

# Mark Growden

## *Saint Judas*

**Label:** Porto Franco Records ([portofrancorecords.com](http://portofrancorecords.com))

Release date: March 16, 2010

LP, CD, Digital

**Images:** [markgrowden.org/about/press-photos/](http://markgrowden.org/about/press-photos/)

**Artist page:** [markgrowden.org](http://markgrowden.org)

**Media contact:** Carl Hanni - Mod Media - [modmedia@theriver.com](mailto:modmedia@theriver.com) - (520) 622-6313

**Tour dates:** [markgrowden.org/tour](http://markgrowden.org/tour)

“I want to touch people’s hearts instead of their heads,” says singer and songwriter (and accordionist, banjoist, guitarist and saxophonist) **Mark Growden**. He’s talking about his new record, *Saint Judas*, but he might just as well be talking about his philosophy of life in general. For Growden, life bleeds into music and vice versa, which is part of the reason his songs have always held such a deep emotional sway with such a wide audience. Growden’s first few recordings – like 1999’s *Downstairs Karaoke* and 2001’s *Inside Beneath Behind* – built on the outlaw troubadour vibe of his legendary (and plentiful) live performances around the Bay Area. Now comes *Saint Judas*, a quantum leap forward for the singer that is his most refined recording yet.

*Saint Judas* is Growden’s first studio recording of his own songs in eight years. Although there have been two live albums and some film soundtracks, the gap is significant, and reflects a period of some turmoil in Growden’s life that surfaces in the themes of redemption and forgiveness that runs through the album’s 13 songs. The album’s title track – a Kurt Weill-sounding cabaret rocker with its refrain of “Bottoms up to you, buddy, 'cause somebody had to take the blame” – honors the Biblical “Saint of Sinners” often vilified as the traitor who turned on Jesus. It’s a way of acknowledging and accepting the worst that lies within everyone while finding the strength to forgive and carry on - a theme with deep personal resonance for Growden these days. The singer’s extended break from music was largely due to a drug addiction that he needed time and space away from music to overcome. Now clean for over two years, Growden says the strength and perspective he has gained from kicking his habit has given him a renewed focus on music. “Now that I’m back,” he says, “my relationship to music is more clear.”

That closeness shows. *Saint Judas* is his strongest recording yet in a career that has already been critically applauded and festooned with comparisons to songwriting icons like Nick Cave and Tom Waits. Part of this is due to the strength and rapport of his now-longtime backing band. Guitarist **Myles Boisen**, acoustic bassist **Seth Ford-Young**, percussionist **Jenya Chernoff**, cellist **Alex Kelly** and trumpeter **Chris Grady** (Boisen, Ford-Young, and Grady all long time Tom Waits sidemen) provide an energetic complement to Growden. The group gathered at the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center in northern California for a 4-day rehearsal retreat to prepare for recording live in studio with producer/engineer **Oz Fritz** (whose resume includes everyone from Waits to Caetano Veloso).

The resulting music, recorded live with almost no overdubbing at all, is a gorgeously evocative set of ‘Americana noir’ that finally matches the legendary energy of Growden’s live shows. “We crafted this,” says Growden of the experience of making *Saint Judas*, which was considerably more involved than any of his previous recordings. “It’s not just a few chords going by to a steady beat, we really refined things. It’s very dynamic and nuanced.”

As are the lyrics. Growden has already been described as a wordsmith on par with legends like Leonard Cohen – who he fittingly covers here in a completely reworked version of ‘I’m Your Man’ that deserves to stand alongside Jeff Buckley’s definitive version of Cohen’s ‘Hallelujah.’ But the depth of his poetry has never been more evident than it is here. The opening “Undertaker,” based on an Alan Lomax field recording of the prison work song

“Rosie,” introduces the theme of resurrection that runs through the album. “Dig me a grave, in the open plain. Lower me down, and pull me up again,” sings Growden, over a howling guitar and trumpet. Growden explains that for him the resurrection theme that surfaces here and throughout the album isn’t of the magical rise-from-the-dead variety, but rather that “it takes some grieving to get through to the joy.”

The Biblical references that pile up throughout the album are no accident – Growden’s father was a preacher in the northern Sierra Nevada town of Pinetown, California, where he was raised. But Growden is less interested in religious iconography than he is in seeing Biblical stories as “universal themes.” So “Delilah,” with its plaintive accordion and cello, references the story of Sampson and Delilah, but as a metaphor, he says, “of the death of ego, of the illusion of yourself, for love.” Growden is similarly captivated with recordings of old American (mainly African-American) music, recorded by musicologist Alan Lomax in the 1930s and 40s, and several songs on *Saint Judas* are reworkings of these. In addition to “Undertaker,” “Been In the Storm So Long” is based on a field recording of a woman singing in church in the Georgia Sea Islands, to which Growden penned new words. “Everybody Holds a Piece Of the Sun” marries Growden’s old-timey banjo with Boisen’s guitar skronk and is based on the traditional song “Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning.” Meanwhile the closing banjo-and-voice only “All the Pretty Horses” is not a reworking at all but a version of an old spiritual that Growden calls “one of his favorite songs ever,” which one legend has as being written by a woman watching the horses pulling her child’s hearse through the streets. The most moving piece - the album's centerpiece - is “The Gates/Take Me To the Water.” “Every soul is welcome,” shouts Growden near the end in a line that sums up the overarching theme of *Saint Judas*, “be you a virgin, a whore, a sinner or a saint.” It’s an adaptation of an old spiritual that delicately builds from a percussive accordion-heavy opening to a rousing choir-fed climax before launching into a rollicking New Orleans-style version of the traditional song. “Everyone assumes that it’s about Katrina, says Growden of the track. “But it was written before Katrina, and it’s about walking in Oakland and seeing the pain in people’s eyes.” And for Growden, that hurt he sees in others is part of him too, having overcome his own demons so recently. “Any kind of human behavior that there is,” he says, “that’s in me too.”

Growden’s journey from jazz saxophonist to innovative singer/songwriter with an arrestingly original voice is already unique enough. He began playing accordion and banjo when all his other instruments were stolen from a theater where he was accompanying a dance performance. He began writing and singing his own songs after he read an interview with Joni Mitchell where she remembered a high school poetry teacher telling her – like Growden, an accomplished painter – she could write poetry, since poetry was just “painting with words.”

*Saint Judas* adds yet another twist to his career arc. After enduring some of his darkest moments, Growden has emerged with a powerful summation of his creativity and depth up until now. In addition to the *Saint Judas* album, Growden co-produces COVERT – a site-specific concert series with famed artist John Law, is currently writing an opera based on *Saint Judas*, is working on a educational film about the harmonic series, and leads singing workshops in various cities. An indication that for all his accomplishment and deserved acclaim so far, the next stage of his fascinating career looks to be the best yet.



**PORTO FRANCO RECORDS**