

Nashville Scene

April 12, 2012

The Phil Madeira-curated *Mercyland: Hymns for the Rest of Us* explores a pluralistic take on gospel

Everybody's Crying Mercy **by** JEWLY HIGHT



It came to light during the final season of *Seinfeld* that George Costanza's contrarian dad Frank had a method of celebrating the holidays without all of the religious and commercial hoopla: He flat-out made up his own holiday, Festivus, for the rest of us. It called for exchanging grievances, not gifts, and for no decoration more elaborate than an aluminum pole.

As it happens, Phil Madeira has a moving new project called *Mercyland: Hymns for the Rest of Us* — a devotional album without all the religious and commercial hoopla — and one wonders if the subtitle is an intentional reference. "Oh, that's hilarious!" says the veteran Nashville songwriter-player-producer when I bring it up. He maintains that it's an entirely unintended coincidence — a Seinfeldian slip, if you will.

Actually, the motives behind Madeira's album are more profound. Parked at a wrought-iron table on the front porch of The Frothy Monkey, he explains, "I think the most visible expressions of Christian faith are very exclusive, and I think that has been a real struggle for me."

The Kickstarter campaign Madeira launched to help fund *Mercyland* — and more specifically, an online exchange the campaign sparked — was the closest he came to the bantering humor of the '90s sitcom, and even then, the subject matter was considerably weightier than the show's. "One of the things that I wrote in my little plea for patrons was, 'If you're tired of fundamentalists, whether they're Christian, Muslim or atheist, maybe you relate to the idea of who the rest of us are,' " he says. "I actually had a fundamentalist guy write me and say, 'You know, I really want to give you my hundred bucks, but I'm really upset that you've left out the fundamentalists.' I mean, it was a trick question. And I thought, 'You're the people excluding everybody, not me.' "

Seeds of the album were planted while Madeira was on the road with Emmylou Harris during 2008's round of shouting-match presidential primaries. "The language that kept coming from people who were religious just made me sick and made me sad," he said. "So I went to her and I said, 'You know, this drives me crazy. I'd like to do a record that just tries to address the idea that God is love. And she was in from day one."

By that, he doesn't mean Harris sang harmony on a couple cuts. She co-wrote and performed the reverently reflective Buddhist-inflected ballad "I Didn't Know It Was You." There's also a track The Civil Wars recorded back before people knew who they were, along with inspired contributions from The Carolina Chocolate Drops, The North Mississippi Allstars, Buddy Miller, Shawn Mullins, John Scofield, Mat Kearney, Amy Stroup, Cindy Morgan and Dan Tyminski. Madeira co-wrote all but Harris' song and a pair of traditional numbers, but he

chose to sing lead only on the title track, in favor of assembling an array of voices and vantage points.

He issued invitations to people he crossed paths with naturally. They're his regular co-writers or employers, or friends of theirs, or they've cut his songs, or, in the case of Kearney, they got to talking over gin-and-tonics at a party. Some are situated on the mainstream fringes, others are leading lights of the roots music world, and several share in common with Madeira past experiences in contemporary Christian music, though they've since settled elsewhere.

"When I moved here," he says, "the first door that opened was the Christian-music door. Not long after I got here, I was at The Bluebird one night, and I heard a group called the Kingsnakes, with Kenny Greenberg and Mike Henderson playing guitars. I'll never forget hearing Mike just sounding like a bluesman from the '30s. And I just thought, 'Wow, this is who I was before I got caught up into commercial music, and before I did any Christian music.' It was a real epiphany. And that night I said, 'OK, I've got to figure out how to get out of Christian music.' Then I slowly transitioned. Ironically, through Christian music, through Julie Miller, I started playing with Buddy Miller, and that has led me down a great path."

By design, Mercyland offers no guarantees about where its performers are coming from, and that wouldn't really fly in CCM or mainstream country, where much emphasis is placed on performers' clearly defined relationships to that subject matter. There's food for thought here, too, for further left-of-center (read: Americana) audiences. The project gestures toward the rich complexity of spiritual expression, and acts as a reminder that it's unwise to assume what a singer means, or doesn't mean, when she sings of matters of the spirit.

"I didn't care whether the people on the project believed what I believed or not," says Madeira. "I mean, there is a theme. There is an inescapable acquiescence to the idea of God is love. So there's a side

of it that might as well be gospel, but it's still a different gospel."

Mercyland's is a pluralistic gospel that isn't aimed at bringing differently believing people into the fold so much as savoring the divine-human connection wherever it is found. According to "Give God the Blues" — delivered with wry, streetwise authority by Mullins — there's no need to try to convert anybody to anything, anyhow.

To prove how wide he propped the door open on this album, Madeira points to a conversation with Scofield, who leads a gorgeously lyrical instrumental version of "Peace in the Valley" on guitar. Says Madeira, "The night before we recorded, he was like, 'Hey man' — very jazzy, New York guy — 'So Phil, you know I'm not a Christian, right?' I said, 'Yeah, man. That's the point.' " Scofield nonetheless said he could dig the question, "What if Jesus was love?"

In a dozen songs, Jesus makes only one explicit appearance, and it comes during "If I Was Jesus." Years before The North Mississippi Allstars rendered their loose-as-you-like front-porch version, the song appeared on a major country album, conforming to comparatively tidier pop conventions. "They took a song that Toby Keith had cut and really made it their own," says Madeira. "I mean, you would never know it was the same song."

Another way of putting it is Allstars singer-guitarist Luther Dickinson delivers the easygoing, sing-talking cadence of a guy who sounds kinda stoned. "That's precisely what I love," Madeira responds with a chuckle. "He does sound lit up. He may be the straightest guy in the world. I don't know. But he sounds so earnest, too. And I think he sounds like a guy who wants mercy. That's all I really want."

Email music@nashvillescene.com.

•
•
•
•

• 43