

RICK SHEA HAMMERS OUT STRONG SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AMERICANA ON 'LOVE & DESPERATION' (ALBUM REVIEW)

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We are all figuring out ways to deal with this pandemic but musicians face some of the more difficult challenges. They can't perform in crowded live venues, virtual shows do little for them financially, and that yearning to play with friends and perform for fans is growing stronger as the days pass. Southern California singer-songwriter **Rick Shea** found at least one solution. He began sessions for *Love & Desperation* in the spring of 2019 at his home studio with first rate talent such as drummer **Shawn Nourse** (Dwight Yoakam, I See Hawks in L.A.), bassist **Jeff Turmes** (Mavis Staples) and his longtime collaborator **Dave Hall**. They didn't finish and then were interrupted by the pandemic this spring. So, the album had to be completed digitally and Shea reached out to his friends that he knew had their own home studios to finalize the project.

So, Nourse worked at his own home as did **Phil Parlapiano** of Dead Rock West, keyboardist **Skip Edwards** (Dwight Yoakam), and accordionist **David Jackson**. Although Shea would have preferred the special interplay that develops when all are in one room, he was pleased with the resulting natural sound. Shea either wrote or co-wrote eleven of the dozen tunes, choosing to begin with a rockabilly tune by swamp rocker Al Ferrier, once also covered by bluesman Lazy Lester. Because Shea is cut from a similar cloth as Dave Alvin and the late Chris Gaffney, both of whom he played with for years, the listener gets a cross section of most American roots forms: blues, folk, country, and rock n' roll. Shea also says it owes to the bars and honky-tonks of San Bernardino where he grew up. He is a gifted storyteller with a little bit of that high lonesome sound, perhaps better said as moonlit desert quality in his vocals. The use of accordions in most songs give the songs a southwestern/Tex-Mex feel. Such is the case with the country ballad "Blues at Midnight" and especially with the shady, desperate characters that populate "(Down at the Bar at) Gypsy Sally's" which borrows its title from Townes Van Zandt's "Tecumseh Valley."

The title track is autobiographical, nodding to family history where the wild kid finds plenty of freedom with his inattentive parents. "Juanita" takes its title from the name of his wife's mom as Shea tries to imagine the lives of his in-laws when they were dating. "A Tender Hearted Love" is an endearing tune for his wife. A major highlight and the quintessential example of Shea's style is "She Sang of the Earth," a ballad written with Kim Ringer, daughter of the late, respected singer-songwriter Jim Ringer. On this tune Shea plays acoustic guitar, mandolin, and mesmerizing pedal steel, emblematic of his versatility across any stringed instrument that imbues the entire album. Additional evidence lies in the instrumental "Mystic Canyon" where Shea plays both electric guitar and pedal steel, weaving layers of color to great effect.

He delivers the cautionary tale "Nashville Blues," indicating no regrets about never having moved there- "I'm better off at home singing the blues." The album closing noir "Texas Lawyer," inspired by the work of novelist Elmore Leonard, is making its third appearance on a Shea album, having appeared on his first CD, on his live solo version, and now here. It's a sentimental touch as the late Chris Gaffney played accordion and sang on the original. Here he adds a trumpet and background vocalist while his mandolin playing infuses the vibe. Together with the autobiographical and past material are the songs inspired by these pandemic times. "Big Rain Is Comin' Mama" is a country two-step about impending doom. "The World's Gone Crazy" he describes with these words, "Things have been upside down for a while now. I wrote this after watching a particularly harrowing episode of *The Rachel Maddow Show*."

This is the essence of Americana music, delivered by one of its severely underrecognized talents accompanied by some of the best musicians in southern California. If you like the music of artists like Dave Alvin, Dwight Yoakam, and Tom Russell and are only familiar with Shea as a sideman, you owe this a listen.