and tell the world, "I have a right to seek a life that gives me the tools to deal with the pain as much as possible." Pete Townshend said, "Music can't solve your problems, but it can let you dance all over them for awhile."

It's really not a hard song (to perform live). It's like an actor doing a Shakespeare play with all the soliloquies—you have to take a deep breath before you start. It's like skiing down a mountain. Once I start the song, I start skiing down the mountain, and for the next few minutes, my life is not my own. I'm trying to stay up on the skis.

It's about 80 percent rote memory and 20 percent living the character. Most of my songs, I'm playing Tommy Womack struggling with his demons. It resonates with you and so many other people because there's a lot of scared-to-death people out there who don't want to show signs of weakness. I'll show it for you. I understand. I'm on your side. I'm with you. You're not alone—be strong, somebody loves you.

## ON HIS OTHER WRITINGS

I've written two books—*Cheese Chronicles* (1995), about my band, and a novella, a complete 180 type of book, *The Lavender Boys and Elsie* (2008). It's about the only all-gay confederate regiment to serve in the Civil War. (It's fiction), but I do everything to make it come off as real. It's letters between a soldier and his sister, and the whole story evolves through those letters. I've given readings, and people ask, "Where did you do your research and find out about this?" I always wanted to write a historical novel. I'm a big Civil War buff—almost as encyclopedic about that as I am rock 'n roll history.

## ON HIS UPCOMING ALBUM, "NOW WHAT!" TO BE RELEASED NEXT FEBRUARY

I think it's a better record than *There, I Said It!*, but I'm prepared for some people not to agree. There's no epic like "Alpha Male..." but there is a shorter song, "90 Miles Down a Dead End Street," about a true-to-life drunken experience I had on the road when I was



Photo by Gregg Roth

trying to drink successfully.

I'm a stone cold degenerate alcoholic, and I really screwed the pooch driving 70 miles per hour with a bottle of Chianti in the passenger seat. Sometimes I think I self-destruct just to have material to write about... I'm just glad I didn't kill somebody with my vehicle. When I do something foolish, I write a song about it.

I'm good for four, six weeks, then I'll screw up and have to make apologies and amends. In those intermediate times, I'm a really nice fellow (laughs). I like to see people smile. That's my drug, now that I can't drink or use drugs anymore.

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