



Shawn Maxwell

J Town Suite



- 
- 1 **Steelmen March**
 - 2 **Fries or Rings in the Back**
 - 3 **Herald's News**
 - 4 **In the Shadow of Statesville**

Shawn Maxwell
alto & soprano saxophone
flute

Michael Barton
electric bass

Collin Clauson
fender rhodes
wurlitzer

Greg Essig
drums & percussion

- 5 **Jerry**
- 6 **Tap, Keg & Tavern**
- 7 **Hickory Street**
- 8 **Bridge Closed**
- 9 **Ghost Mall on Jefferson**

Joliet, Joliet – wherefore art thou?

About 35 miles southwest of Chicago, if we're speaking prosaically; from a more poetic standpoint, Joliet – Illinois' third largest city – sits at the crossroads of 20th-century industry and 21st-century NASCAR. It's where Shawn Maxwell was born and raised, where he went to school and then to Joliet Junior College (the nation's first public community college). It's the source of his origin story, and as with anyone's hometown, it maintains an indelible hold on his memories: recollections of family and friends, first music lessons and high-school jobs.

But it ain't no Elysian Field, as Maxwell will readily attest: "It wasn't the nicest place in the world."

Known to most Illinoisans as the home of a now closed penitentiary, Joliet prompts no romantic visions in those beyond its borders, nor for many of those within. "It was kind of rough," Maxwell continues. "I saw a lot of gang fights. It's where I grew up, but the town had, and still has, a kind of darkness to it. So I wanted the music to have that weird, dark feel to it as well."

Done.

Make no mistake: *J Town Suite* is a love letter – a definitively conflicted one, but a love letter nonetheless – to Maxwell's roots. It's just not a gauzy one, as you can tell by the song titles and especially by the music.

On his previous 11 albums, the saxophonist has honed a hallmark style of composition and improvising, immediately recognizable for its oblique harmonies, unorthodox rhythms, and hairpin turns of melody. His music comes at you in polygons rather than waves. Tritone chords abound. Steep intervals throw the listener off-kilter. Like the city of his birth, Maxwell's work has a rough edge, and although he has polished it to a bright gleam, the scrappy undercoating remains.

On *J Town Suite*, Maxwell leans even further into the minor-key modes and unresolving chord structures he's used in the past. He has purposely used a fair amount of diminished chords – the source of the somewhat sinister sound in many of these pieces – and their prevalence helps create a unified harmonic landscape: they provide a slightly spooky throughline among the suite's movements. Previous albums used this eeriness for occasional comic effect, but here Maxwell employs it as a nearly constant backdrop.

So why the hell do you want to go there with him?

To begin with, "dark" is not "dull" – tone poems don't all come in pastel – and the movements of *J Town Suite* pack plenty of intrigue, along with energy and craftsmanship. You may not start whistling these melodies first thing in the morning, but trust me, they'll worm their way into your consciousness nonetheless. Also, the suite conveys an authentic overall concept, rather than trying to cover a panoply of genres: it's cut from whole cloth. And the entire quartet – Collin Clauson on keyboards, bassist Michael Barton, and Greg Essig on drums – bring a crisp commitment to the presentation. This ensemble rewards listening, and this music provokes thought.

Beyond that, the album brings you closer to the artist himself. Previous projects have always included music inspired by Maxwell's friends and family; over the course of his recordings, he's offered snapshots of his life in no particular order. But he has never devoted an entire album to his own experiences. So consider this the "early years" chapter of his ongoing musical autobiography.

Steelmen March revisits the saxophonist's time at Joliet Central High School, which boasts some serious credibility in national music circles. The band program there, over a century old, was founded by a friend of John Philip Sousa (!), the architect of military band music in the 19th century; despite the city's relative obscurity, the band has a starry reputation to this day. Joliet Central's sports mascot is the Steelman, and the school made "March of the Steel Men" – composed in the 1890s and adapted by the high school in 1937 – its pep song. It's got legs. Maxwell's composition nods to the original in its march cadence and some borrowed bits of melody. From those, and shifting from four-four time to the skipping pulse of five-four, he creates his own hulking theme. "It has a limping darkness," he says. The image of a spry Boris Karloff comes to mind.

To fully appreciate **Fries or Rings in the Back**, you need the context of Joe's Hot Dogs, a late-night takeout joint, family-owned for decades – "one of those very unhealthy spots," Maxwell says, frequented by teens and young adults on their way home from whatever. At Joe's, they make the French fries and onion rings to order, which takes a few minutes, and by 1:30 AM – when the line to the counter has gotten long, and the staff needs to get that part of the order ready in advance to keep things moving – they need to know what the folks at the back of the line will want.

"And so," Maxwell explains, "there's always someone from the staff yelling, 'Fries or rings in the back?' [as each new customer joins the queue]. That's why the bass line stays the same, even as the chords change. I wanted to give people who have not been in Joliet the experience of standing in line and hearing that phrase over and over again." Maxwell plays soprano sax here, folding the instrument's timbre into a dreamscape purgatory of waiting for food in the middle of the night.

Maxwell had a paper route as a kid, as did several of his friends, each delivering the *Joliet Herald-News* to a handful of houses. "But over the next several years," he recalls, "each of my friends lost interest. So I just assimilated their routes, and by the end of high school, I was delivering to well over 100 homes. I was making a ton of bank, which I immediately spent at the comic-book store," cultivating a hobby that he still indulges. His inspiration for **Herald's News** comes from this vignette: "I'm home from school and I don't have a lot of time, because now I have another job, at Burger King. I need to deliver 100 papers in about 20 minutes so I can get to BK. So the theme is kind of chaotic, and I just keep playing the melody over and over, with everything else going around me, till I can get done."

In the Shadow of Statesville references the maximum-security penitentiary in nearby Crest Hill; Statesville eventually obviated the need for Joliet's own prison, which closed in 2002 but remains a local landmark. Maxwell has an unusual personal connection with the old Joliet Correctional Center: when he was a young child, his father worked there as a prison guard. "I can remember driving with my mom to drop him off at work," Maxwell says now, "and I can remember actually going inside with them, for some reason. They give tours there now. It's a seriously dark place – and it was less than half a mile down the street from our high school.

"In Joliet, like a lot of towns, you can be in a really nice area, and then walk a block and you're in a really bad area. Going from the high school to the old prison, it just gets worse and worse, until you get to an area where you don't want to be walking at night. That's the vibe I was going for." The piece sounds haunting, and haunted, thanks to the eldritch flute work combined with shimmering Rhodes piano.

Sunnier memories led Maxwell to compose **Jerry**, dedicated to a friend's father, a locally famous trumpet player named Jerry Lewis, who happened to chair the Fine Arts department at Joliet Junior College. "When I went to sign up for classes there, in 1994, he told me, 'Hey, you're going to be in the jazz band. And I'm going to get you a saxophone.' [Until then, Maxwell had played clarinet only.] I wasn't going to argue because, as a dumb teenager hanging around his house, he had already yelled at me, rightly, for lots of things." To this day, Maxwell remains close to Lewis and his wife.

Lewis not only turned Maxwell into a jazz saxophonist; the educatorhipped all his students to WDCB, the Chicago-area jazz station. "And in improvisation class, he taught us a basic phrase that we jokingly called 'The Jerry Lick.' So I took that, and turned it on its side and amped it up a little, and all the 'A' sections are based off of that."

Regarding **Tap, Keg & Tavern**, Maxwell describes a scene familiar to those who live in cities with clearly marked neighborhoods, each with their own watering-holes. "Within walking distance of my parents' house, you could probably hit ten neighborhood bars; the first one was at the end of their block. My mother worked there as a waitress. This is a tribute to all those places; the words 'tap,' 'keg,' and 'tavern' are taken from famous Joliet bars that had those in their names." Maxwell here makes lighter use of the flute, the better to convey the sense of "bouncing around dive bars until, toward the end, you go home and take a nap."

Maxwell's family lived on **Hickory Street** until he entered fourth grade. "In the surrounding houses, there were what seemed like two dozen kids, all my age, and we would all run around and play on the street." Again playing soprano, he wanted the music to sound happier, to reflect those memories, and indeed, this one is a short, sweet, and extroverted romp.

The last two movements speak to the fraying infrastructure and shuttered businesses that have befallen Joliet and so many other Rust Belt cities. Joliet

is bisected by the Illinois & Michigan Canal, so residents getting from one side of town to the other must use any of several bridges – or rather, any that are actually open. Hence, **Bridge Closed**. "When I was younger a lot of them were broken much of the time," Maxwell remembers. "One was closed for over a year because barges would run into it, or it would just break down. I lived on the west side, and my school was on the east side. If the nearby bridge was working, I could be there in literally two minutes; if it was broken, it might take a half-hour. So in this tune, you're driving and feeling good, and then the traffic backs up and you realize, 'Oh crap! This bridge is closed,' and you have to head a mile or two to the next one – and sometimes that one isn't open, either." The drum breaks capture the panicked frustration of the experience for Maxwell. (Fittingly, the song doesn't have a bridge.)

Finally, **Ghost Mall on Jefferson**, a somber duet for saxophone and bass that alludes to the Jefferson Square Mall, one of so many now-abandoned shopping meccas built in the 1970s and 80s. "It was the place to be," Maxwell says. "And then they built a newer, bigger, better mall on the other side of town, and everyone went there instead. I remember walking around when there was, like, just a Footlocker store, and an Orange Julius, and a Walgreens. It was the most depressing mall ever."

And thus ends Maxwell's ode to Joliet.

Maxwell does have fond memories of his hometown, and he wanted to honor those. But he also had no desire to sling rainbows or slather bluebirds onto the unvarnished truth. He wanted to compose a gritty aural documentary of a place that has problems, but which also shaped his youth, gave him a direction, and led to his career. Joliet was and is working-class, unglamorous, and economically depressed (which makes it more the norm in American life than we might wish to acknowledge). But the fact that it can still command his grudging affection tells us something about the power of memory, and a great deal about Maxwell in particular.

"I wear the city's problems on my sleeve as a badge of honor," he concludes. "There's a certain attitude of: Yeah, I'm from Joliet. Yeah, I went to that high school; yeah, I saw that massive gang fight and got out of there OK. It's as if to say: Hey, this is what I've gone through, and maybe this is why I am the way I am – and hey, it's cool."

- Neil Tesser
GRAMMY Award winning author

ALL COMPOSITIONS © SHAWN MAXWELL PUBLISHED BY SHAWN MAXWELL PUBLISHING (BMI)
SHAWN MAXWELL IS A CONN-SELMER ARTIST AND PERFORMS EXCLUSIVELY ON SELMER SAXOPHONES
SHAWN MAXWELL IS A VANDOREN ARTIST - CLINICIAN AND PERFORMS EXCLUSIVELY
ON VANDOREN REEDS, MOUTHPIECES & LIGATURES



PRODUCED BY SHAWN MAXWELL AND NICK EIPERS
RECORDED BY NICK EIPERS AT ELECTRICAL AUDIO - STUDIO A, CHICAGO, IL ASSISTED BY TAYLOR HALES
MIXED AND MASTERED BY NICK EIPERS AT CRANN DARACH, CHICAGO, IL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL BARTON COVER DESIGN BY NICK EIPERS

shawnmaxwell.com

CORAST012

©© 2023 SHAWN MAXWELL / CORA STREET RECORDS
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION
OR DISTRIBUTION IS A VIOLATION OF APPLICABLE LAWS