



James McMurry “**Childish Things**” Compadre Records

There’s no denying that James McMurry, like his father, is an observer of the finer details of life. God knows James has filled his six previous studio albums with sometimes biting lyrical observations on the human condition. “**Childish Things**” is the seventh episode in an ongoing story.....

Having completed his allotted daily chores, in the opening cut, “See The Elephant” the teenaged farm-boy asks his father if he can go “*Down to Richmond to see the travelling show.*” While a real life travelling show is the tag in this cut, other songs on “**Childish Things**” focus subjectively on the circus – for richer, for poorer - that day-to-day life has always been! The conclusion offered by the world weary forty-something[!] narrator in the album title cut, and second track, is that he has now “*Put away childish things.*” McMurry posted a rowdy eight-minute long band, and a five-minute long solo acoustic, mp3 version of the anthem “We Can’t Make It Here” on his web site, prior to last year’s U.S. Presidential Election. Here the song runs out at just over seven minutes. Thematically McMurry’s lyric paints a picture of a 21st century country, supposedly the world’s richest and most advanced, whose blue-collar workforce find themselves in crisis. Foreign wars, minimum wage, welfare cut-backs, drugs, sex, all kinds of products imported from the East and more, come under the gaze of McMurry’s microscope. Taken as a five-word statement, the title can be read two ways, the first being that America’s factories and manufacturing plants have been exported to lands where labour is cheaper, while, secondly, the knock-on effect of those closures is that life for the ordinary man has become a daily struggle to survive. The line “*No, I hate the man who sent the jobs away*” may be directed at the current incumbent in the White House, but here in “the West” jobs in the traditional heavy or labour intensive industries have been diminishing for decades under the tutelage of political parties of all shades. The point being that in the U.S.A., the two [major] party system has run its corrupt course, leaving a nation divided by a very deep rich/poor chasm. For the poor, and paraphrasing McMurry’s lyric, he also raises the spectre of “*join the forces and go fight for us in a foreign war [and die], if you can’t find a day job,*” and bitterly adds the rider “*rich boys are exempt from such conflict!*” Pat Tillman went to war, and sadly died, when he could easily have stayed home, signed on the dotted line and become, so to speak, “*a rich boy.*” Seems like there’s something not quite right with this picture. Congressman Bernie Sanders [elected for eight straight terms] and a Vermont Independent, who is currently standing for election to the U.S. Senate on an American Working Families ticket, has adopted McMurry’s song for his campaign, while over in that “swinging” state, Ohio, at station WYSO-FM in Dayton, the music director was recently suspended without pay for one week by the Federal Communications Commission for daring to play the unedited version of “We Can’t Make It Here.” These are truly scary times!

Jay Webb’s “Ole Slew Foot” was a minor Country Chart entry for Porter Wagoner on two occasions – ‘66 and ‘78 - when released as a single, and on this reading James is supported vocally by Joe. Ely, that is. The storyline relates to an old bear, “*He’s big around the middle, and broad across the rump*” plus “*He ain’t never been treed, Some folks say he looks a lot like me*” who comes down the mountain looking for food and runs off with a pig. In terms of content, that’s the top and bottom folks! OK there’s actually more, the bear also smashes the farmer’s precious hives and eats all the honey. With his focus on a multi-generational family gathering on America’s late May national holiday “Memorial Day,” the latter is in part a, finely observed, carbon copy of “Choctaw Bingo.” The storyline to “Six-Year Drought” meanders through a sweat filled summer of physically draining labour during which the narrator drops the aside “*I was still a prisoner here in ‘61.*”

“The Old Part Of Town,” is the location for an assignation in this rough edged love song, a composition penned by Peter Case that made it’s debut on his 1989 Geffen album “**The Man With The Blue Post Modern Fragmented Neo-Traditionalist Guitar.**” There’s a cut here titled “Charlemagne’s Home Town.” Born in 742 AD Charlemagne’s birthplace has never been definitively established, although the

city of Aachen [in current day Germany] certainly became his power-base. Once he came to power in 768, Charlemagne was engaged in almost constant battle till his passing in 814. As a child he even accompanied his warmongering father in battle, and once Charlemagne came to power he ruled with the sword and the crucifix. Throughout his reign Charlemagne was also followed by a trail of scandal and deceit. Does any of this sound familiar? Whatever, McMurtry's song contains the line "*I measure out my life with coffee grains*" a reference to T.S. Eliot's 1917 poem "The Love Song Of J. Arthur Prufrock" in which appears "*I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.*" With an accordion at play in the background, there's a European café society feel to the lyric, with mention of black tobacco smoke filling the air, liking the language [a foreign tongue?], a marketplace merry-go-round and more. There are also hints [in the lyric] of some unattainable female. "Pocatello," all three minutes of it, is just another rock 'n' roll song about meeting this woman on the road – no more, little less. Having already raised the spectre of the "**Saint Mary Of The Woods**" closer "Choctaw Bingo," here, the lyric to the final track "Holiday," once again repeats the family gathering formula leavened with more of McMurtry's spiky insight into humankind's foibles.

Musically speaking there are two paces to McMurtry tunes, one fast and loud the other slow and ponderous. Melodically speaking it's hard to hum a single one of these suckers, and it's been that way since James began employing an electric guitar, bass and drum backdrop many albums back. James you stay on the high road, finally, after all these years, I'm for taking the.....

Folkwax Score 7 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

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