

Paste

Mercyland: *Hymns for the Rest of Us* [Mercyland Records]

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When most folks think contemporary Christian music, they run. Whether it's the glossy post-Prozac sheen of Sting at his most vacuous, the dentist's perky AC or the harmony-heavy old-school quartets, it doesn't inspire passion in faith.

Phil Madeira, like fellow roots icon/salvation witness Buddy Miller, knows the difference and the way to coax the divine from plain dirt. On *Hymns for the Rest of Us*, an all-star alt-roots collection, Madeira crafts a Sunday morning coming down that can satisfy even a staunch non-believer.

Drawing on guests from The Civil Wars to the North Mississippi Allstars to Emmylou Harris, Madeira's *Mercyland* offers an ecumenism that reaches across subgenres to coalesce a community bound by both faith and music.

From John Paul White's first strummed acoustic guitar chords, The Civil Wars' euphoric "From This Valley" finds the duo trading verses and sharing harmonies with Harris. It is a joyful noise, a seeking that kicks up one's heels, even as it grounds the soul in something more than the soles.

Their acoustic jubilation melts into down-low cool on Shawn Mullins' Gil Scott Heron-evoking "Give God the Blues." Name-checking various religions and political parties, only to assert God hates none of them, Mullins slashes hypocrisy in the name of God, creating a realm of togetherness in a world driven by hyper-divisiveness.

Providing the instruments room to breathe, Madeira's own contribution offers languid jazz. "Mercyland" reinforces the notion salvation is a communal effort. A raw voice that's warm yet dusty, the noted sideman's lifted up by the McCrary Sisters' perfect girl group "ooh" and "aah" punctuations, as a tremolo guitar melts over the slight snare drum-with-brushes-driven arrangement.

Effortless, varied, real: it imbues Mercyland with potency. The easy sweep of Matt Kearney's "Walking Over The Water," Carolina Chocolate Drops' old time banjo-driven "Lights In The Valley" or John Scofield's Procol Harum-meets-Al Perkins'-steel instrumental "Peace In The Valley" create an accessible gospel for people living on terra firme.

That diversity also broadens. North Mississippi Allstars bristle through a lean rock treatise "If I Was Jesus," while Dan Tyminski eschews his haunted bluegrass for the slithering soul witness "Light of Your Love" and Miller works from his wheelhouse with the straight testimonial "I Believe In You."

In jaded times, faith must feel real. For Phil Madeira, it means an altar call of friends he believes in to sing songs of faith from where they each reside; the result abides even those who might not follow, but merely love music at its source.