

Unexpected Light in the Darkness: David G. Smith, May 17 at the Redstone Room

Written by Jeff Ignatius
Saturday, 03 May 2014 08:48

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In putting together his new album *One House*, Blue Grass, Iowa-based David G. Smith “ended up with 10 issues-oriented songs,” he said in an interview last week.

This was a bit of an accident. Smith – who will be celebrating the album’s release with a May 17 show at the Redstone Room – said he brought 21 songs to producer Blue Miller and “figured we’d find an album out of that. ... We ended up recording two albums. ... We’ve got another one on deck. It’s already been mastered.”

And when Smith considered which songs to put on which album, *One House*’s 10 tracks seemed to naturally go together in the order they appear.

The title track asks the question “Can we live in one house built on higher ground?” “Ivory” deals with the illegal trade of elephant tusks. “Jesus Is in Prison” is about a death-row inmate. “Angels Flew” tells the story of a boat lift rescuing people on 9/11. “Doesn’t Take Much Light” and “Ariel” are specific narratives based on real people – with Parkinson’s disease and the extremely rare Rett syndrome, respectively. (The River Music Experience concert is also a platform to raise money for the latter illness.)

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It's a heavy collection, and for some tastes it will likely be too on-the-nose, even though it's rarely preachy – which Smith called “the mortal sin of songwriting”: “It's a supreme challenge to try to write something that will strike a chord with people and at least make them pause and maybe think a little bit.”

The subject matter and directness are countered by folk arrangements that are thoughtful and evocative, but more importantly the album – Smith's second studio effort – is also filled with hope, conviction, earnest heart, and lovely turns of phrase that elevate it. Smith is at his best finding unexpected light in the darkness.



On “Jesus Is in Prison” (one of five songs that Smith co-wrote instead of penning solo), he sings that the inmate in question “never said he's guilty” – but there's nothing in the song to indicate that he's *not*. There's an empathy to the song, trying to figure out what's in the convict's head and soul, and Smith combines at least three ideas in one dense sentence: “Evil's loose and Jesus is in prison / And he's waiting for the truth to set him free.” Here he's talking about the wickedness of the world; invoking the Christian idea of “inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me”; and suggesting the peace that death can bring.

In the relatively simple love song “Made for You,” there's a cryptic, eloquent nugget that is at once cheesy and wise, speaking matter-of-factly to the ways relationships change people, and one can infer that it can be for better or worse: “I wasn't born this way / I was made for you.”

With “Second Chances” – about people with serious illnesses – there's a touching insight that cuts through the poignancy, articulating the inherent value of a connection even when hope is dim or lost: “Here's to you givers and receivers / Here's to each of you who reaches for the other.”

Something similar happens with “Ariel,” which seeks and finds the positive – and a lesson – in a child who cannot communicate: “I see your free spirit trapped inside an unrelenting body / Teaching me the necessity of innocence.” Rather than being an empty sentiment or projection, Smith finds the crucial detail: “blinking rapid-fire to music that you find to your liking.”

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Regardless whether he's telling one person's true story or a larger narrative, Smith said the process and aims are the same: "'Ariel' is on one end of the spectrum, ... along with 'Doesn't Take Much Light,' that you are naming names. Whether you're naming names or not, you're looking for a story that's compelling," and searching in that for something that will resonate. "Telling the truth and being honest about it. That's how I approach every song."

It's a lesson he also tries to teach. Shortly after our interview, Smith had a songwriting workshop in Nashville on teen pregnancy. "What will guide us through hopefully are those components," he explained. "It's a compelling story, and we're going to try to tell some of what's not just our truth, but what rings true. That's tough to do."

As for the finished third studio album, Smith said it won't be quite so topical: "I'll get a little more personal, and I think I'll let people see a little more of me," he said. And he promised "a couple more fun songs."

David G. Smith's record-release show for One House will be held on Saturday, May 17, at the River Music Experience (129 North Main Street, Davenport; RiverMusicExperience.org). The performance begins at 7 p.m., and tickets are \$5.

For more information on David G. Smith, visit DavidGSmithMusic.com.