



REVIEW: RICK SHEA AND THE LOSIN' END – THE TOWN WHERE I LIVE (2018)

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Somewhere in middle America.....

Living in the middle of England and looking out of the window as I type this, it is rainy, drizzly and cold, it is easy to romanticise American music. To build the places that it comes from as something somehow different. Wide-open roads paved with possibilities. When Springsteen sang about the “Badlands of Wyoming” on “Nebraska” not once did it cross our teenage minds that living in the US might just be as dull as living here. It sounded mystical, majestic even. It still does.

Which is why, even 25 years or more after hearing what remains this reviewer's favourite Springsteen record, it still comes as a shock to hear the small-town frustrations expressed. The title track of “The Town Where I Live” – Rick Shea's eleventh solo record, but by his own admission his most band focused – deals with exactly that. “The town where I live,” sings Shea, in rich deep tones, “it is ragged and old, too hot in the summer and the winters too cold”. And later he adds a touch of real despair. “Sometimes I feel like a ghost in the town where I live” he offers, before admitting that even if he left, he'd “end up someplace where it all looks the same.”

In those few lines he shows all his gifts for telling wonderful stories, ones rooted in the reality of existence. Such vignettes are everywhere you look on “....Live” and inform it throughout.

The simple acoustic and accordion backing to the opener “Goodbye Alberta” ensures that one is instantly familiar and as warm and welcoming as returning home. The dustbowl folk of “The Road To Jericho” has a kind of shuffle, and is shot through with a longing and deep-seated regret. That it feels instantly familiar, yet retains an originality is to its credit.

“The Starkville Blues” is another that has its roots in rock n roll's history right from the moment Elvis went in to Sun Studios people have been recording songs like this, but this not only has phenomenal lap steel, but a real Johnny Cash flavour too.

A record with an appreciation of the fact that you can't just serve up the same song time after time, “Hold On Jake” is anchored in the honky-tonks where Shea found this sound, while “Trouble Like This” is a gentle lamentation, albeit one which doesn't shy away from the fact that something awful will probably happen. It is not dissimilar from Stephen Fearing's wonderful record from last year.

“(You're Gonna Miss Me) When I'm Gone” has a classic country vibe, and with its glorious lead guitar is highly likely to get them dancing when it's played live, for all that though, there is a deep-rooted sense of sadness here, as if to say that whatever happens the black clouds just won't lift.

“The Angel Mary And The Rounder Jim” is a quite superb story set to quite superb music and its harmonies are gorgeous. Looking back to happier times, maybe, but this is sun drenched and beautiful.

“Sweet Little Mama” ends things in timeless fashion. Organ work and more understated guitar (it is a feature of the album that the playing is never flashy, but somehow fits perfectly) while just before comes the only one Shea didn't write, “Guess Things Happen That Way” has been performed by everyone from Johnny Cash to Emmylou Harris but here Rick Shea and The Losin' End make it their own in the same way that Steve Earle might.

In many ways the cover sums up the album. “The Town Where I Live” knows its history, but it offers something new, and in so doing, these stories are brimming with a very special kind of frustration indeed. Rather like the best American music has always seemed to.

Rating 8/10