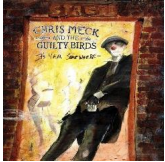


Chris Meck & The Guilty Birds - It's 4 AM Somewhere (2016)

Written by bluesever

Saturday, 18 June 2016 14:22 - Last Updated Friday, 15 December 2017 22:02

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1. *Brave and Reckless* 2. *Ways* 3. *Who Do You Love?* 4. *I Promise I Will* 5. *Dark Sea* 6. *Sand* 7. *Good to You* 8. *You Belong to Me* 9. *Can't Drink You Away* 10. *Train* Chris Meck - guitar, vocals Calandra Ysquierdo - bass, vocals Michelle Bacon - drums, vocals

The power of Chris Meck and the Guilty Birds' debut comes from several places at once, but is exerted with a devastating focus.

First, there's the precision of its fine power trio. Calandra Ysquierdo's prowling, menacing bass and agile backing vocals explode off Michelle Bacon's relentlessly pounding drums and splashing cymbals. They bolster lead singer Chris Meck's more fragile bravado and provide ample space for his sharp, clean, ever-reaching guitar.

Kansas Citians familiar with Meck's late wife Abigail Henderson's battle with cancer — through which she managed to build an annual caravan to the nationally renowned Midcoast Takeover showcase at SXSW and create the Midwest Music Foundation, which provides health care services to local musicians — there's a special poignancy to these jagged-edged anthems composed and performed by her loved ones. In fact, Henderson's fans may hear an echo of her in the blend of Meck's and Ysquierdo's vocals on the opening cut.

But all art has history, and what makes this album important is its vitality in the present. It takes no context beyond being an open-hearted human to hear the late-night desolation that haunts this record.

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We often think of irony as a distancing mechanism, but the ironies here are double-pronged weapons, tools for fighting back. Take opener, “Brave & Reckless,” which is built around the stalker-ish lines “You say you don’t want it/Say you don’t need it.” The bass-driven verses are every bit as creepy as that line, but it only takes half a listen to realize this is self-talk, and the thing that’s being debated is the vulnerability to love again. The protagonist is a heartbroken shell, rehearsing lines and barely managing his cigarettes on an all-night drive.

Similarly, on the album’s centerpiece, “Dark Sea,” the simplest yearnings for connection are transformed into seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Only the force of drums, bass and guitar suggest there’s a way to keep going.

Until the last cut, every brave moment is shadowed by self-deprecation. The anthemic “I Promise I Will” attempts to start a romance by promising “I’ll always blow it at all the worst moments.” The album’s most magnificent build — rising to something like a great Stones cut balanced with the Velvet Underground’s strange grandeur — is “Can’t Drink You Away,” which doesn’t even pretend to want to forget. And the gorgeous, delicate “Good to You” confesses one limitation after another before qualifying its pledge of commitment with “If you feel lost the way I do, I’ll be good to you.” All the pledges on this record defy pain, but that doesn’t mean they don’t wince.

Except the last one. “Train” is the classic blues on a record that up to that point only hints at it. Closer in sound and spirit to Hendrix’s “Red House” cover than the rest of the album, it’s still of a piece, allowing Meck to showcase the range of his guitar chops. Even Meck’s voice sounds stronger than ever, certain he’ll be ready when his own train comes. He sounds like he takes comfort in knowing he won’t be coming back. ---Danny Alexander, kcur.org

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