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"American Road" by Mark Elliott

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Coincidence or maybe something more? Who knows. Life is funny, for here I am reviewing Mark Elliott's CD "American Road" on July 4th. That thought just came to me as I began this review of songs based on times, places, people and culture, American-style. But fear not, for this is not a collection of visceral nationalism run amok, like so many of the 'love this country or I'll kick your behind two weeks beyond Thursday' offerings pressed into action after 9/11.

No, this is a look at the real America, of situations and settings not all glossed up and packaged pretty, that are actually commonplace in all mankind. That's the beauty and strength of this release.

The best of the cuts are "A Private In Patton's Army," "Old Berle Jones" and "Message In A Bottle."

The wistful "A Private In Patton's Army," its mood enhanced with slow accordion backing, depicts a youthful farm boy joining "up with other nephews of Uncle Sam" in World War II. Upon returning home seemingly intact, the boy-turned-man:

"...kissed a pretty girl and settled down
But there was a life-long battle brewin'
On a new and dangerous ground
He'd talk about God and he'd talk about the general
And when he was drinking
They were one and the same
From the bottom of the glass
Like the bottom of the trenches
He came up fighting no matter who was in the way..."

"Old Berle Jones" is a wonderful time and place song. About the indentured-like servitude lives of Appalachian miners, the hard life both above and below ground, plus personal pride and attachment to land, the last verse goes:

"...A mountain tear down a granite face
Sitting in the twilight of the old home place
He tells his son 'tell your son'
Ain't much to look at but this is where you're from..."
The beginnings of alcoholism are depicted in "Message In A Bottle." At a church camp retreat, a young man picks up a whiskey bottle and finishes it off with some buddies:

"...I chugged it down with my two best friends
For me it was religion, for them it was sin..."
After immersing himself in the fast life, he eventually journeys away from drink, singing:
"...It's been some years now that I've been dry
It's been an ocean of tears but one hell of a ride
I've got some scars yeah there's no doubt
Half from the doing half from the doing without..."

Others selections worthy of mention include the title cut "American Road," with its mix of Irish immigration, the ending of slavery and equal rights for women storylines, "Ride Out Of Reno," a family history tale and the reflective "From The Top Of The Hill," featuring a descriptive blend of nature's everyday wonders scattered among a personal creed of satisfied optimism.

"Jackass Family" deserves its own special mention. Reminiscent of but much darker (and funnier) than Robert Earl Keen's "Merry Christmas From The Family," it begins:

"Well my sister Mary is cheating on her husband again
And my cousin Roxanne has run off with a woman
Who used to be my old live in
Dad says he'll stay on top of the world
Long as step mom stays deceased
Sweet aunt Ilene is now my Uncle Norman
And then there's me..."
And it's 'downhill' from there.

Close to 50 minutes in length, this barnstorming tour of states of mind and place provides more than enough reasons for anyone to give it a listen.

Elliott on vocals and guitar is backed by Jimmy Nichols on grand piano; Mark Burchfield on upright bass; Eric Darken on percussion; Jim Hoke on accordion, harmonica and clarinet; Wanda Vick on fiddle, octave fiddle and bouzouki; Cary Stone on lead guitar; Jon Catchings on cello; Jonell Mosser on vocals and Don Henry on vocals.

Track List:

- American Road (3:41) Jeff Middleton, co-writer
- Ride Out Of Reno (3:42) Jim Moran
- Message In A Bottle (4:17)
- Born To Fly (3:25)
- A Private In Patton's Army (4:51)
- Baseball & Beatles (3:32) Jim Moran, co-writer
- Jackass Family (4:21) Neal Coty, co-writer
- Old Berle Jones (4:39)
- Jacket (3:50) Daniel Baker, co-writer
- Not Even New Orleans (4:05) Tim Johnson, co-writer
- Old Dogs (3:54) Tony Ramey, co-writer
- From The Top Of The Hill (4:35)

All songs by Mark Elliott, except as indicated.

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