

GREAT

AMERICAN

COUNTRY

## GAC Album Review: *Mercyland: Hymns for the Rest of Us*

By Daryl Addison



*I want all God's children to live in harmony, Phil Madeira sings in earnest on the bluesy title track of his non-denominational gospel project, *Mercyland: Hymns for the Rest of Us*. Due in stores Tuesday, April 24, *Mercyland* brings together leading Americana and folk artists with a message of unity and the idea that God*

is love – no matter to which church you belong.

Madeira, who is part of **Emmylou Harris'** band The Red Dirt Boys, conceived and produced the record that includes selections from diverse artists like **The Civil Wars**, **Buddy Miller** and **Shawn Mullins**. Madeira co-wrote the majority of the project's 10 original songs with the album's guests and sits in with them as part of the band on most tracks. These collaborations, which also feature many of the lineup guesting on each other's songs, is what makes *Mercyland* so unique and creative in delivering its message of unity.

From the opening acoustic notes of The Civil Wars' "From the Valley," which features Emmylou Harris on backing vocals, it's evident that *Mercyland* favors a raw, live sound over control room tricks. The starkly produced, Appalachian-influenced song hinges on the electric harmonies of TCW's **Joy Williams** and **John Paul White**. On the swamp blues "Give God the Blues," Shawn Mullins sings universally, *God ain't no Republican / He ain't no Democrat / He ain't even Independent / God's above all that*, over Madeira's steel fiber slide guitar and an assist from Buddy Miller and **The Carolina Chocolate Drops** on backing vocals.

The songs on *Mercyland* take on different points of view in their praise, but oftentimes focus in on descriptive realism to give witness. **Mat Kearney's** relaxed and rolling "Walking Over the Water" sees God's plan in joy and pain, singing, *I raise my fist toward heaven from that dark, forsaken road / Blue lights flashed on broken glass and a siren left me cold*, after first celebrating a daughter's life. On the glory-bound road song "Light of Your Love," **Dan Tyminski** sings, *In the warmth of your embrace / I feel the weightlessness of grace*, over modern blues rhythms. "If I Was Jesus," performed by delta blues group **The North Mississippi Allstars**, candidly jokes with lines like, *I'd be the guy at the party turning water to wine*, before offering the weightier, *I'd lay my life down for you . . . and forgive you and adore you*, with introspective warmth.

Diversity in musical styles and the unity of working together continually emerge as part of the album's overall theme. *Mercyland* includes two traditional songs that interestingly serve as mirrors of each other. The Carolina Chocolate Drops deliver quick, old-timey bluegrass on the vocal-driven "Lights In The Valley" with only guitar, banjo and mandolin to support. On "Peace In The Valley," guitarist **John Scofield** leads a slow blues instrumental featuring thoughtful solos from John, Madeira on organ and pedal steel player **Al Perkins**.

*Mercyland* offers praise while celebrating differences. Over the midtempo Americana groove of "I Believe In You," Buddy Miller declares unwavering faith while acknowledging the leap. On the traditional country "I Didn't Know It Was You," Emmylou Harris fully realizes grace in her daughter's eyes. The beauty of it all is that *Mercyland* takes on an overwhelming sense of unity through its acceptance of differing views and the artists' strong connection to each other and the work.

Key Tracks – “Mercyland,” “Light of Your Love,” “Walking Over the Water,” “Give God The Blues”