



Jonathan Byrd **"The Law And The Lonesome"** Waterbug Records

You have to hand it to Jonathan Byrd because, musically speaking, he doesn't hang around in the same place for long. Now with five solo albums to his name, I think it's fair to say that no two have been alike. The characters that journey through the ten songs on **"The Law And The Lonesome"** are brittle, hard bitten, desperate and mostly down on their luck. Some are losers in the love stakes. The photographs that grace the twelve page liner booklet go a long way to reinforce the 'underbelly of life' scenarios presented in the songs. On the cover of the booklet, surrounded by barren scrubby landscape, a crow sits defiantly on a barbed wire fence while 'his friends' circle above, there's also a dilapidated looking motel, and a nervous coyote scurrying for cover. Throughout there's nary one sign of a human being.

A sombre, haunting stringed instrument supports Byrd's finger-picked acoustic guitar on the opening, album title cut. Sounds like a cello, but in truth it is co-producer Chris Bartos' five-string violin. Built around the repeated line *"You took the wrong way home"* as the principle character journeys to heaven knows where, he becomes progressively more confused – *"The snow's like a ghost of cocaine on the highway, It shifts and plays tricks on your mind."* Poetic devices inform the latter, and Byrd repeats the process in *"They blasted the bedrock and laid all the blacktop, Like a snake 'round the shoulders of God, Christ on his hilltop and the cop at the truck stop, Are both only doing their jobs."* The aforementioned death dealing powder reappears in "Clean" and finds the addicted narrator on his way to meet *"the candy man."* Desperate to fund his next fix Byrd portrays the narrator *"Diggin' for change in the backseat clothes,"* while the closing verse encapsulates the living hell the addict is experiencing *"If falling in love is like going insane, then this must be the devil's dream."*

Fiction has been known to imitate real life, and vice versa. In "Diana Jones" Jonathan has taken the name of his partner in ByrdJones and created a racy and believable tale ultimately tinged with sadness. A pretty Cherokee girl leaves her reservation, travels to Georgia, adopts the name "Diana Jones" and becomes proprietor of the Dewdrop Inn – where she *"kept a room behind the bar for any man who needed that."* The local sheriff became a regular, although Harlan's wife frequently came and dragged him home. Filled with grief over a love that's unattainable, Diana goes on the rampage with a gun. When the sheriff and his deputies are called to the Inn, Diana and two others perish. As Byrd relates, other things perished that day - *"The wild died in Harlan, too, with Diana Jones."* Fast, flashy and fluid Nashville country guitar licks – ala James Burton/Albert Lee – support the Southern travelogue "Houston Window Blues," although, curiously, Jonathan's vocal fades while there still appears to be a deal of road to cover. "The Fifth Wheel" opens with the frustrated narrator stood by a busted payphone, recalling with an ocean of regret a recent and unnecessary argument with the woman he loves. In the closing verse Byrd succinctly captures the tension - *"I love you, I miss you, I wish I was with you, I feel like a fifth wheel tonight."*

"Prairie Girl" is a tale of love that once seemed as if it would last forever but has now withered and died. Co-written by Byrd, Corin Raymond of Toronto, Canada duo The Undesirables and Edward Hillier "May The River Run Dry" features six gun toting, doubling crossing desperadoes who, tomorrow, *"We'll each have our share, Every man will get what he's due."* "Coyote" and the ensuing "Soldier's Lullaby" are, respectively, the shortest tracks here at a tad over two minutes each. In the motion filled former title a coyote is portrayed prowling across the landscape, while the narrator in the latter – could it be the coyote speaking? – reports that some soldiers are singing by a moonlight river. Having already sung about Houston, Byrd's fifth collection closes with a melodic snapshot of "Galveston."

Recorded in just four days, the haunting stripped down sound on “**The Law And The Lonesome**” reflects the bleak landscapes – topographical and emotional - that form the backdrop for much of the action. Byrd strums his Martin acoustic guitar, sings and adds a little fiddle and percussion to “May The River Run Dry.” In ‘the ghost riders’ role Raymond’s voice also graces the latter cut, while Bartos’ played all the other instruments – [the aforementioned] violin, electric guitars, mandolin and double bass - and also sings.

Folkwax score 9 out of 10.

Arthur Wood.

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