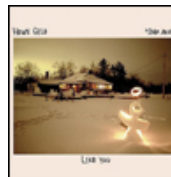




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Howe Gelb

'Sno Angel like You
Thrill Jockey
2006
B



Refresh off his guest contributions to Neko Case's *Fox Confessor Brings the Flood*, former Giant Sand captain Howe Gelb gives us a quirky and unusual slab of dry and unrelentingly direct songs that just happen to be sparsely adorned with the electrifying stabs of a full-steam ahead Southern gospel choir. After a quarter-century in music, Gelb has little to prove but plenty to offer, and the minimalist arrangements on *'Sno Angel Like You* feature his thick, deep voice as he jaunts across an array of grinning, growling lyrical contraptions.

After a serendipitous encounter with Canadian gospel choir Voices of Praise, Gelb set out to combine his dirty, salt-of-the-earth sound with the breathtaking force of the choir's many voices. For this task, Gelb composed seven new songs adhering to the choir director's only stipulation ("Keep it positive") and roped in three old Giant Sand songs by his friend, the late Rainer Ptacek.

Gelb's interplay and relationship with the choir isn't clean or manufactured. They aren't simple, angelic voices that float in from somewhere above his head or that are simply pasted on his music. If anything, it sounds like Gelb is performing *for* them, that they are in fact his audience, who occasionally are so moved by his performance that they coo and color segments of the song.

The first track, "Get to Leave" features only slight accompaniment from the choir, and at the end, they laugh and clap in appreciation. At that very moment, the listener is initiated into this little congregation, with Gelb as the charismatic, plain spoken preacher who's lassoed a throng of white robed revivalists ready to spread the word—his words. The juxtaposition of Gelb's two-chord, bluesy rhythms and the choir's soaring, sonorous exaltations is striking, and in an instant the earthly becomes sublime. "But I Did Not" chugs along with a locomotive persistence, slowly climbing the mountain to "The Farm," where the album's build-up finally flowers in a warm and sunny climax.

Gelb's folksy style and verbal proclivities draw comparisons to Silver Jews' David Berman, but unlike Berman, Gelb eschews poetics, never backing himself into an odd couplet or strained metaphor. It's pure-speak, without pretension or complication but still able to accomplish some deeply affecting lines and verses. "Love Knows (No Borders)" finds beauty in the memory of jingled pocket change and takes its time to seep its way into existence, the loose guitar and drum moving at a snail's pace, leaving plenty of silent, pensive gaps between each word.

Though none of the material is overtly religious in nature, by "keeping it positive," Gelb has constructed an immensely pleasing and happy album. He sounds at ease, and the joy he gets performing with Voices of Praise comes across on record. The choir's tone is also smooth, and one can tell they're getting a kick out of working in this new context. "Worried Spirits" pounds away at deep drum kicks and sludgy guitar strikes, and the choir finds their niche amidst all the noise, even sounding downright funky at times. *'Sno Angel Like You* manages to meld these two disparate parts into a beautiful whole, with each side using their innate talents towards the common goal of music that challenges the senses while still being fun.



Reviewed by: Michael Patrick Brady
Reviewed on: 2006-03-16
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