



## JEFF BLACK

### A LONG TIME COMING...

Jeff Black's fourth solo recording *TIN LILY* was released by Dualtone Records during late July 2005. At the outset of our recent two-hour long conversation concerning his latest album *PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC*, I put to Jeff that it had been a long time coming. "Yes it has. I guess the real world for me is playing music and writing songs. There are also a lot of variables, with family and the children, and the perceived real world slips in on you. After *TIN LILY* I was pretty much gone on the road for a couple of years, supporting that record and the ones before. When I kicked off the Black Tuesdays podcast in late May 2005 we did a bunch of free episodes." The initial incarnation of Black Tuesdays ran weekly for thirty weeks.

Jeff continued: "We re-launched it on a monthly basis in December 2008. By the industry definition I wasn't releasing a record, but I've posted around one hundred small EPs as downloads. I'm always writing—I use it as a journal and I'm constantly trying to find what it is I want to say and find the music to carry it along. The music industry has changed so much, but some things never change—my journal, my pencil and my guitar is the place I always start." A few months after the launch of the podcast Black Tuesdays 2 for which there was a small monthly subscription charge, Jeff's web site carried the following "Fans are making headlines for the innovative way they are supporting art directly. We already know that Jeff has the best fans in the world, which is why we are asking you to go a step further and help fund the creation of the new CD." In recent times numerous musicians in the roots music field have pursued the fan-funded route. Jeff Black's approach was to create the

Black List, with a sliding scale of benefits depending on whether the sum tendered was large or small. Free access to Black Tuesdays 2 was made available to all fund members.

Jeff continued: "I had licensed a couple of my previous records and those licenses were reverting to me, so I was already a free agent. I looked at the record making process differently than I had in the past, whether it had been a licensing or a record deal. I began by concentrating on what I wanted to say in the songs, and then I tackled the question: 'What would be the best way to do this?' since by industry definition I'm also an independent artist." Alluding to the Black List, Jeff commented: "It was marketing in the darkest sense [laughs], because there was really no campaign. I got one response, and then another, and then another. It snowballed on its own. I thought: 'I'm getting a pretty good sign from the universe, that I should start making this record.' I talked with a couple of different producers in town. Although very talented and wonderful people that I consider friends, honestly I couldn't afford to do it the old way. The old model wasn't going to work for me."

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The foregoing said, apart from his debut album *BIRMINGHAM ROAD* (1998), Black self-produced his ensuing three releases. "For a little while I was looking to collaborate, because I work alone almost all the time. You get your answers after a while. It wasn't about personalities, or even the money for that matter, it



was a feeling I had. I had a strong attachment to the way these songs turned out, having played them live for some time. It became clear to me I was probably the best candidate to record and produce these songs." Pre-production of PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC began about two years ago, with sessions proper commencing a few months later. During the ensuing eighteen months, sessions continued between Jeff's road tours. "Even though I've really enjoyed Black Tuesdays and the freedom it gave me, I really have an old school attachment and that's making an album that has a common thread running through it. It's a document in time."

Black (vocals, guitar, piano, keyboards, banjo, bass, percussion) was joined in Arcana Studios, for much of the album, by Sam Bush (mandolin, octave mandolin, slide mandolin) and Jerry Douglas (resonator guitar, lap steel). "I met Sam when he played on a demo I was making of *Same Old River* in September 1991. At that session he said: 'I'm going to record that song one of these days.' A few years pass and we got together to write. In getting together we discovered we had been friends longer than we realised. I really admire everything that Sam represents musically. He goes down a very wide road within his genre. Meeting Sam and becoming friends with him is very special. It would be hard for me to imagine making a record without Sam being part of it." To date, Sam has covered a handful of Jeff's songs. Bush's rendition of *Same Old River* appeared on his album GLAMOUR & GRITS (1996).

Then there was that other acknowledged string-man. "Jerry Douglas I met at a recording session and through knowing Sam. I don't know that I've ever met a more lyrical musician. He plays with so much heart and emotion. Sam introduced me to many of those guys. I moved to Nashville thinking I was writing one kind of song and then discovered that I was going down my own path. Those players in town took me into their fold, because they liked my songs and the ideas and ideals behind them. I feel really fortunate to have worked with Sam and Jerry on this occasion. There's nothing incidental about what they play."

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Gretchen Peters and Matraca Berg add their voices to the soulful *Sorry*. "I would hear things in my head, and these musicians would come in and raise the bar several notches above what I thought I was going to hear. All the contributing musicians are composers, so they really listen and help carry a good song." Concurrently, Suzy Bogguss was finishing her latest album and preparing for a tour. "We have a date for her to appear on my next record. I really wanted to get all three women together, but scheduling wouldn't allow it."

The album was recorded in the barn—Arcana Studios—at the rear of Jeff's old home. Tarot cards were the inspiration. "I've got to say that I am not a historian but the thing that always jumped out at me, especially when you look at guys who undertook a journey, it begins with the fool [laughs]. The studio

Photo © Michael Wilson



had a different name when I made that Black List Christmas record, then it was Alvie's Old Barn. It has gone through quite a transition since then. There is so much magic in that little room I wanted to give it a sense of place."

The album liner credits additional recording taking place at Diversion Studio in London. "Contrary to popular belief technology is something I try to embrace. I love Kim Richey and we've been friends for a long time. This world is a busy, busy place. I met Jez [Ashurst] when he and his wife and Kim and I hooked up for some concerts a couple of years ago. I didn't want the opportunity for Kim to sing on my album to slip by. I arranged by e-mail and telephone to send audio files of *Run* to Jez. I think they were getting ready to go on tour and had one and a half days left. Much to my happiness they spent a lot of that time recording background vocals. I took the tracks over to Dave Sinko who mixed them and it was like Kim was standing beside me."

PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC contains fourteen songs. Knowing that Black is prolific, how had he begun: "With a pretty long list." Jeff's reply begged the question had he recorded more than fourteen of them. "Yeah. As a matter of fact B-SIDES AND CONFESSIONS Vol. 2 is not too far away. Jerry plays on one or two. Sam will probably play on a few. Certain songs cry out to be together. I wanted an album that had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Some decided they wanted to be somewhere else, so they are going to live on Vol. 2. I'm hoping it will be a lot less



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time between records. I've also got some new songs that I have to finish. The songs are not really B-Sides, in the sense of what that means, I just didn't want people to think I had completely lost my sense of humour."

The world is filled with unique coincidences. Through bass player Dave Pomeroy, Jeff met Dave Sinko at the same session he met Sam Bush. Sinko is credited with mixing *PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC*. "With my Pro-Tools Studio I captured everything the best I could. Dave mixes with such care and insight and clairvoyance. He's the sixth Punch Brother with Chris Thile and those guys. He's on the road with them quite a bit, which raised the question: 'When is Dave gonna be available?' He had mixed Sam's last record. I've always loved his work. It's very earthy, and organic and true." As it happened the timing couldn't have been better. "Dave was in town and had time available. I'm a lucky man for it, for sure. I explained where all this stuff was coming from and he gets it, he understands. Dave mixed it perfectly. I recorded it so there were no big puzzles to solve. I think we took a week and a half or a couple of weeks to mix."

Sequencing the songs on an album is a dark art. It isn't so much that there is a right or wrong (sequence). That said, an astute listener should be able to discern whether much thought has gone into the running order. How had Jeff approached sequencing *PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC*? "With the reference mixes you can begin. I wanted to start with *Walking Home*, and I thought *Ravanna* would be the last song. They're the corner posts. I played them around the house and dug into what I heard. I tried to share every bit of audio space that had been taken up—whether it's a resonator guitar, mandolin or a piano, what kind of percussion is here and there, those kind of things—in order to give it an even flow. That said, just as with *Arcana Studio*, the journey starts with the fool [laughs]."

Had it taken two weeks? "It was probably faster than that. It was wonderful to be able to hand the disc to Kissy (Jeff's wife). She played a huge role in making this album. If you were to clock in and clock out, overall it only took a few months, if that even, to make this album. With all the scheduling problems those months were spread over a couple of years."

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*"She was a big influence in my life as I grew older. After she was gone, I realised that. She painted, played piano and was well-read. In her house you could find the Bible as well as man, myth and magic books."*  
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Jeff Black's songs are published by his own company, Lotos Nile Music, which he founded circa 1993. Lotos was Jeff's paternal grandmother. "She was a big influence in my life as I grew older. After she was gone, I realised that. She painted, played piano and was well-read. In her house you could find the Bible as well as man, myth and magic books. If you visited her you could bet she spent more time painting, reading or creating, than dusting off the top of the refrigerator." *PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC* is the debut release by Lotos Nile Music.

I put it to Jeff that there was a truly rural feel to the liner artwork. "It's no big secret that I come from a very tiny town in Missouri." Relative to Jeff's early years as a Liberty resident,

the town has grown immensely. "I did not grow up on a farm, but if I jumped over the back fence I stood on one. It's a dreamscape, probably now more than ever. I think we miss suspended belief. I think that it's important, especially with art. Whatever art you are in pursuit of, whether it's high or low, I think it's important. Thorne White has done hundreds, if not thousands, of sets of artwork for musicians. He's a fan of my songs and we'd talked about working together. I thought there was more colour sneaking out of this music than my usual black and white [we both laugh]." The trademark artwork that accompanied Jeff's previous releases employed Michael Wilson's black and white photography. "We did some black and white liner mock-ups but these songs called for something else." A cameo on the front cover portrays a farmer and horse drawn plough, while a field of ploughed furrows forms the background to much of the five-page fold-out liner.

"While making this album I felt I was able to travel in my mind a little more than before. I was able to meditate on it, think on it and be there for every measure. That enabled me to be more open when the other players came in. I was more open to breaking away from what I may have played three or four years ago. If I would have jumped right in to make a record after *TIN LILY*, I may not have experimented as much. Although I've always tried to be organic, I wanted more wood and steel on this record." A review of *PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC* appears elsewhere in this issue. Although Jeff and I talked about the songs, I've avoided duplication here.

**Arthur Wood**

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