

# 54•40

## Northern Soul

Neil Osborne: vocals, guitar • Dave Genn: guitar • Matt Johnson: drums • Brad Merritt: bass

Throughout the enduring career of 54-40 - Canada's preeminent representatives of the first wave of post-punk modern rock – the band's creative pulse has always pumped hard, heartfelt and steady. The fact that the muse on their 13th studio release (and 2nd for the True North label) leads to an offering called "Northern Soul" is both redeeming and appropriate.

It's everything that a great 54-40 album represents.

Great guitar riffs, crafty melodic hooks, big bass, memorable choruses and a driving beat that paves the way for the band's explorations of atmospheric mid-tempo and gentle ballads that ebb and flow with grit, self-awareness and social consciousness. It's the kind of stuff that provides a sublime edge to the band's sound.

The title track, "Northern Soul", embodies this dynamic. An engaging structure of melody and harmony built around a lyrical foundation that most pop rock writers tread very lightly - if at all. Neil Osborne - the band's primary lyricist - explores these times of war in distant lands with a humanist vision that is uncompromising, focused and universally heartfelt from the point of view of a parent – appropriately he is accompanied by his daughter Coral on the vocal tracks.

"I am firmly on the side of the pacifist," says Osborne. "Every time the news announces another fatality from the 'war' I cannot but help feel for the families. I am sorry, but any justification simply rings hollow compared to the grief of a parent. Once I opened myself up to that sentiment the song wrote itself - it takes the high road and makes no apologies."

The track represents the proverbial tip of the iceberg when it comes to the thoughtfulness and dedication the group injected into this recording project: a project that, at its core, also remains one of 54-40's most ambitious and potentially enduring.

Here's the thing.

As the band navigated through the original pre-production stages, the goal was to create 100 songs – yes, 100 songs!

"Yep, the original idea was to create 100 songs and it still is," explains Osborne. "For practical reasons we unleashed the first collection and have called it *Northern Soul*. It does have the launch tune *100 Songs* on it which explains pretty clearly the exponential benefit of creating something. "

And clearly, in terms of creative process, 54-40 gets it. They are a band in full stride, in control and taking determined steps as they move forward with their work. Couple this with the band's legacy of multiple gold albums, top 10 singles, songwriting awards and more than 2000 live performances and it should be no surprise that there's a intriguing and revealing back story as to how *Northern Soul* was recorded.

The band first set up shop for a month at "The Chapel", a former funeral home/chapel now converted into an art/work/event space nestled in the meaner streets of Vancouver's gritty Downtown Eastside. "The neighborhood was rough but we hardened to it," says Osborne. "We all have histories starting out as a band playing the dingy clubs in the east end back in the early days of post-punk."

It was a very much a live experience.

"The idea was to capture the sounds and songs as we created them - right to tape - and then work them from those foundations," says Osborne. For these veteran modern rockers, it was an experiment in process. Instead of following the more traditional writing steps - jamming, arranging and performing live before the actual recording - the band captured elements of the actual creative musical process as the foundation.

"Renting out this space and bringing in recording gear afforded us this luxury," explains Osborne. "There was no control room - the recording gear was placed at one end and the band formed a circle in each room's center. I would operate the gear and walk over to my spot while the red light was on."

Osborne notes that *Northern Soul* was written in this environment and points to the banjo on *100 Songs* and acoustic guitar on *Lucky* as perhaps the best representation of the room's unique sonic characteristics.

The next step represented a study in contrasts.

After a stopover to perform a club show in Victoria to experience "playing loud and live", the group moved the production to British Columbia's Gulf Islands and rolled onto the natural splendour of Denman Island to set up shop in an old barn on the waterfront.

"Same sort of set-up," says Osborne. "No control room, just the space and the band."

The Denman Island sessions saw the completion of the rest of the album's material with *Snap*, *Where Did the Money Go* and *Wind Down* as well as the more vibe-like stuff, *Moonbeach & Shade Grows*, going to tape on the shores of the Georgia Strait.

In some circles people say location is everything. In this case – the recording of *Northern Soul* - location was certainly something: a series of choices that defines, in both style and substance, the vibrant muse and imagination that still fuels 54-40's creative process and burns at the heart of the album.

"Both locations, in their own way, helped colour the themes of this album," says Osborne. "They were isolated and non-traditional in terms of recording environments, *but* traditional for in terms of music – a church and barn."

Something else indeed.

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