

## Charlemagne by Charlemagne

If it weren't for the harmonies, I would have trouble fathoming why this album has been classed by every music magazine as either 'alt-country' or 'Americana'. The sonic memories it conjures up on first listen, when you hear the broad sound and the most memorable hooks, are of those bands we get in every era - with a tight rhythm section, prominent acoustic playing, considered lead guitar, and a strong stoical vocal which takes as its main influence the Byrds. Badfinger come to mind, as do, less remarkably, the Cosmic Rough Riders. It is unfair, of course, to open a review of some poor singer's album by name-checking three other bands. It is not intended to condemn Charlemagne - if anything it is just a small attempt at saving him from the empty and inappropriate 'Americana' pigeon-hole. Because the Noahjohn frontman's debut solo effort is not entrenched in California or Tennessee any more than it uses the influences of any old British four-piece. The track Dawn Upon even features a Hank Marvin style guitar solo. So, what of those harmonies? In classic singer-songwriter mode, the album's opening song Prisoner Of opens with just the briefest acoustic introduction and then heads straight into a close two-part harmony description of a typical lost soul figure - imprisoned in the wrong mind, whistling the same song for ten years... yes, you have probably heard it all before, and the production is possibly what keeps you wanting to hear the rest of the album - you know the guitarist and drummer are right there, playing for you while your two speakers provide the vocals. The album is still warming up by the time you get to August Evenings. And, unless you are an impatient punk rocker, this is where it gets interesting. It is that under-stated confidence which underpins the whole album - but this time, finally, it is applied justifiably. The idea isn't new but the expression of it is poignant: "And what I once thought / Was strong is nothing to lean on". But what Charlemagne does not do is rely on usual folk minor chord changes to emphasise the message. He is assured enough to use some fascinating major shifts - the transitions rather than the chords themselves (or the finely honed but uncomplicated acoustic playing) make the point he is singing. And before we get too familiar with what he is trying to do, he tells us "I am over you", and that's that. Next song. Other than its brevity, this song's finest qualities are repeated even more dramatically in the album's closing track, Portrait With No Shortage Of History. By now the band has loosened up (about time), and this time a piano and pipe-sounding organ come to the fore - the organ gives the track a churchy feel, but the piano's thin sound keeps it personal. The lyrics are taken from Madame Deluxe by Tenaya Darlington, but they are in perfect keeping with the lyrical tone of the album - a wistful second-person look back on other people's history, which at times accuses the protagonists rather than mourning with them, in the manner of so much popular music. "It's sad, what happened to you, what happened to us, but this is what happens when you...". Charlemagne sings his lines impassively, as if he would rather not have to, but this is how it is. The chords are fewer in this song, but again, the changes guide the song and give the lyrics structure where otherwise one would be lacking. Charlemagne is worth a listen - at any rate budding songwriters should use the album as a study guide. It displays a conscious lack of raw emotion which the listener will either love or loathe - personally I respect rather than savour the distant and resigned voice which is used to give expression to the narrator's feelings. But this album will grow on you.

## About the Author

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