

“Music Man” Layng Martine Jr. Debuts with Joy At 81

By Craig Havighurst

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If you're feeling the Nashville blues, a mix of regret and anxiety about gentrification and Music City losing its soul, I'd recommend spending time with 81-year-old (mostly retired) songwriter Layng Martine, Jr. He's been working and living here since 1972, and he still glows about it.

“Nashville is all about helping each other,” he says in Episode 247 of *The String*. “There's a big YES! There's a big, hopeful dome over Nashville.” A hopeful dome! After a few minutes of this I'm ready to run up and down Music Row, hugging everybody I see. But let's back up a second.

Layng (pronounced LANG) was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2013 in honor of a prolific and eclectic career writing hits in country, pop, and rock and roll. His breakout came when Billy “Crash” Craddock took his summertime jam “Rub It In” to the top of the country charts in 1974.

Martine's songs were recorded by Pam Tillis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Crystal Gayle, Kathy Mattea, John Anderson, Don Williams and Tanya Tucker. He wrote Reba McEntire's first hit with “I Don't Want To Be A One Night Stand” and one of her biggest smash singles “The Greatest Man I Never Knew.” Perhaps most remarkable, his song “Way Down” was recorded by Elvis Presley -- in the jungle room at Graceland -- then went to No. 1 just as Elvis died in the summer of 1977.

What Martine didn't have was a recording career of his own. He cut some sides here and there and made a lot of demos, but nothing took off for him, and he was content as a writer. But now, years later, the first full album by Layng Martine Jr. is here. Titled *Music Man*, it's a delightful experience and story.

Layng's son Tucker Martine grew up in Nashville, lit out on his own just after high school, and built an influential career as a recording engineer and record producer working out of Portland, OR. His discography is one of the most distinguished in indie rock and roots, with multiple projects for The Decemberists, Bill Frisell, The Avett Brothers, and his former wife Laura Veirs. Layng says that Tucker would sometimes float the idea of making an album of his father's most interesting work.

“That kept being said for years and years,” recounts Layng. “And then one year at Christmas, I think in 2016, he said, ‘I'm giving you five days in the studio. I'm going to choose the songs. I'm going to play the drums. I'm going to hire the band. And we're going to make the record.’”

Make it they did, once the pandemic panic had subsided, at Tucker's famous Flora Recording and Playback studio, with his closest colleagues and guests including Scott McCaughey of The Minus 5, Peter Buck of R.E.M., and k.d. lang. Music Man defies expectations at every turn. The cover shot offers a look at Layng looking chiseled and flinty, but the 12 songs within are bright callbacks to 1960s pop country and rock and roll, celebrating new love and carefree times, all wrapped in a stylish and up to date esthetic. Layng's voice is youthful and sincere. The songs span decades, from 1964 to fairly recent, and they hold together beautifully.

"Music Man" opens the record by evoking the audacious and life-affirming influence of writers, players, stars and DJs who gave young people a soundtrack of their own back in the day.

"Surabian Lament" - based on a made up word - is a little bit twisty and gothic with a crafty soundscape. While tracks like "Summertime Lovin'" and "Love You Back To Georgia" are pure teen pop filtered through decades of experience. "Little Bit Of Magic" is a three-chord, solar-powered bop. If ever I needed the word irresistible, I need it now.

In our conversation, you'll hear how Layng broke away from his expected path in life and his career in advertising with a strong notion that he could write songs at least as good as those he was loving on rock and roll radio in the 1960s. He struggles and scuffles, even going bankrupt after a restaurant venture fails, until he finds the good graces and mentorship of Ray Stevens in Nashville. Soon after moving, his career takes off, and now his Hall of Fame entry lauds Martine for being "a steady presence on the country and pop charts for more than four decades."

You'll also hear a father who's tremendously proud of his fascinating son, a husband who's gone more than a few extra miles for his beloved wife, and a man just brimming with positivity, compassion and joie de vivre. "I still love diners and Dairy Queens and bombing around with my wife with the top down and all that -- exactly what I liked when I was 16," he says. "You can just keep being the person you are."

Craig Havighurst is WMOT's music news producer and host of The String, a show featuring conversations on culture, media and American music. New episodes of The String air on WMOT 89.5 in Middle Tennessee on Mondays at 8 pm, repeating Sundays at 7 am.