



Dave Alvin “**Ashgrove**” Yep Roc Records

Produced by long-time Alvin collaborator, Greg Leisz, the Ashgrove in the album title is by way of a tribute to the music club that once stood on Melrose Avenue, Hollywood, a location where Dave openly admits he *“received his musical education.”* The club was destroyed by fire in 1973. In fact the opening track, “Ashgrove,” is a ballsy, upbeat road song, in which Alvin *not only* recalls how as a youngster, more than thirty years ago, he saw all the, now dead, great blues-men perform at the venue – Big Joe Turner, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Rev. Gary Davis – he also memorialises his late parents. I guess you could best summarise the opener as a *“Now I’m out here on the road, all alone”* song. “Rio Grande,” which follows, was co-written with Tom Russell [Tom’s version appeared as “Down The Rio Grande” on **“Borderland”** in 2001], and Alvin’s reading of this tale of searching for but ultimately losing love, aided in part by the consumption, for the sake of solace, of alcohol, retains a country flavour courtesy of Leisz’s steel guitar and support vocal.

“Nine Volt Heart” co-written with Rod Hodges [leader of the New Orleans based combo, The Iguanas, whose most recent recording, also a Yep Roc release, was titled **“Plastic Silver 9 Volt Heart.”**], is something of a fond recollection – even a personal one, possibly – of listening to the radio over many decades. *“Plastic silver 9 volt heart, You click it on and let the music start, And the radio was his toy.”* Scene one portrays a youngster whose mamma *“went looking for his daddy inside a bar.”* A decade later the youngster has grown and he’s with his favourite girl in the car, listening to the Staples Singers sing “I’ll Take You There.” In the final, late night, scene a young couple turn on the radio in order to play a lullaby for their weeping child. There are some great phrases in the electrically charged and upbeat “Out Of Control,” concerning a shady character with the *“nine millimetre muscle”* who *“Used to do a little construction,”* but is now involved in *“a little import export making enough just to cover my cost.”* “Everett Ruess” concerns a real life character, an independent thinking Californian – as well as an artist, writer, and accomplished outdoorsman who loved to live alone in isolated wilderness places. First there was the High Sierras, but circa late 1934 he headed for Southern Utah and Escalante. He promptly disappeared and while his body was never found, this song tells how his legend grew.

“Black Sky” and “Black Haired Girl,” plus “Sinful Daughter,” the latter co-written with New Orleans based singer/songwriter Shannon McNally, form the trio of electric blues numbers on this disc. “The Man In The Bed” is probably the most touching, yet emotionally raw track, in this collection. It amounts to the reflections of a *still young at heart*, old man who replays episodes from his life - *“I’m the man I’ve always been, I the kid who rode the rails through the Great Depression, Fought in the big war and marched for the union”* - as he waits to pass over. Ballad paced and underpinned on acoustic guitar by a cyclical melody, the lines *“These trembling hands they’re not mine, Now my hands are strong and steady all the time, They can swing a sledgehammer or soothe a baby that’s crying”* and *“I slipped out the door and I’m finally free, Young and wild like I’ve always been”* confirm that his passion remains undiminished even though his time has come.

Considering that the album opener reflected upon the passage of time, it’s somewhat appropriate that it closes with “Somewhere In Time” co-written with a couple of Los Lobos alumni, Louie Perez and David Hidalgo. A version of this song, with a vocal by Alvin, appears on the new Los Lobos album **“The Ride.”** A laid back, ballad-paced number it reflects not unsurprisingly, upon past events – a former love, a lonely highway, a dream.....after all, what would this life be without dreams?

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

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