



Interview: Heidi Duss / Foto: Marco Duss

Interview with Mike Aiken, Nashville 05.06.2013

Tell me about yourself, you did a lot of sailing?

Yes, I live on a 42 foot, about 12 meter sailboat for the last 20 years. We left from the US and sailed to the Canadian Maritimes, way up north in the ice. The music scene was very, very good, sort of a Celtic, Irish music scene. Then we sailed to the Azores and from there to Europe. We based out of Spain for about three years, that started a lot of my playing in Europe. Then we sort of drifted along towards the Canary Islands and the Caribbean and we based out of Antigua for another three, four years. We played the Tiki Bar Scene up and down the Caribbean Chain.

Was this all for the music or did you have another job during this time as well?

It was just sailing and music.

Now you live in Virginia?

Yes, we sailed back to the States and live on the Chesapeake Bay in Norfolk, Virginia. What happened was, before we went sailing, I played with bands, I quit the bands and during the sailing, I started writing a lot of music. When we came back, we set up a studio in a 81 foot 1941 old tugboat. The engines and the tanks on the boat were

removed. We set up a studio below the water and recorded 3 CD's there. From that I got signed to a Nashville label and then, all my business came to Nashville.

Are you planning to start living here in Nashville?

No, we are here a lot though. I don't want to leave the saltwater and the ocean, so we still live on the boat but we come here a lot. Nashville is a great spot for music and business.

Do you write all your own songs?

Not always, I co-write with quite a few people and I write for others. And usually on every CD there are a couple of songs that I really like, that somebody else wrote, I cover those.

How many CDs do you have out?

I have 6 CDs out on the Northwind Records label. They have done well in Europe. I had the song called „No Fishing Pole“ that went to Nr. 1 and was picked up by Universal Records France and distributed there about three years ago. The current record is „Captains & Cowboys“, which was released April this year.

Can you tell us more about the current album?

This is a little different than my other CD projects. It's much more personal and probably much more about me. I spent the early part of my life pretty much rural on a farm. I used to raise Quarter horses and Appaloosa horses and for a while, for a living I was also shoeing horses. I spent a lot of time around the rodeo, that was a big part of my life. Some of the people that influenced me, not musically but on how to be as a person, were some old Cowboys, guys that were just tough, but honest and fair and really good people. When I left that and started living on small boats, I found the same rugged individual as a small boat captain. So there is a similarity between the ocean and the Cowboy and I wanted to write about that and put it on a CD. That's what came out on this album.

Can you tell us something about the different songs on that album?

One of the things that is different on this CD is, I had a producer. I looked for a long time for the right producer, and I ended up going with Dan Baird. If you don't know Dan Baird, look up the Georgia Satellites, Dan was the lead vocal and guitar player with the Georgie Satellites. Dan was a different kind of person, he did not let you do things the easy way. He worked you real hard, which is what I wanted. So I think, Dan's influence is pretty strong here. This CD is more Americana, Roots, Country, which I like more than pop country, so it goes not towards a traditional country, but a Roots Country feeling. You may also get a feeling of Maritime with the song „Save The Whales“, there may be a touch of Irish – Bluegrass feel. Then there may be a song where you get almost a Caribbean feel. I mix it up.

Which is your favorite song on this album?

Oh that's a real tough question, it depends on what mood I'm in, there are some love songs and when I'm in that mood, then they are my favorite. Probably, at the moment my favorite is „Virginia“.

What is this song all about?

It started with the drive from Nashville to Norfolk, it's beautiful. You go through the Smokey Mountains and the Shenandoah Mountains and then you go down to the ocean. It is about an 11 to 12 hour drive to our boat and it is gorgeous. But when you start looking at the history of the Civil War and the history of slavery, you will see another side to what Virginia was. I try to capture all that in that song.

What part of the States are you originally from?

Originally I'm from about 30 miles east of Buffalo, New York, up in the Great Lakes, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. That's where I grew up and I learned to sail on the Great Lakes. I met one of my father's friends, which was an elderly gentleman from Norway. Both his grandfather and his father built boats in Norway and he came here and built a boat to sail back, then he met an American wife who didn't like boats. He didn't get much of a chance to go sailing, so he took me. That's what started my love for the water.

When did you realize that you wanted to sing and write Country music?

As long as I can remember, as a kid I wrote little Rock 'n Roll Tunes. I moved out of my parents house and was on the street pretty much from age 16. I played Rock'n Roll to support myself. When I turned about 20, I was tired of big amplifiers and loud guitars so I sold all my electric equipment. I bought an acoustic guitar, a dobro, a fiddle and a mandoline and started to learn Bluegrass. I did that for a couple of years and that brought me back to Country Rock and Southern Rock. But what I always loved, was a Roots Country base. I found out through the years, that my writing always came out through that style. I don't think you can make yourself have a style, music finds you and somewhere you're comfortable, you can hear when you try something here and there that it doesn't sound as true as the one style that suits you. I found my style, it feels good. For years I was on the road playing blues, but all I ever wrote, was happy blues. People used to say, blues is not supposed to be so happy, but I'm not an unhappy person, so that wasn't my style.

Do you have an experience, that specially stands out for you?

Yes, it is something that goes back to Virginia, Amy and I have a music festival called Aiken and Friends Fest, it is a Roots – Americana festival. It's in a very small town in Virginia. At one point, the Town Board asked us to come to town, the Mayor of the town came and gave us a paper and made us honorary citizens of Smithfield, for bringing the music to to their town. That felt really good, we have been so long on a sailboat with not really one home, so that was very special.

Are you working or planning a project right now?

The big one is Captains & Cowboys, that just got released. You know, the writing and the making of a CD is the small part, the bigger part of it is the promoting and going out on the road and playing the tunes.

What are you hoping for in the future?

For music hopes, it is to just keep writing better and better. For me, music is my living and my passion, but I still see some writers, and I wish I could write as good as they do. So my hope is, that I can put into words those stories that a good songwriter can do, like Guy Clark. My hope is to always get better, especially in songwriting. There are a lot of good players. You come to Nashville and in any street corner, there are great players, but it's not so easy to find good songwriters.

Anything else that you would like to tell the public?

I would like for people to know that we played Europe a few times, different tours and we are looking forward to coming back. I have family in France and it is always nice to go and visit with them in and out of being on the road. I would also like for people to know where they can find me, <http://www.mikeaikenmusic.com>, go there, the music is on and all the public media sides are there, so come in and say hello, the door is always open.