

Jerry Joseph Biography

Some songwriters just strike down to the heart of things. Even when they're being tender they nail you in the soul's solar plexus, shaking us with words and wires and something inescapably human. Jerry Joseph is this kind of composer - a rocker with emotional scalpel that cuts deep every time. He wears his influences on his sleeve - Elvis Costello, Neil Young, John Lennon, Steve Earle - but tailors them in ways that are always distinctly himself, probing the politics of love and nations with equal dexterity. By turns tough and unbelievably bruised, Joseph's work manages to be joyfully pissed off and achingly bittersweet, often within the space of just a few verses. There's a healthy restlessness to his music, a stripe of his modernity and tireless engagement with the world that places him next to younger contemporaries like Conor Oberst (Bright Eyes) and Ryan Adams.

Joseph has worked tirelessly since his late '80s/early '90s days in Little Women, averaging an album a year since 1994. Often live-on-the-floor affairs, there's an immediacy and personal reach to his albums like kindred spirits Chris Whitley and Vic Chesnutt, his fellow toilers in the under-sung singer-songwriter field. Like the best musicians, there's always a forward motion to his work, some force that compels things ahead from where they've been, something one hears loud & clear on his latest project, The Denmark Veseys, a malleable band named a controversial slave revolt leader from the 1800's and based around the core of Joseph and master percussionist Steve Drizos that released their self-titled debut in early 2008, which ranges from the Buzzcocks-like punk pop of "Helena Bucket" to the masterful Americana sway of "Cochise" to incendiary agit-prop rockers like "Ho Chi Minh." Produced by David Barbe (Drive-By Truckers, Son Volt), the new record has the measured intelligence of craftsmen able to whisper and scream on several levels at once, a callback to a time when real musicians made thoughtful rock 'n' roll albums that thrive on repeat, revealing fresh details and nuances over time hidden amongst the lesions and frustrations Joseph & Drizos etch so eloquently on their debut.

All the miles and stage hours of this tireless road dog simmer into his recordings, which manage to capture some of the brilliant flame of his take-no-prisoners live performances. There's an intensity to Joseph that dates back to his early days in could-have-contenders Little Women in the late '80s and continues through his collaborations with jam scene kings Widespread Panic ("Climb To Safety") and pleasantly eviscerating releases with his Jackmormons band like Mouthful of Copper, a 2003 live double disc set that showcases the fury and focused intelligence Joseph brings to his music. Creatively restless, he has crafted acoustic ruminations (2004's Cherry) and muscular rock cycles (2005's Into The Lovely), always keeping himself open to where the muses will steer his passionate, beautifully jaded songwriting.

Currently living in Harlem, NYC, he's a tireless listener to everything that comes his way, filtering in the hip-hop of Aesop Rock and Jamaican strains that drift through his window as easily as he incorporates the more brainy, confessional strains of his core inspirations. He embodies original rock's boundary-free spirit that pulled happy handfuls from country, blues, jazz and folk to create something that struts and wails. From dub to backwoods laments, his music stretches to incorporate whatever is flipping his switch at a given moment, yet always grounded in something indefinably Jerry J. This free-ranging is most delightfully loose in the Stockholm Syndrome, his on-again, off-again collaboration with Dave Schools (Widespread Panic), Eric McFadden (EMT, P-Funk), Wally Ingram (David Lindley, Sheryl Crow) and Danny Louis (Gov't Mule), where the boys can swing from roadhouse hard to psychedelically bent.

"Usually, if I think something's cool it stays with me," says Joseph. "When I write I go to my brother's

house in Mexico, and I don't write with drum machines or four-tracks. I tend to write on just acoustic guitar, and sometimes I can get out a couple songs a day if I'm in the groove. I'm finally getting old enough that I might actually get good at this (laughs). I think the writers that are aging and growing with their art are fascinating. This is really the first time with pop music that we've been able to watch people get old. If they're cool and writing about it, like Dylan or Neil Young, they're sort of documenting the process. In my own broken way, I'm trying to do that, too."