

## THE PHANTOM MONK OF FOLK-BLUES



A writer at the San Diego Troubadour described guitarist and songwriter Kelly Joe Phelps as, “The Phantom Monk Of Folk-Blues,” and rightly so. Over the past 17 years of recording and touring, Phelps has been talked about as much for his passionate, spirit-driven, lone musical ways as for the inventiveness of his playing and singing. A New York Times concert reviewer wrote: “...his airy playing conjuring a pocket of supernatural space. He manipulated his fretboard to create eerie harmonics as he slipped from a mumble to a falsetto, as if to follow the soul beyond the physical realm.”

Uncut magazine, reviewing a London show, wrote: “...to ripple and snake into unknown territory for the country blues he allegedly played, to squeeze out sounds touching the searching jazz that had once been his trade, to mutate through more layers than twelve strings should hold. And the songs – their pleas for mercy beyond the grave healed the spirit in ways disbelievers, in bibles or blues, could feel.”

Kelly Joe is an improviser within the world of folk music. He'll likely use the same group of songs during one show that he used the previous night, sure enough, but the skew will have changed, the colors and shading moved around. Sometimes, it seems like the song might even be playing him, rather than the other way around. “I approach music this way,” he says, “to give it a chance to breathe, walk, or whisper. Improvising, even in small amounts, turns a piece of music into a conversation, in real time, with all of the unexpected twists and turns that any conversation is going to have, even if it's with someone you talk to all the time. The emotional complexity of us, in any one moment, can be musically represented through improvisation as a moment in motion, like someone thinking, or worrying, perhaps, right this second, here and now. If there isn't some part of the unknown or unexpected present, it seems like an important aspect of being human goes missing. That's the beauty of spontaneity, even in the supposed confines of folk music. It allows a character, a note, or a chord some time to be alive, to look for themselves...if I'm doing my job well, that is.”

Phelps refers to himself as a folk musician. He deems the folk music story as one continually being written, and its ultimate definition in fluid motion. “There's still a lot of work for us musicians to do,” he considers, “and a lot more music to find. We have to keep our eyes and ears open, and keep moving forward, and continue to learn.” The culture website PopMatters, reviewing Kelly's CD 'Western Bell', figured he had work to do as well, but clearly as the Phantom Monk: “When a listener resigns him or herself to intently listening to Kelly's lone guitar, fighting back the darkness one plunk at a time, an odd sort of poetry arises: like a hero of the high plains, roaming nameless to wherever God deems his services necessary, Phelps speaks directly to your soul. If that isn't the stuff of legends, I don't know what is.”