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MUSIC REVIEW

## **Mercyland: Hymns for the Rest of Us**

**Andrew Greer** / posted April 24, 2012

*Style: Americana/folk; compare to Buddy Miller, Patty Griffin, Amos Lee*

*Top tracks: "Give God the Blues" (feat. Shawn Mullins), "Mercyland," "Leaning on You" (feat. Cindy Morgan)*

Hymns have pervaded popular music since mainstream pacesetters like Elvis Presley, Mahalia Jackson, and Aretha Franklin incorporated religious sets into their chart-topping 1950s repertoires. In the '60s, socially conscious singer-songwriters like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Simon & Garfunkel commented on America's tense issues with often spiritually-themed folk hymnody, foreshadowing the Jesus Music movement a decade later, and spawning an entire genre marked by Christian lyrics.

Today, thanks to continued efforts by the likes of Buddy Miller, Emmylou Harris, and Patty Griffin, spiritual music, especially wrapped in the garb of Americana, is a commercially successful venture. Enter Phil Madeira's *Mercyland*. As one of roots music's biggest songwriters and producers (Alison

Krauss, Garth Brooks, Keb' Mo'), the multi-instrumentalist gathers eleven-like minded artists to combat the righteousness of religion with a dozen acoustic-based tracks presenting the type of heart-based faith that influenced his own musical and spiritual upbringing.

Co-writing most of the tracks with the participating musicians, Madeira's songs wed each artist's personality with melancholic folk, blues-oriented roots, and gentle Americana sensibilities. Gritty dobro, electric blues guitar, and clever semantics permeate Shawn Mullins' "Give God the Blues," describing a deity unbiased by race or creed: "God don't hate the Muslims / God don't hate the Jews / God don't hate the Christians / But we all give God the blues ... God ain't no Republican / He ain't no Democrat / God's above all that." The title track, a compassionate chorus recorded by Madeira, offers, "I want every man and woman to claim some dignity / So let's you and me ... travel down to Mercyland." And the North Mississippi Allstars' campy "If I Were Jesus" (originally recorded by Toby Keith) further depicts a God personal with humanity.

The Civil Wars' acoustic gem, "From This Valley," and the old-time "Leaning on You," marked by Cindy Morgan's heartbreaking vocal and double-stop fiddles, sweetly ask for help from on high, while Buddy Miller's easy gravel on "I Believe in You" and Mat Kearney's effortless pop/rock on "Walking Over the Water" grasp at faith in the midst of harrowing doubt.

Add equally stellar seeker hymns by Americana staples Emmylou Harris and The Carolina Chocolate Drops, indie popster Amy Stroup, Union Station's Dan Tyminski, and jazz guitarist John Scofield, and Madeira has not only outdone his own rich musical history, but created a poignant commentary on the tightrope of faith—capturing the vulnerable exchange between hurting humans and a holy God.

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