

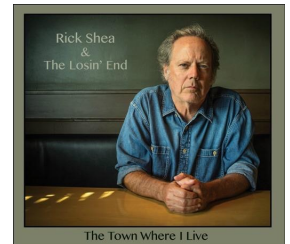
DEEP ROOTS

Roots Music & Meaningful Matters

The Deep Roots Elite Half Hundred of 2017 (Part 1)

11. RICK SHEA & THE LOSIN' END, *The Town Where I Live* (Tres Pescadores)

Essentially a folk singer with a hearty voice, a sure feel for country-flavored blues and given to vivid, detailed portraits of people and places in the manner of Tom Russell, California-based veteran Rick Shea offers a folk-flavored gem as wise and powerful as Tom Paxton's 2015 triumph, *Redemption Road*. Like all outstanding folk writers, Shea knows the land and its human inhabitants are inseparable, and the former is predictable only in doing unpredictable things to the latter.



So the album opening toe-tapper, “Goodbye Alberta,” although spiced with a bit of Tex-Mex flavor in the form of multi-instrumentalist Stephen Patt’s accordion, might well be an emotional farewell to Alberta, Canada, or to a doomed relationship with a living person. Actually, the first three songs—including “The Road to Jericho” and the twangy, Cash-like “The Starkville Blues”—either bid farewell to an unwelcoming locale or warn against dangers lurking for those daring to visit said destinations. The fourth song does away with a specific name but is similarly dire in its dirge-like quality and unforgiving assessment of “The Town Where I Live” in lyrics such as “...it all seems to take a lot more than it gives/they say you’re too young, they say you’re too old/the job’s just been filled or you’re moving too slow...” In this context it makes sense Shea would emerge from these tales with a rousing country stomper in “(You’re Gonna Miss Me) When I’m Gone” and would offer, in the penultimate number, an existential affirmation of simply rolling with the flow in the Jack Clement-penned Johnny Cash classic, “Guess Things Happen That Way,” arranged in subdued emulation of Buddy Holly’s “Peggy Sue,” with drummer Shawn Nourse delivering the trademark paradiddles through the number.

The most moving of Shea’s songs sounds not a warning about troubles ahead but rather presents a cautionary tale about a real-life couple headed for trouble. The principals are gifted folk singers Mary McCaslin and the late Jim Ringer, who met on the circuit, married and produced one celebrated album, 1978’s *The Bramble & The Rose*, and subsequently “flamed out in distressingly public fashion,” as Jerome Clark observed [in his review](#) of *The Town Where I Live*, but not before producing music still spoken of in hushed terms in folk circles. Over a gently shuffling country rhythm, Shea, his voice resonant and strong, and Claire Holley, adding plaintive harmony support, unfold a sympathetic but clear-eyed narrative of the duo’s triumphs and impending tragedy: “*Fortune smiled, the songs rang true / they traveled far, their legend grew / trouble came on a devil wind / caught the Angel Mary and the Rounder Jim / two voices singing, two hearts entwined / songs that grew from the true vine / they rode the hard road both end to end / the Angel Mary and the Rounder Jim...*” *The Town Where I Live* suddenly is transformed into a folk morality play. All these places where trouble lurks, and finally two doomed souls enter, Angel Mary and Rounder Jim, fated to learn they can’t beat the land, much as the characters in *Deliverance* learned they couldn’t beat the river. *David McGee*