

"Marriage of Melody, Guitar will Resonate with Blues Fans" *-John Ziegler, Duluth News Tribune, Jan 1, 2009*

He calls his style "Zen Blues." With his stompin' left foot, his stinging slide and his National Steel resonator guitar, Jeff Ray creates a style that is equal parts Delta Blues, straight up Americana singer-songwriter and brilliant instrumentalist.

The clarity and precision of Ray's bottleneck playing, as it swoops and dives through his vocal lines, is so well-honed and has such an alluringly liquid quality that it puts him in a league with the best on the planet. Folks such as Ry Cooder, David Lindley and Bob Brozman have nothing on this young virtuoso.

His newest record, "Last Great Winter," is a tour de force that should be required listening for anyone interested in the instrument or the style.

"Dear Grenadine" is an instrumental that blends Merle Travis' alternating bass beneath Leo Kottke-like upper register slides, snapped strings and fretted chordal clusters. It's such an expressive composition that it made me think it might have been born of a marriage between Travis' classic "Freight Train" and Kottke's sensational instrumental "Bean Time."

"Higher Hilltops" has a hushed quality and an elliptical melody that evolves and changes without sounding cobbled together. Ray's voice, when engaged, has a cooler, more detached feel that intertwines, like a strand of DNA, with his impassioned and throatier guitar tones.

Woody Guthrie's immortal "This Land is Your Land" is an album highlight with crystalline slide and a vocal that has just a hint of Woody's son, Arlo, in its timbre. Ray has returned the song to the style the elder Guthrie intended. Over time it has become a cuddly childhood sing-along. Ray restores a couple of verses that have routinely been shucked, including a well-timed one about the welfare office, and gives the song more drive and guts. It's worth the price of the disc to have this version of a song many feel should be our national anthem in your collection.

Ray's brilliance with bell-like harmonics (a la Lenny Breau, Chet Atkins and Tommy Emmanuel) is stunning. His velvet touch on the forefront of "Human Hillside" shows that he has absorbed the finger-picking wizardry of Pat Donohue and Chris Smither. The tunes tangled melody bends and undulates, feeling like a fast run through the woods on a new trail complete with twists and turns, then makes a dive for the finale like a kamikaze pilot.

Bob Dylan's "Maggie's Farm" is a stripped-down take on the tune that ushered in Dylan's switch to electricity back at Newport in '65. Ray's cover is much bluesier and clearly his own, which would get Dylan's thumbs-up. It also gives Ray the forum to whip out some great slide licks and let the resonator talk up a storm.

Ray not only tours the country solo but is working with Nick Salisbury (bassist for G.B. Leighton and Mick Sterling) in a group called Jeff Ray & the Stakes. It's an acoustic roots band that regularly adds special guests such as Mikkel Beckmen of the Brass Kings and Harold Tremblay of Cool Disposition.

His dexterity with the slide, his pristine intonation, his delicious sense of melody, and his ability to cover without copying make Jeff Ray someone to discover and "Last Great Winter" a gem worth seeking out. If you're a resonator guitar devotee it's a must-have. If you're not, this disc could make you a convert.