

Published Review for "It's All In The Moose's Head" by Ed Ryan  
Written by Wayne Karol for Holding Together magazine  
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### **"It's All In The Moose's Head" - Ed Ryan (self-published, USA)**

One night in 1997 I stopped for a beer on the way home and I discovered one of the finest songwriters I've ever heard.

Ed Ryan might not be a household name outside the Long Island music scene, but if you're familiar with him, I'm betting that he's right near the top of your "Why is this person not a major star?" list. Since the early nineties, Ed's been wowing Island audiences as the front man in such legendary local acts as Wide Awake and Rhino Caravan, solo gigs that seamlessly blend storytelling and humor with originals, oldies (heavy on the Beatles) and Irish songs, and his duties as long-running host of the coolest open mic night in human history. He's also one of those people that you just instantly like, and both he and his wife Lorraine quickly became good friends.

Following the (bitter – don't ask) break up of Rhino Caravan, Ed starting recording solo. *Make It So* was released in 2003, followed three years later by a collection of Irish tunes, *Songs I Love So Well*. (If you've seen Gerry Finlay and the Cara Band open the broadcast of New York's St. Patrick's Day parade, that was Ed singing "Danny Boy"). Then on March 26<sup>th</sup> 2007, he took to the stage at the Brokerage Pub in Bellmore for a VH-1 style Storytellers concert. For any Ryan fan it was an absolute peak experience, as for three hours Ed led us on a tour through a quarter-century of his music. Fourteen songs from that night (plus one studio track), most of which have never appeared on CD before, make up this current collection.

My only real complaint is that two of my all time favorites didn't make the cut: "Claustrophobia", a true masterpiece of wordplay, and that perennial crowd-pleaser "The Drinking Song". (Even something as seemingly just-for-fun as the latter features such classic Ryan lines as: "I drink with the Devil, but we drink to the Lord") But that's just being picky; and this disc showcases so many of Ed's strengths, from storytelling to humor to love songs to socio-political commentary to introspection, that it's a fine introduction to why there are so many of us raving about him.

The opening track, "68 And Beyond", has Ed venting his frustration at social and political corruption, looking back to how this same shit was going on: "the year we shot Kennedy, the year we shot King, the year we all elected Not A Crook" and lamenting that: "in all this time we haven't learned a thing". I can't say that I agree with every word, but I was impressed enough to use it as the epigraph for Part I of my book (if you'll excuse the self-promotion). The title of "Would You Love Me If I Changed" is pretty self-explanatory; what's most noteworthy here is how this assertion of his need to be himself is coupled to a real sweetness of tone. Even lines that throw down a challenge like: "You like my talents? Well, here's the dirt. Now weigh the balance" don't come off as harsh as they might. The pretty "Every Day" then shows off Ed's way with a love song. You'll probably find a smile on your face and not know if it comes from the tune, the words or the emotion in his voice. Don't enjoy the head too much, though, because next we plunge into Ed's dark night of the soul with "Caught By The Tail", as he's trying to hold on while feeling: "Why do I bother to try when I'm destined to fail?". Whatever your reaction to this one – sadness, identification that you've been there yourself, gladness that he's got through it – there's no denying that it's powerful.

“Beast Of Eden” dates back to the late '80s Ed Ryan & The Underdogs. The narrator is “in love for the first time all over again”, and while the tune is bouncy, the lyrics focus on the part of it that's “The maker of torment and bitter tears”. It's not a bad song by any means, but it's certainly not among his best, and it's the only one whose inclusion I might question. We're back on surer ground with another love song, “Breathe”. If you were to analyze it with a reviewer's head, you'd have to say that he goes overboard with the metaphors; if you listen to it the way that people actually listen to music, what stays with you are the lilting melody, the honesty, and the lines “It's the moon in the glare of your stare that makes me sober, And it's the sun in your eyes that makes me want to breathe”. Then prepare for yet another mood change with “Beauty Queens And Pilots”, a *cri de couer* about children sacrificed to adult ambitions (JonBenet Ramsey being the beauty queen of the title). Ed walks the emotional line perfectly here, giving his sadness and anger full rein without bashing you over the head with them.

The slight but fun “My Baby Left Me” then leads into the disc's two strongest songs. A single haunting riff draws you into “The S.S.Marie”'s tale of madness at sea, and I'd have to rate it as Ed's finest pure storytelling ever. “I'm Looking” was Wide Awake's signature song: what sticks here are a propulsive beat, the refrain of “Try...try...”, and the way Ed's voice hits the height of the chorus. It's powerful enough in this version, but it must have been an absolute monster with a full band behind it. Yet another change in tone brings us “Monica On My Mind”, an ode to one Monica Lewinsky. Of all the *double entendre* that this chapter in American history inspired, I swear nobody did it better than Ed does here, and if you're not constantly laughing through this one, I recommend a medical examination. “Amen” is as reverent as the title implies, combining sadness at the world's cruelties with an apology to God for how human kind has screwed up. (It would make a good companion piece with “Make It So”, where it's God that Ed's pissed at. Too bad we're only getting one side of it here.)

The live cuts conclude with a pair of love songs, the infectious joy of “She's Mine All Mine” and the sweetness of “Always Love”. And for a final change of pace, we close out with a studio version of Ed's most popular recent song, “Drop On By”, the story of one man, one week's vacation, seven different bottles of booze, and seven different women. Trust me, you will enjoy.

The booklet features the story behind each song and a photo of Ed at the time he wrote them – which can be amusing in themselves. This and Ed's two other CDs can be ordered from the man himself at : [www.ed-ryan.com](http://www.ed-ryan.com) .

-- Wayne Karol