

The album inspired by Augustine



Sam Rocha - husband, father, philosophy professor - busts it out for punters in a US club. The now Canada-based musician has just released an album of what he calls 'Augustinian soul music'. Just don't call it Christian...

BY ROBERT HIINI

"If that water aint hot then them dishes aint clean," sings US singer songwriter Sam Rocha on *Eggs With Love*, one of many deceptively simple and immediately engaging soul songs on *Late to Love*, his debut album inspired by the *Confessions* of St Augustine.

Was he conjuring words from a long-suffering, ever loving St Monica's lips, or did the phrase emanate from somewhere closer to home, from his own upbringing perhaps?

Sam Rocha is not saying. The question, he intimates, sort of misses the point.

"It's mixed. I don't read the *Confessions* as something "out there," apart from my own lived experience," Rocha said in an interview with *The Catholic Weekly*, earlier this month.

"In fact, the lasting power of the *Confessions* is that Augustine was able to describe universal themes of the human condition that we can all share and commune with.

"This is not an attempt to put Augustine's words to music; it is an attempt to put the soul of the *Confessions* into music. It is not about what Augustine says; it is about what he shows."

The 31-year-old husband, father, writer and philosopher grew up in a Mexican-American household; a lay Catholic missionary family rooted in the charismatic renewal. Music was immersive, all-pervasive, unavoidable.

"I started learning some chords (on guitar) around age five and never stopped. I could never afford lessons, so I don't read music, but I've been blessed to play with people who are consistently better than me and push me to keep improving."

The past 10 years have seen him hone his craft, writing more and more, and playing a slew of professional gigs, often to supplement the family income; a discipline, he says, that has generated growth in his ability to make art.

A prolific blogger, Rocha became somewhat infamous in the Catholic blogosphere for writing a piece called "Why serious Catholics should hate Catholic stuff", a punishing critique of the poor state of Christian subculture. He identifies as a soul musician; a folk artist.

"I don't identify as a

'Christian artist' mainly because I so often see this label used to compensate for bad or mediocre art. You should not buy my art because it is Christian, you should buy it because it is art.

"It's not devotional or liturgical music ... The groove reigns supreme in this music. The musical genre of soul already exists, but often suffers from being spiritually shallow (with some incredible exceptions), and Augustine's neo-platonic Catholicism fills that gap nicely."

Rocha is again puzzled when I ask about music's function - what music is for. He suggests, again, that the question is a strange one.

"I don't really know. I'm not even sure that art needs to have a function.

"The way I think about music is fundamentally somatic, about the body.

"We have a pulse that needs to be in rhythm, babies can feel a beat and it makes them move. We dance.

"So the music I play should not just make you think, it should make you move and feel something in the body and the heart and maybe the mind, too."

Lately, he's been listening to a lot of Jack White, of White Stripes fame ("I'm not a rocker and I will probably always struggle to appreciate it fully, but I find his live performances fascinating").

When it comes to Jazz, he's a huge fan of Brian Blade and the Fellowship and Chris Dave and the Drumheadz, as well as Mehliana, Brad Mehldau and Mark Guiliana's project. He's hanging out for the next D'Angelo record and enjoys the soul group Hiatus Kaiyote.

Somehow, in fulfilling his primary vocation as husband and father, teaching, blogging and writing for prestigious publications like *The Paris Review*, he manages to make time for musical creation.

"You will often find my family in my writing and music, and so on. More and more, the mediums I work in seem to be finding their way together," Rocha said. "I am able to work at home more than most, including nearly every evening and night, so that also gives me precious time to be with my family, and still stay productive."

Late to Love is available from iTunes and Google Play store, and is also available on CD at www.wise-bloodbooks.com



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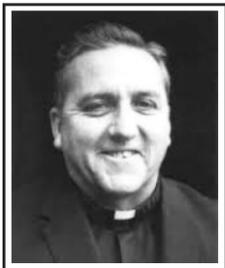
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THE CATHOLIC WEEKLY

Level 8, Polding Centre, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney, NSW 2000
Phone: (02) 9390 5400 | Fax: (02) 9390 5401
Twitter: @catholic_weekly | www.catholicweekly.com.au
www.facebook.com/TheCatholicWeekly

Editor: Peter Rosengren | cweditor@catholicweekly.com.au

Sub-Editor: John Pierce | cweditor@catholicweekly.com.au

Designer: Renate Cassis (02) 9390 5407 | production@catholicweekly.com.au

Journalists: Sharyn McCowen (02) 9390 5408

sharyn.mccowen@catholicweekly.com.au

Robert Hiini (02) 9390 5409 | robert.hiini@catholicweekly.com.au

Marilyn Rodrigues | cweditor@catholicweekly.com.au

Commercial Manager: Suzanne Austin (02) 9390 5403

cwaccountant@catholicweekly.com.au

Advertising and Marketing Manager: Steve Richards (02) 9390 5404

steve.richards@catholicweekly.com.au

Assistant Advertising Manager: Garry Finney (02) 9390 5413

garry.finney@catholicweekly.com.au

Librarian: Nora Jonkers (02) 9390 5416 | nora.jonkers@sydney.catholic.org

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