

Duane Carleton transcends schlock rock March 23, 2007 *By Art Edelstein Arts Correspondent*
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With so many rock 'n' roll albums a wasteland of unresolved teenage angst, high-decibel electronic noise, undecipherable babblings from mock poets or otherwise poorly conceived and badly produced wannabe music, Duane Carleton's "Once Lost, Then Torn Down" stands out as an oasis of highly listenable music in a desert of creativity. This singer-songwriter-musician has something valuable to say, and he delivers his message in a package most listeners to the rock genre will find very palatable. Carleton hails from West Rutland and he and his band are regular performers in southwest Vermont. His Web site boasts lots of gigs at venues in the Killington region. He has 20 years of experience in the business and it shows. While he is not well known beyond Rutland County, he should be. Carleton's music shows keen insights into the malaise of American rural life as well as the reasons why people choose to live in rural states like Vermont. If musical comparisons are in order, then Carleton's voice and style comes closest to that of John Mellencamp, Bob Seger and Bruce Springsteen. Mellencamp's music has always had a Middle America twang; Seger has a solid rock voice and a clear notion of what ails the middle class. The Boss (Springsteen) has made a fortune extolling the virtues and pinpointing the foibles of the common man. Carleton shows similar sensibilities on this CD, which is not his first. He's put in his time making self-produced singles and other albums and the time spent shows on this new recording. The music here churns and pulses through a variety of rock settings, from blues-inflected songs, to Southern rock, neo-country and acoustic ballads. For the effort, Carleton emerges as a musician with a variety of styles under his belt and this CD kept this reviewer's interest throughout the 13-track album. Carleton's songs center on life in the mud lane of existence of rural poverty ("Small Town Heroes"), life in rural America ("Looks like Home to Me"), the waning of American industry ("The True American") and Vermont's declining farming economy ("The Ballad of Horace Greene"). He manages to cover a lot of landscape eschewing maudlin rhymes, or cookie-cutter rhythms. He accomplishes this with a very good backing band that includes Bob Van Detta on bass, Ross Edmunds on drums and Tim Lynch on keyboards. Carleton handles the guitars. This is a rock solid crew of rock musicians who are not prone to self-indulgence. The fast tunes sizzle and the slower ones ache. The production by Carleton and cohorts is spotless and tight. Self-produced rock music has a tendency to be flabby with too many performer hijinks and lots of self-congratulatory preening. Not this album. Carleton and crew lay down a groove that should be the envy of any band yearning for recognition in this crowded spectrum of the music industry. For his part, Carleton delivers his often-scathing lyrics in a clear baritone void of the screams, yells, howls or other histrionics heard from too many rock performers. He's a really good singer and his voice sits high in the mix, just where it should be. The lyrics here are well thought out and potent. Carleton has a sharp eye for the way people in rural America live. "The people living in my home town know what it's like when things don't go easy/ they're used to doing things the hard way where things can get a bit greasy. And those small town heroes got to shine on," are from "Small Town Heroes," the opening rocker that exemplifies his sparse, but potent approach. These are lyrics with little waste and a charcoal image of the Vermont he observes around him. On the acoustic "True American," Carleton pays homage to the silent majority, America's working poor, with words such as: "I am child from nowhere, no one is my name, got no place I need to go havin' nothing is my shame/ every day when I wake up I do the best I can, I ain't ashamed of what I am for I'm the true American." On "The Ballad of Horace Greene," which Carleton performs with just acoustic guitar, he writes of the dying dairy economy. "Horace Green was a good man, kind to lend a helping hand, came from a long line of farming men, it started when his great, great granddaddy bought this land/ Well some men's dreams can fill up the sky/ others dream of just getting by/ Horace dreamed when his boy was a man he'd take up a family way and work this land/ So how many times can you kick a man down till you've kicked him in the ground, how much of his soul can you tear away till there's nothing left to say?" This is fine tight writing. Carleton hasn't performed in Washington County in recent memory and that's too bad. As good a talent as his should be heard by a wider audience. Perhaps when ski season is over he and his band will take the drive north and share their talents with our part of Vermont.