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## Review: Mercyland: Hymns For The Rest Of Us, Various Artists



by Kim Ruehl, for FolkAlley.com

**The relationship between music and spirituality** has a history about as long as human beings have been capable of giving voice to their beliefs. In fact, there's reason to believe music has had a place in spiritual practice since before any of the contemporary religions even took root.

**Conversely, modern music** would likely have little place without the various tenets of faith. But, whether it's faith in god or love or humankind, music is evidence of the persistence of the human spirit. Maybe that's why so many predominantly secular artists occasionally perform and record spiritual songs at some point in their career. When an artist sings a song about faith in something larger than themselves, it doesn't necessarily mean they're looking to make a testimony about their religious beliefs. It's simply a moment for them to tap into whatever holds the key to their creativity.

And so it is that a handful of today's finest folk and roots music artists - **The Civil Wars, Shawn Mullins, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Buddy Miller, and Emmylou Harris** among them - have gathered to record an album titled *Mercyland - Hymns for the Rest of Us*.

**This is not a collection of tent-raising revivalist spirituals**, though there are certainly plenty of those in the folk tradition. You're unlikely to find on this disc a clear and determined statement about Jesus or God or any specific Biblical lessons. (Except for North Mississippi All-Stars' "If I Was Jesus," which takes the

phrase "What would Jesus do?" in an interesting direction.) Nor, for that matter, will you find lessons from the Torah, the Qu'ran, the Tao Te Ching, etc.

**What you will find are existential spiritual explorations** about things like life and death, love, struggle, dissent, and peace. In fact, Shawn Mullins may carry the crux of the album's motivation in his song, "Give God the Blues," which comes up second on the disc:

*God don't hate the Muslims*

*God don' hate the Jews*

*God don't hate the Christians*

*But we all give God the blues.*

*God don't hate the atheists*

*The Buddhists, or the Hindus.*

*God loves everybody, but we all give God the blues.*

**Like the rest of the album, Mullins' song neither confirms nor negates anyone's religious practices.** Mercyland acknowledges faith, love, and mercy are not merely features of religious doctrine, but are human compulsions toward which we're all pulled. Regardless of any community's relationship with God, there is always common ground in music.

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