

**Rick Shea & the Losin' End,
The Town Where I Live
(Tres Pescadores, 2017)**

Last I heard Rick Shea, it was on his album "Sweet Bernardine," which I reviewed in this space on 7 September 2013. At the time he was only a vaguely familiar name. I liked his album a whole lot, and his brand-new one is just as good, basically more of the same except with slightly more of a band sound. Clearly Shea, a Californian who's been around for a while, knows who he is and what he wants to do.

He is not to be confused with some pop-flavored, faux-rooted "Americana" act. He traffics in muscular folk music based in American tradition and experience. Here, nine of the 10 songs are Shea originals, though the last, "Sweet Little Mama," consists in good part of floating verses from old blues and folk songs, along with a melody related to the traditional "Corrine, Corrina." Shea, it can be fairly stated, is as outstanding singer as the late Merle Haggard; though their voices are not close, they're at least distant cousins. They have in common the ability to communicate a story with commanding authority and mature wisdom.

The song that hit me the hardest on first hearing is "The Angel Mary & the Rounder Jim." I was halfway through it before its subject matter occurred to me. It turns out to be something I knew about through mutual friends: the doomed relationship, professional and romantic, of Mary McCaslin and the late Jim Ringer, who in the 1970s shined brightly on the West Coast and national folk scene but who flamed out in distressingly public fashion. In their prime they produced some of the most memorable music of the era, McCaslin as a singer-songwriter, Ringer as carrier of family-derived traditional ballads (e.g., the stunning "California Joe") and hard-core country. (His repertoire included a song I co-wrote with Dakota Dave Hull, though Ringer died before recording it.) Shea, who knew them well (his previous album features a duet with McCaslin on Roy Acuff's "Streamline Cannonball"), skimps on the details, best forgotten in any case, but conveys what everyone who knew their music still feels: a sense of irretrievable loss for what could have been. The repeating of the first verse at the conclusion will punch you right in the heart.

Jack Clement's "Guess Things Happen That Way," an early Johnny Cash hit, sounds as if cut with the Crickets, Buddy Holly's legendary band, specifically on my all-time favorite Holly tune, "Peggy Sue," on my list of songs of which I will tire on the day I cease breathing. Fittingly, it's the most band-ish cut on the album. On the other hand, the excellent "Road to Jericho," a Shea original, could nearly pass as traditional. Its thematic inspiration had to have been the oldtime "Goin' to Jericho." Other standouts such as "Trouble Like This" and "The Starkville Blues" attest to Shea's singular ability to convey a sense of dread.

Dylan has said that if you want to write songs, first immerse yourself in the folk tradition. That's because traditional singers knew worthwhile songs and knew how to tell the stories in them. Like anything that's worth preserving, it's something you can't fake. Rick Shea's music is devoid of fakery, and it tells stories you will want to hear. *Jerome Clark*