



NEW RELEASE

BLACK HEN MUSIC

Kelly Joe Phelps Western Bell

At some point, the rearview mirror gets too fat. So crowded, so saturated with the recorded miles and miles of what's back there, it just falls off the windshield. Then you turn and go home.

After a decade and a half of traveling the world – occasionally with a band, but usually alone with a guitar – Kelly Joe Phelps' rearview might've fallen off the windshield. *Western Bell*, his eighth full-length album, could be the soundtrack to his first mirror-cleaning sit-down in a long while. Some stuff winds up on the mantle (the photo of the Montana ranch where he helped herd cattle); some stuff winds up tattooed on his arms (a whole lot of names, or the pirate that says, "Be Kind").

Long-hailed for his virtuosic and courageous playing, these eleven instrumentals for solo guitar feel different somehow. It's as though the audience has been removed from the equation – not momentarily ignored, but removed entirely -- leaving the compelling sensation of peering through a keyhole. "Where's the slide?" they used to yell – really yell – at the guy up there playing some of the most unstraightest straight guitar ever set down. "Play the slide! Shine-eyed!" Well, after a four-record slide hiatus, a few cuts ("Blowing Dust 40 Miles," the vast "The Jenny Spin," and "Little Family") feature Phelps laying it down horizontally again, but lawd knows not for those folks. More sonically investigative than ever, and simply wrought with emotion, the results are spellbinding.

Technically speaking, the vast majority of the numbers are improvised on the spot, some in tunings so backasswards that only the most basic elements of a "guitar piece" remain – vibrato, the occasional alternating thumb, the clack of a bar on a steel string. In these instances, Phelps seems to deconstruct the very engine that's carried him around the world, lay the guts on the floor, and set to rebuilding a machine precisely in tune with the necessities. No drag.

And herein we find the shining black center of *Western Bell*, of Phelps himself perhaps, sifting through the engrained muscle memory of years of playing, the record collection, the poems, women, other on-ramps. Incredibly personal, these ruminations reflect a soul busy coming to terms with its scope and parameters, past & future. Visions of big sky, ant hills in fast-forward, her laugh when she drank.

Others, like the curtain-parting title cut, or the love-drunk stumble of "Hattie's Hat," are compositions so fully formed, so flecked with the ghosts of American Music, you'd swear they've existed for generations. Sinatra could slide into "Murdo," & Gershwin could have written it. Leadbelly, Bill Evans, from stomps to carnivals, and all with mojo – as quick as an allusion is recognized, it's gone again. Beautiful, innovative, and inspired.

There are only a handful of truly seminal solo guitar recordings in circulation, ones that forever transport both audience and genre. Add one more to the list. Here is Kelly Joe Phelps' *Western Bell*.

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