



## Josh Ritter **"The Animal Years"** V2 Records

If there was a hint as to where Ritter would journey next, in melody, but more particular word, then I guess the mysterious and poetic movie "Wings" that appeared on his September 2003 recording **"Hello Starling"** gave us a clue. Anyone expecting the effervescent and simple joy of latter collection cuts like "Kathleen" or "Snow Is Gone" will be stunned by the contents of **"The Animal Years."** Signed worldwide to Richard Branson's V2 imprint [\*], this recording, Ritter's fourth, is his major league pitch for glory and fame.

Almost fifty minutes in duration – one cut is seconds short of ten minutes - **"The Animal Years"** opens with "Girl In The War." While the war in the title is undoubtedly the current Middle East engagement, the word Iraq isn't mentioned. Rather, Ritter's approach takes the form of a conversation between the scripture saints Peter and Paul. You see Peter, *The Rock*, is deeply concerned about the safety of his girl who is on active duty in this seemingly endless conflict, and he affectionately adds, *"her eyes are like champagne, they sparkle bubble over."* While Peter prays that she will return home alive and well, Paul appears to abrasively offer *"You got to rock yourself a little harder, Pretend the dove from above, is a dragon and your feet are on fire."* In the "Wings" lyric angels were indirectly referenced, and those heavenly beings reappear here as a possible source of salvation [for Peter's girl], although concerning them he sourly comments, *"I know they can hear me yell, If they can't find a way to help her, they can go to hell."* The sound of the piano and drums that launches the hard-edged "Wolves" would not be out of place on a Springsteen recording. In this love themed lyric Ritter employs the appearance of hordes of these canines creature [at least in the narrator's mind] as a metaphorical device, in that they literally "devour" what was once a tender, even passionate, affair. As I said at the outset, peppy and happy have given way on **"The Animal Years"** to edgy and dark.

The lyric to "Monster Ballads" – according to Ritter, Mark Twain's character Tom Sawyer was his inspiration - appears to be a free form word collage that features numerous, seemingly unconnected, images. Josh's use of language [and the spoken sound of the same] is the vital ingredient on this cut. For instance does he hint, by pronunciation, at katydids? – you know, those large, singing, winged insects - in the lines *"I was thinking 'bout what Katy done, Thinking 'bout what Katy did."* There's also mention of Katy being the *"fairest daughter of the pharaoh's son, Dressed in gold 'neath pyramids"* the lyrical hook being the [common] phonic present in *"fairest"* and *"pharaoh."* Later mention of *"the 1's and 0's"* and how, according to Ritter, they are *"bleeding mesa noise"* invokes the modern world's dependence upon computers. There are sufficient hints however that "Monster Ballads" is at least partially set in the ancient land of Egypt, though it is not specifically named, while, supported by a martial beat, "Lillian Egypt," that cut that immediately follows, takes us back to the days of silent black and white movies, where we are introduced to Lillian - *"The lily of the valley, The lily of the west was a rose."* The Illinois bred daughter of a big town banker, and [probably unknown to her father] a perverse wild child – imbibing copious amounts of Four Roses and dancing on tables being her specialties – Lillian leaves home and becomes a silent movie star, who is – no big surprise – eventually tied to a train track, while the "casting couch" villain in *"the studio moustache,"* probably a grease tipped black handlebar, looks on then winks at Lillian and blows her some kisses. Time to gag girls!

Stripped down to Ritter's voice and a lightly plucked guitar, in terms of presentation "Idaho" possesses a Woody Guthrie feel – rhythmically the delivery of the phrases *"I gave it to a friend of mine"* and *"Ain't no wolf can sing like me"* hint at the recent Guthrie/Bragg collaboration "Way Over Yonder In The Minor

Key.” Born and bred in the Gem state, Ritter’s lyric [once again] introduced us to “wolves,” adding further weight to the contention that Josh, literally, “played with word sounds” while creating this song collection. Set to a walking pace rhythm “In The Dark” is another anti-war song with a focus that screams, “bring an end to this conflict” - *“I saw the battlefields, the dying Light Brigade, Stretched out upon the wheel.”* Employing the repeated request *“Don’t you leave us in the dark,”* Ritter goes on to deliver the stinging Tolkien-esque admonition *“We thought you were a saint, But the halo was an eye, It’s hard to see how there could be, So much dark inside the light.”* Am I thinking white façade with pillars, and a Pennsylvania Avenue D.C. address? “One More Mouth” is a soulful paean to loneliness and possessing a fondness for being in that situation. As for the curmudgeonly narrator he grumbles, *“Will I starve in this eclipse while you treat every hungry kiss, Like one more mouth to feed?”* Next up, the opening verse of this shuffle tempo love song “Good Man” is a celebration of the artist’s art – the act of creation, whether enduring good times or bad. In later verses, Ritter recalls a real life dance he had with death and closes with an invitation to join him on the back of his horse for a ride into the – proverbial - sunset.

At the outset of “Best For The Best” the narrator informs us *“I realised that Illinois was more than I could stand”* and adds later that he spent a few years seafaring on the Queen of Spain *“A leaky little boat that went up in flames.”* In terms of presentation the spectre of Guthrie also pervades this cut. The nine-minute plus long, semi-spoken “Thin Blue Flame” completes Ritter’s anti-war trilogy. While Josh calmly delivers his chosen words, only occasionally spitting them forth, they are akin to what a holy roller preacher would employ, and are filled with images of blood, guts and gore and the eternal damnation of mankind. *“Streets a ’swimming with amputees, It’s a Bible or a bullet they put over your heart, It’s getting harder and harder to tell them apart”* may be representative of the former, but in Ritter’s eyes damnation is a double edged sword *“If what’s loosed on earth will be loosed up on high, It’s a Hell of a Heaven we must go to when we die.”* The dying crescendo that closed The Beatles paltry five minute long sound-scape “A Day In The Life” is replaced here by electronic feedback, while the inspiration for the pounding piano that, for close on two minutes, leads to that feedback appears obvious. Only employing a piano to support his vocal, with the aptly titled “Here At The Right Time” Josh gently lays **“The Animal Years”** to rest.

**“The Animal Years”** was produced by Brain Deck formerly drummer in the Chicago rock band Red Red Meat. In recent times Deck has undertaken the role of producer for acts such as Iron & Wine [aka Sam Beam] and Modest Mouse, and this disc was recorded at Bear Creek Studios in Seattle, Washington State and at Engine Studios in Chicago [Illinois again!!!!]. Even though he employs electronic wizardry on certain cuts, Deck never prevents Ritter’s songs from shining through, and while allowing the presence of background studio noises, on a few occasions, may appear sloppy, the whole thing quite simply gels. It’s stuff that works. Across four albums, Ritter has recorded each one in a different geographic location and, in the process, employed three different producers. At this juncture having listened to **“The Animal Years”** many times over, it appears true to say that Josh intentionally employed clever wordplay while constructing this suite of lyrics, deliberately allowing the spillage song-to-song of specific words/images - for instance “wolves,” “ships” or “boats,” “Egypt,” “Illinois” and more. The question arises, was he simply “stringing words together for words sake”? Don’t get me wrong, as an aural entity **“The Animal Years”** sounds sublimely wonderful, it’s the subjective intensity that I’m uncertain about. Shallow or deep, rich or poor, black or white.....I think you get the idea. But it could be deep, deep, deep! Did I just hear a manic laugh?

#### **Note.**

[\*] – Already a superstar in Ireland, Josh Ritter chose to remain with Independent Records in that market.

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10

#### **Arthur Wood.**

Kerrville Kronikles 03/06.