



Ben Bedford **"Land Of The Shadows"** Hopeful Sky Records

Here's the thing, a couple of albums into his recording career, Ben Bedford has proved himself to be a truly inspired and talented storyteller. Line on line he pieces together his character[s] and their backdrop, fictional or factual. Those based on fact, are richly decked with historic and geographic references. Drawing on what is familiar to him - Ben's a son of Illinois - the state looms large in his [lyrical] canon. His words draw the listener in with stealth and a calculated inevitability.

A farmer, husband and father, now union soldier, who longs for home [Illinois naturally], is the narrator of the opening track. Aged "Twenty One" and set during the siege of Vicksburg, [Bedford only reveals the location in the closing verse], among many issues raised relating to men's conflicts, the destruction of Southern homes by cannon fire looms large – *"Last night we climbed up to the levee top, We could see the holes in the houses, Where the balls had dropped"* – and following the poetic allusion to sustained fire *"a symphony of crashes with the town hall bell"* the narrator recalls where his heart truly lies – *"And it makes my heart stop every time, the iron hits a white framed house like mine."* Track two, "The Cherry Mine," ploughs what has, in past decades, been a rich vein for songwriters. I'm thinking of classics like Bill Ed Wheeler's "Coal Tattoo" and the Merle Travis pairing "Nine Pound Hammer" and "Sixteen Tons." In Bedford's "The Cherry Mine" the year is 1909, Saturday 13th November to be precise, the setting the North Central Illinois town of Cherry. Four year earlier the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad had opened a mine in order to supply coal for their trains. Employing the voice of a woman whose husband survives the disaster – over 200 men and children were saved that day, but 259 perished including a dozen rescue workers on their seventh journey into the inferno – "The Cherry Mine" eerily echoes the events of that fateful day.

"You're The Weather" is a song for the wind and the [ever changing] weather, and is followed by "The Sangamon." Already referenced in "Twenty One," the Sangamon is a two hundred and fifty mile long tributary of the Illinois River, Ben's words portray a heart-sore widower casting into its waters his late wife's belongings – she perished in childbirth - because of the memories they hold. An unaccredited female voice supports Bedford's lead vocal, while I wonder if the oft repeated *"One day I'll cross the Sangamon"* hints at some future 'Styx like' reunion. Mary Harris, born in Cork, Ireland on the first day of May 1830, crossed the Atlantic with her family eight years later. Close on a quarter of a century later, having qualified as a teacher, Mary settled in Memphis, married George Jones, a member of the Iron Workers' Union, and in the ensuing years became a labour and community organizer. Driven, principally, by Chas Williams' dobro the rhythmically energetic "Mother Jones On The Line" is set before worker's rights were firmly embraced in legislation, and Ben's lyric references her ground-breaking work, via the voice of a striking mine worker – *"I've had enough of crooked promises and forked tongued words."* I mentioned Merle's "Sixteen Tons" earlier and his lyric included *"I picked up my shovel and I walked to the mine, I loaded sixteen tons of Number Nine coal."* "Number Nine" surfaces in Bedford's lyric, as does the narrator's intention *"Ain't gonna swing that pick no more"* and *"Ain't gonna buy from the company store"* [Travis' lyric also alluded to this exploitative mine owned monopoly].

Located midway through the album "Ten Paces" is an instrumental penned by Chas Williams, who co-produced the album with Bedford, and it features Ben [acoustic guitar], Chas [banjo] and one time Dead Reckoning recording artist Tammy Rogers [fiddle]. "Amelia" Earhart, the pioneering female aviator, has been eulogised in song before, notably, in recent times, by Iain Matthews and Andy Roberts as Plainsong, and by Joni Mitchell's "Amelia." Bedford's lyric initially poses questions as to the aviatrix's state of mind immediately prior to her May 1932 transatlantic flight from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland to Ireland, a feat for which Congress [subsequently] awarded her the Distinguished Flying Cross. Co-

written by Bedford and Kari Abate – Kari supplies a harmony vocal - “Land Of The Shadows [For Emmett Till]” recalls the horrific August 1955 homicide in Money, Mississippi, of Till a fourteen-year-old African American from Chicago, a heartrending occurrence that galvanized the American Civil Rights Movement.

Waltz paced, “One Night At A Time” wistfully reflects on cold Illinois winter days, while the sound of a wailing wind introduces the ensuing “Fisher’s Hall” another Bedford creation set during the American Civil War, that presents, on this occasion, *the other side of the coin* - the thoughts of a amputee Southern soldier. Australian bush poet Andrew Barton *Banjo* Paterson (1864 – 1941), the author of “Waltzing Matilda” and “The Man From Snowy River,” penned the words to “As Long As Your Eyes Are Blue,” a song for lovers mature in years, and Ben furnished the music. It closes another memorable album by this Illinois composer.

Folkwax Score 9 out of 10.

Arthur Wood.

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