



## Peter Cooper

### Mission Door

(Red Beet)

US release date: 10 March 2008

UK release date: Available as import

by [Juli Thanki](#)

Let's get one thing straight here: me writing about Peter Cooper, one of the most prolific country music critics and scholars in the business (he teaches country music history at Vanderbilt and has written for numerous music publications), is a little like Avril Lavigne talking smack on Debbie (sorry, *Deborah*) Harry: the cocky, young upstart should never criticize the master; it never ends well. Nevertheless, I persevere, but if you've never read Cooper's writing before, go check him out when you're done reading this.

*Mission Door* is flat out amazing, and the fact that it's Cooper's first record makes it all the more stunning. The songs—of which Cooper wrote or co-wrote ten of the 12—are bleak snapshots of the New South and all that it entails: racism, poverty, modernization, et cetera. Just think of something depressing; chances are it's featured in one of these songs. But it's depressing in a good way. Cooper looks at the world with a journalist's eye for details, but turns a phrase so pretty it makes you mad with envy. The songs are powerful enough to stand on their own, but Cooper kicks it up by enlisting a cadre of guest stars, including Nanci Griffith, Jason Ringenberg, Todd Snider (who Cooper met when interviewing him for an article), and living legend/pedal steel guitarist Lloyd Green, who has played on over 100 #1 country songs.

Peter Cooper obviously has a deep respect and love of country music, and this comes through in his songs, which cite everyone from Charlie Rich to Bob Dylan, though Cooper has an obvious affinity for the doomed geniuses. The most memorable of these tracks is "Take Care," a story song which finds Cooper becoming captivated with Van Zandt's song "Lungs" Cooper then describes actually getting to meet him after a concert where Van Zandt was "too messed up to remember most of the words," but there's no happy ending here, as Townes transforms from songwriting legend to cautionary tale. On "Andalusia," Cooper sings about his grandfather, Hank Williams, small town Southern living, and the disappearance of all of these touchstones from his life.

"715 (For Hank Aaron)" addresses racism through the lens of America's Pastime, complete with a talking blues interlude featuring a young, Aaron-obsessed Cooper in rural Georgia engaged in a conversation about the new home run record holder at his grandmother's beauty shop. It's a fascinating anecdote, bolstered by Cooper's obvious love of the sport, about a time that was divided into "us" and "them", Babe Ruth versus Hank Aaron. Will anyone ever write a song like this about Barry Bonds? Doubtful.

While Cooper's songs take the forefront on *Mission Door*, two covers, both penned by Eric Taylor, are also included. Nanci Griffith and Todd Snider provide accompaniment on title track "Mission Door," which according to the liner notes, is Cooper's favorite song, sung with his favorite singers. Lucky guy. "All the Way to Heaven" is perhaps one of the least-depressing moments of the record as it details the good things about life: Charlie Rich singing, pretty girls dancing, jerks in alligator shoes getting shot by bartenders packing heat. This track alone is worth the price of the record, if only for Lloyd Green's incredible steel guitar solo.

The record's closing track is an amazing version of "Thin Wild Mercury", a song written by Cooper and Todd Snider for Snider's album *The Devil You Know*. It's a song based on Bob Dylan's erroneous criticism

of Phil Ochs (another doomed legend): "You're not a writer / You're a journalist". Lucky for us, Peter Cooper is both.