

## A Review

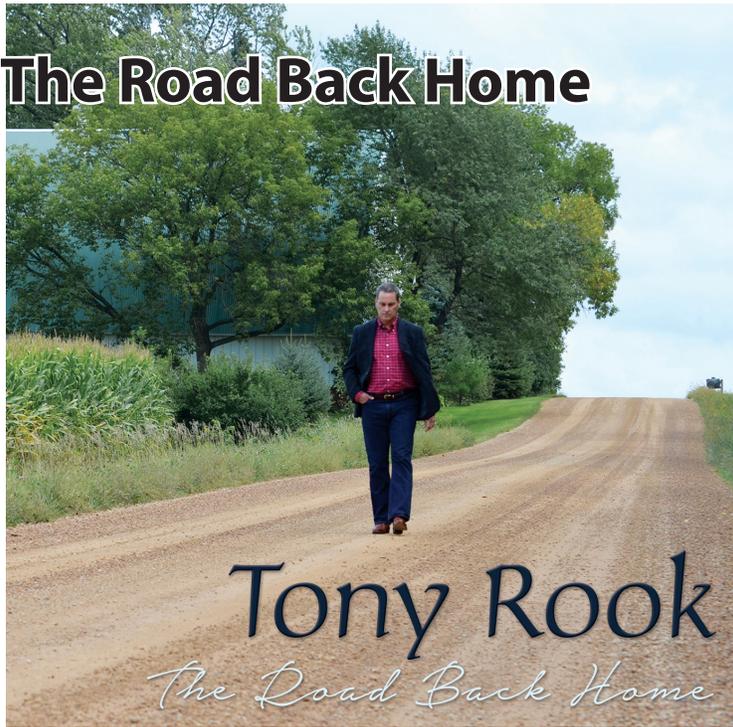
# Tony Rook - *The Road Back Home*

by Adam Granger

When I started playing bluegrass in 1967, there was a finite number of musicians in the genre, and even fewer good ones. Any fan with a halfway decent job could buy all of the bluegrass releases issued each month. When MBOTMA was formed in the mid-70s, there were, I'm guessing, a dozen bands in the organization, and everyone knew everyone else. Today, some forty years on, the worldwide proliferation of good bluegrass bands—and of the musicians who spawn them—seems to know no bounds.

I limit the amount of free writing I do, including reviews for this magazine. Other entities I write and have written for—National Lampoon Magazine, Flatpicking Guitar Magazine, A Prairie Home Companion, The Park Bugle, and Recycled greeting cards—are all paying gigs and, until we adopt the 30-hour day, I only have time to do so much pro bono writing. So, when guitarist, mandolinist and bandleader Dick Kimmel asked me to review a solo album by the guitar player in his band, Dick Kimmel and Co, I agreed, strictly as a favor to him. And thus was I sent *The Road Back Home*, a solo album by New Prague denizen Tony Rook. This is an ambitious and inspired album, cleanly and crisply performed and recorded, and it more than fulfills the purpose of a solo album, which is to showcase the skills of its protagonist.

Rook uses a variety of great players, recorded in sessions in New Prague and Nashville. He plays rhythm guitar in the finest bluegrass tradition and throws in a few classic flatpicking solos as a bonus. Banjo chores are shared by Graham Some, who is one of the most underrated banjo players in the country, and Rook, no slouch on the 5-string



himself. Mandolinists are Tim Carter, Dick Kimmel and Matt Flinner, and St James native Becky Buller plays fabulous fiddle on five cuts. Kimmel and Co member Terry Johnson and, on one cut, Rook, are the bassists.

All of the vocals—leads and harmonies—are sung by Tony. Overdubbing the same voice is risky: the result can sound like someone singing through a vocal harmonizer—aggravatingly synthetic. Fortunately for him and us, Rook avoids that. The attentive ear can instantly perceive that the voices are all from one throat, but there is sufficient variation in tone and timbre to avoid irritation.

Eight of the twelve tracks on *The Road Back Home* were written or co-written by Tony under his nom de composition, Philip A. Rook. The first cut, *I'll Make Time* is a straightforward please-love-me bluegrass song. It's followed by *Lauralee*, a latter-day Civil War lamentation sung from the Confederate perspective; the pleasant romp *Appalachian Springtime*; and Tim Hardin's 1965 chestnut, *Reason to Believe*, done up bluegrass-style.

Four more Rook originals follow: *Down This Road* starts on the IV chord, which is usually a fun thing, except that in this instance it leads into a lyric describing a troubled relationship. Just

about the time we're getting really concerned about the future of the singer and his partner, Rook segues into an instrumental passage, after which—spoiler alert—the pair does, in fact, break up. It's not anyone's fault. It happens. Next comes *House of Prayer*, which one expects, from the title, to be gospel but which turns out to be an elegant love song. That's followed by the album's only instrumental, *Blueridge Breakdown*, and *Simple People*, an ultimately tragic homage to minimalism and veneration (in which, speaking of overdubbing, we get to hear not one, but two, Becky

Bullers).

Heading down the home stretch, *Keep on Tryin'*, by ex-Eagles bassist Timothy B Schmit makes a graceful transition to bluegrass in Rook's hands, and *Darlin' Now's Not the Time* is a song of unrequited love composed by ace singer-songwriter Louisa Branscomb. In the eponymous *The Road Back Home*, Rook reflects and wonders, and then another fine Branscomb offering, *Wearin' the Blues*, wraps up the album, and we're happy to have spent 45 minutes with Tony Rook and his talent and enthusiasm.

Anyone who has recorded albums knows what an absurd amount of work they are. From concept and original creation of the material through learning that material to corraling and rehearsing musicians to scheduling and conducting recording sessions, album creation takes a chunk out of ya. Whatever toil and treasure he expended in its creation, *The Road Back Home* shows Tony Rook to be one of those really good musicians you may never have heard of—the ones I was talking about at the start of this review. Good compositions, good lead and rhythm playing, good singing (leads and harmonies), good musicians, and good recording, mixing and mastering. Good job, brother Rook, and thank you, Mr Kimmel, for hooking me up with this album.