



James McMurtry "**Saint Mary Of The Woods**" Sugar Hill Records

McMurtry returns, following a four-year long hiatus, with a self-produced set [apart from the Ross Hogarth co-produced album title cut] recorded at Austin's Flashpoint Recording. This album, his sixth, finds McMurtry still firmly lodged in *electric downtrodden blue-collar roots rock territory*, and of the ten tunes seven are totally McMurtry originals. "Dry River," penned by Dave Alvin and included by the Californian on his 1996, recorded *live in Austin* disc "**Interstate City**," opens this collection. A *dry river bed* features in verse one, and *dead tree stumps* in a bulldozed orange grove in verse two. Both are used as an analogy to the unrequited love that the narrator mentions in the closing verse. Poetry!!

There's a Dire Straits rhythm and feel to the "Valley Road," while McMurtry's words are cryptic in the extreme, presenting disjointed snapshots that form no obvious or contiguous story line. Sic, "*looking through the front door*" and "*mirror ball in the middle of the dance floor.*" As for the Valley Road, someone definitely rode a sled out there – on wheels or with runners ? – with "*No helmet or a care in the world*" and "*Your face buried in the back of his shirt, Shut your eyes and you never get hurt.*" Sadly by this stage, I'm thinking these folks are out there living on the edge, "*But do I really care?*"

Next, I found myself singing [Dylan's] "It's All Over Now Baby Blue" as James worked his way through the title cut. In the song "Out Here In The Middle," the fact that the line featuring the song title is followed by the words "*where center's on the right,*" kinda left this scribe more than a little confused. Where was he going with the lyric ? Maybe geometry wasn't a hot deal with James. "Lobo Town" rocks with a vengeance, while the appearance of the line "*Pass judgement if you dare, See if any of us care*" made me look up sharply. Hell, James was now reading my mind. What's more, there were still five songs to go. Mostly they sounded alike, and you could at least discern the story that was about to climax with an alcohol fuelled death in "Gulf Road." "Gone To The Y," "*to sleep it all off*" is another alcohol fuelled epic, while by the opening lines of the closer "Chocktaw Bingo" run to "*Strap them kids in, Give 'em a little bit of vodka in a cherry coke.*" Some families live life out on the underbelly, take the easy road and avoid responsibility at every turn.

The pickers assisting James amount to some of Austin's finest – David Grissom, Paul Pearcy, Lisa Mednick, Daren Hess, Ian McLagan, Steve Bruton and Earl Poole Ball. Hess, bass player Ronnie Johnson and recording studio owner Eastside Flash, share the writing credits with McMurtry on the album title cut and "Broken Bed." Oh well, here's to a missed opportunity.....there's little that's revelatory or new here.

Folkwax Rating 6 out of 10

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