

Jeremy James – ‘Landlocked’

Album Review by Alan Bennett Ilagan

You hear them on public radio all the time ~ earnest gay folk artists whose words are typically preachy and whose melodies meander but never mesh. Strumming their guitars and singing their words, they let loose a barrage of sounds and songs, often overburdened with wordy clumsiness but forgiven for their well-meaning earnestness. Their intent is lofty, and the message is strong, they just never quite get the music to match the meaning. Rising above the gay-folk fray is Jeremy James, whose fourth album ***Landlocked*** was released earlier this year.

James is the real deal – a singer, song-writer, and musician whose roots are in the South, but whose branches stretch North. As he states on opening track ‘Home’, “I’m watching this road unwind and I’m in a blue state of mind.” Alternately ambivalent and proud of his Southern background (“You can take the boy out of the country, but you cannot take my country from me”), James sets the album up as a journey, where such ambivalence provides a tender bit of tension, and a very real resonance.

From the album’s title to songs like ‘Thruway’ and ‘Home’, the land – roadways, barren space, rivers, hometowns – is a recurring theme. In ‘Saline River’ he wonders, “You are my homeland, why won’t you take me as I am?” Grounded by the ground itself, James crafts an organic, unified collection of folk songs that alternately burst with energy and compel with quiet reflection. He’s a story-telling song-writer, conjuring tales and slices-of-life with adroit understanding and evocative imagery.

A banjo-strumming song about the New York State Thruway may not sound like much on paper, but James draws inspiration from that otherwise unremarkable stretch of highway, finding the haunting loneliness of a solitary drive to or from someone or something, and the colloquial ‘Thruway’ will resonate with anyone who’s spent a few hours on the non-descript road.

Standout-track ‘Waiting’ is arguably the best cut on the album – a rollicking rouser that finds James refusing to accept or settle for anything less than he deserves and needs, as he laments, “I need a man who can hold my hand cause I’m so tired of making

do” against racing guitar-work and a sing-along melody. He also shines when things slow down. The plaintive, gorgeous guitar work of ‘All the Things We Knew’, perfectly backs its layered lyrics, lending further ache to a bittersweet world where “the pronouns just get in the way” as James attempts to “comprehend the science of who you are.”

‘Measure Up’ ticks off a laundry-list of comparisons between its narrator and a possible paramour or rival (“Maybe I’m not as tall as him/ Maybe he’s got a slyer grin/ Maybe he knows how to tell a joke that leaves the whole room laughing/ Maybe he’s got better hair/ Maybe he’s got that savoir faire.”) Such self-reflection mingled with self-doubt makes for compelling listening, and the search that James has embarked upon so vividly comes to a beautiful unresolved close on this final track.

James is a refreshingly open artist who renders the gay issue irrelevant with his matter-of-fact nonchalance about the whole thing, which may be the best way to forge acceptance. Too often our folk artists tend to get denounce the pulpit as they climb atop it themselves. Utilizing his knack for beautiful melodies, insightful lyrics, and skilled musicianship, James gets his message across with a collection of gorgeous songs – never grating and never harsh – the perfect antidote for the coming winter.