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by Robert Marchant

There's plenty of heartbreak, longing and hard luck in Rob Morsberger's music, the kind of tales that have driven pop music through the ages.

But those stories of love and loss are packed with references to Charles Darwin, hieroglyphics and quantum physics you won't find on any AM radio station, and they're tinged with a wit and bemusement that can be rare in the world of three-minute songs. The lyrics are set to a tight musical arrangement that also cross boundaries with ease.

It's a style that Morsberger has been honing for years, and on his fourth album, "Diary of a Literal Man," recorded in a little sound studio adjoining his Croton home, he has brought together many different strands of science, history and literature into a compelling musical tapestry.

And why can't the father of evolution end up in pop music?

"I do enjoy introducing details that are kind of exotic in a pop-music context. I enjoy the different-ness. It's fun in a playful way. It gives me a fresh lens to look at familiar things," says Morsberger, 50, a married father of four.

When he's not recording albums and touring with the likes of the Crash Test Dummies and Marshall Crenshaw, Morsberger scores music for PBS science shows "Nova" and "Nova scienceNOW."

The music, he said, "helps the audience feel the excitement of the ideas -- it's about stories and people

Continuing, he said, "I do seem to write about people who have a passionate desire to learn the truth about things. A solitary quest, a spiritual thing -- it's the search for truth -- we're all compelled by that in our lives."

There's almost a novelistic quality to much of Morsberger's work, whether he's recounting the story of a blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter or a grisly tale of murder in Mississippi.

"What I love about the novel is the nuanced view of life, distinct to each author, this layered, complicated, rich picture of life. The miracle of pop music is that you can get that in a three-minute song as well. Somehow it happens. The music and the words have to be really simple. If you can combine them in the right way, you can get nice ambiguities, things that are fresh, but not obvious," Morsberger said.

Music producer Stewart Lerman says Morsberger has an unusual capacity as a musician, a classical sensibility with popular instincts.

"He brings two worlds together, pop songwriting, and with a really great sense of orchestral music. He doesn't choose to be a classical composer, he's writing contemporary pop music. He has a real ability to orchestrate straight-up pop tunes. He's a master at it, and he's a songwriter, too," said Lerman.

Morsberger spent much of his youth in England and was classically trained at the University of Edinburgh.

He knew from an early age that music would be his life.

"I'm lucky I can make a living as a musician doing a lot of different things," he said, "I was never going to be anything but an artist of some kind. I really like being a musician."

And with a laugh, he said, "It seems to work OK."