



Jeff Black **"B Sides And Confessions, Vol. 1"** Dualtone Records

By the end of March 2003 this will be the third Jeff Black album available in the public domain. The German based Blue Rose label issued **"Honey And Salt"** earlier this year. The latter disc was originally meant to appear on Arista Records, the follow up to his **"Birmingham Road"** [1998] debut. An internal corporate reshuffle *stopped* its release, so to speak, *dead in it's tracks*, a few years back.

"B Sides And Confessions, Vol. 1" is one of those album that I've been expecting to hear through January, February and into March 2003. It's a low-key ten-song revelation, containing only Black penned originals – he doesn't co-write. The album title does the disc no favours, hinting that the material featured may consist of *leftovers* or be of less than *acme quality*. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is one of the finest collection of songs that I've heard lately bearing a 2003 date release stamp [*], and come year-end I will still be trumpeting its merits, very loudly and very clearly.

Self produced, the scantily detailed liner insert informs that the disc was *"recorded and mixed on the fly by the legendary Billy Sherrill."* Possessed of vocal tones that are at turns gruff and gravelly they insinuate a life that has been difficult and hard, while the musical settings are *stripped down* with minimal use of guitar, harmonica, piano, banjo, bass and drums [mostly brushes].

Black delivers the words *"Close your eyes,"* the opening line of the opening track, as if he were about to perform, *"All My Loving,"* but then *"Slip"* immediately rounds into a soulful sounding, piano supported song concerning personal survival. As for the *life lived hard* that I mentioned in the previous paragraph, the lines *"I've drank more than I've needed to, Just to find my heart in a dark old memory"* arrive by way of confirmation midway through the second verse. Through the four verses of *"Same Old River,"* Jeff expresses, respectively, a wish to be an Indian riding the plains on a painted pony, a pirate with treasure to bury, a slave who plans to escape and lead a rebellion, and, finally, in the old west an outlaw with plans to rob *"a train bound for glory."* The message, a life lived to the full is what counts. There's a funky feel to the *"Holy Roller,"* and the lyric depicts the *hardly credible* possibility of the Nation of Islam leader, Louis Farrakhan, playing tic tac toe with Jerry Falwell, a man with a ministry all his own. Moving on from the foregoing pairing, the song depicts *"meeting on the other side"* and *"let's all gather around and sing amazing grace."* Apart from those musical influences that I've already mentioned, there's a minor, but perceptible, gospel feel at play in the opening trio of cuts.

Track four reveals *"Sunday Best,"* the first of a consecutive quartet of stunning ballads. Only qualified by mention that *"People came for miles away, Just to say goodbye,"* the funereal themed lyric includes the *killer lines* *"Saturday was beautiful, All dressed in our Sunday best"* and *"The Lord respects me when I'm working hard, But he loves me when I sing,"* while the oft posed question *"What are we going to do, Was never said out loud"* isn't answered. Underpinned by a piano and drums the gentle lilting *"To Be With You"* sounds like a *million and one* other love songs. It's also one of the finest to pass this way in a long time. As a lone banjo plucks out the tune, the lines *"All night long, I've been riding riding, I should have been there by now"* establish the sensation of motion, as well as indicating the narrator's sense of desperation - *"up to my fenders in mud"* - as he strives to reach his loved one during a torrential rainstorm. The *"Gold Heart Locket"* clenched in his hand contains her portrait. Opening it to look at her *"eyes of hazel green"* he closes it quickly *"because the rain gets past, and lays a tear down"* are truly fine, well observed lines. The fact that the locket is attached to a silver chain is only one more detail, in a seemingly countless stream, that informs this memorable song. *"Cakewalk"* portrays the world through

the eyes of a man who, after countless years [decades possibly] had merged one into another, *"looked up"* and concluded *"we were getting older."* Brushed drums and piano are the sound foundation for the foregoing track.

It's hard to discern whether reincarnation is the precise theme of "Bless My Soul" although *"I've been around so many times"* and *"I know why the spirit brings, Us back into the world, Until we get it right"* indicate that to be the case. In an album that is chock full of great lines *"I know why the baby cries, It's way into the arms of, A mother's love,"* from "Bless My Soul" stands as three of the finest. The opening verses of "Bastard" reference *old Joe Clark*, the *Danville train*, that *Nashville girl* and *sugartown*, while the closing verse opens with *"kiss my ass you corporate whores"* which leaves me thinking that Black's words may reference events I described in the opening paragraph. "Higher Ground," the closing cut, quotes numerous religious symbols and historic locations as the narrator relates *"Oh look here what we found, Higher ground."* All things considered, this ten-song masterpiece could not have finished in a grander location.....

Note.

[*] – Andrew Calhoun's **"Tiger Tattoo,"** Chuck Brodsky's **"The Baseball Ballads"** and Aengus Finnan's **"North Wind"** were 2002 releases, while Cheryl Wheeler's **"Different Stripe"** principally featured previously released material.

Folkwax Rating 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood
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