

# Trey Johnson, Très Solo

*Kinda sorta remember Sorta? Its songwriter and leader goes it alone in his debut with Mount Pelée, and the surprises are plentiful*

| By Steve Carter | Photography by Trevor Paulbus |

Although you may own all the Sorta back catalogs, might have attended their gigs with religious zeal, memorized the words to every song, and be the virtual president of the gone-but-not-forgotten band's fan club, you're still in for 44-plus minutes of surprise when you drop your laser on Trey Johnson's debut CD, *Mount Pelée*. "To me it all sounds like songs that basically came from the same well," Johnson says with characteristic self-effacement, "but according to Don [producer Don Cento] it sounds dramatically different. He was wonderful about taking these songs and presenting them in different ways." The 40-year-old Johnson, who's best known to fans as Sorta's songwriter, voice and musical compass, isn't one to recycle ideas or fluff up the pillows in his comfort zone. With *Mount Pelée*, he comes of age as a mature songsmith on a creative high-wire and establishes himself as an artist who can stand on his own two feet without a band, drawing instead, on empathetic session players and an imaginative production team to realize his vision.

For Johnson, a Dallas native who's married and the father of two, songwriting has always been key: His influences range from Dylan to Cobain to "all the Hanks" and beyond. "Stumbling on melodies that seem fresh and alive is the most exciting thing for me," he enthuses. "And one thing

that's really influenced this record is children's books: I've been swimming in nursery rhymes for the last five years, and a few of these songs started as children's songs, bouncy and really repetitive." In producer/arranger Cento and co-producer/engineer Stuart Sikes he's found a dream team of kindred spirits, and the collaborative gestalt imbues *Mount Pelée* with the élan of arrival. "Stuart likes pure sound, and I do, too," Johnson says. "Sonically, he doesn't want to just fill up empty space, or put butter all over the sound of a particular instrument. Don was willing to take chances and put weird faces on things. I'd bring in songs that wound up being something totally different than I'd initially thought. It was great, and very exciting."

Unlike Johnson's earlier, guitar-driven material, most of the songs on *Mount Pelée* were written at the piano: The songwriter credits that departure as a significant change in direction. Cento's astute arrangements, which involve everything from horn section to string section, Hammond to Wurlitzer, mandolin to female voices, recall at times the pioneering work of Jack Nitzsche with Neil Young, Jon Brion with Aimee Mann and T Bone Burnett with Sam Phillips. As a first-time producer, his contributions to *Mount Pelée* are auspicious. Immediate standout tracks include the wryly humorous *Unfavorable Way*, the artful chamber-pop of *Old Reactions*, and the quietly dramatic confessional that is *Struggle to Find*. "I'm as happy right now as I've ever been in my whole life, and certainly my family is a huge part of that," Johnson acknowledges. "And I'm so pleased to be able to be a songwriter, and thankful I made that decision." ■

*For more information about Trey Johnson, visit [myspace.com/sortatrey](http://myspace.com/sortatrey).*

