

With These Hands by Alejandro Escovedo

Alejandro Escovedo's classic album *With These Hands* has just been re-released by Rykodisc. Alejandro Escovedo is a master at writing what might best be called the epic ballad. Conventionally we are used to "epic" songs being long affairs, with majestic lyrics talking of grand ideas complemented by overstated guitar solos and a dense sound. What is this all in the name of? Power. But as Escovedo shows in his recently re-released album *With These Hands*, there are more interesting ways to make powerful music. A classic case in point is the album's emotional centre-piece, *Pissed Off 2am*. Normal song classification would have this number down as a ballad. As with most ballads, it has subject matter which is sad, it is slow-paced, it has sweet but not cloying harmonies, and it is full of the language of loss, drink, and lack of meaning. It touches the listener, and creates a visual image – the two protagonists are there, right in front of you, you feel like you know everything there is to know about their story, you share the singer's despair; ultimately you begin to identify with him, however silly and inappropriate this is. But this song has something else – it has a subtle but clearly present force, which drives the song in a way which sets it apart from most ballads. It is difficult to pin down exactly how Escovedo achieves this. As with all good epics, there is a piano – but it isn't ostentatious plonking in the best Meat Loaf style, it is more a series of delicate whispers, just in the right place, adding to the melody rather than disguising the lack of one. The lyrics also play their part in creating such a unique song – they are not the simple platitudes of loss, but something far more complex. Escovedo doesn't just have to fight the reasons given to him for the changes in his life – there are also "barricades", real obstacles, which he tries to knock down merely by denying their meaning. But the barricades appear again and again in the song, and the story remains unfinished, the suffering unresolved. That, in fact, is the theme of the album – a yearning for times past, a realisation that times have changed in irreversible ways, and, at times, an uncertain hope that things will be happy in new ways. The initial rumblings and catchy bass riff of the opening song, *Put You Down*, give way to a description of a love that the singer just cannot relinquish, and then we are away – eleven songs of what might be called "Americana" music if only because that term means so little and encompasses so much. Acoustic folk, rustic country, Latino, rock and roll; actually that last term is sufficient on its own. The Band's film *The Last Waltz* contains a revealing interview with Levon Helm, in which he describes how lots of different musical genres come together in Tennessee, as it is geographically the heart of the United States. The result? "Rock and roll". Escovedo's album is a classic exposition of this fusion. The song which sounds most like a rock and roll song is probably *Guilty*. Unlike most of the song on the album, it is not in the first or second person – it tells a story of someone else, a man who lost his way, wrapped up in shame. But this is not just a token loud, pull-out-all-the-stops, rocker. It has a superb hook – that moment in the chorus where the lyrics are perfectly matched by the melody, and where the band comes together and feels the movement, the change, in the song. Towards the end of the album, there is another epic ballad, and this time the power of the song is more easily identifiable. The theme of loss and renewal is poetically exposed at the outset: "Take this old and very tired skin / wrap up a newborn baby and keep her warm again". Judged on paper, the words have the potential to sound trite, but with the warmth and sincerity of the vocals, the song sounds natural and almost unassuming. The ability of music itself to rejuvenate is also recognised: "Take this old and worn out violin and hold it in your arms / and make it sing". By the time we reach the album's title track, the record is almost complete – this is a song Escovedo wrote for his father, and the life of this brilliant but only moderately successful songwriter is put in context by the line "They say death's the only peace the poor understand". The song builds in intensity as it re-acquaints us with the restless growls of the opening number, and we see the light, it moves "faster, howling like the wind blows"; and the singer tells us that the water of the river will heal our wounds – because once again, although the song is not about us, we feel what he is saying. Finally, the album ends and we are reminded that it contains no clear message, just some themes which point the songs in particular directions – because over some more fantastically shimmering piano work, *Tugboat* ends by reminding us that "Gone gone those days are gone / gone gone gone".

With Escovedo now seriously ill with hepatitis C, these thoughts move beyond being simply poignant and assume the weight of real tragedy. This being a re-release, it comes with a variety of bonus tracks and live performances of the album's songs and others, and they too are well worth hearing – the variety of Escovedo's performances is just as evident live as it is in the studio. *With These Hands* is not an album to be enjoyed just by fans of alt-country, Americana, or any other label. It is an album to be enjoyed by those who like good quality songs and near-perfect performance. It is a set of songs that music fans will relish.

About the Author

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