

Plow Through The Mystic

J E F F B L A C K

It's the truth behind what an artist does – and the way they choose to do it – that defines their art. And while the ways in which audiences get their music has changed, the reasons why a certain kind of artist makes music have remained the same. Call it an uncompromising commitment, an inspired confidence, or just the need to share with and connect to those who listen. For Jeff Black, it's what's continued to build a career like few other singer/songwriters in the business. It's how he's grown one of the most fervent grassroots followings anywhere. And it's why *Plow Through The Mystic* is his most musically and emotionally resonant album yet.



“I feel like I already have the brass ring in my pocket, just being able to nurture this thing that I’ve wanted, this need to observe and relate, since I was 10 years old,” says Jeff. “But I had to ask myself, ‘What’s the best way to do it now?’ Over the past decade, I’ve learned that I’d have to make changes in how I create music and put it out there. And I’ve never really opted to do this much on an album on my own.” *Plow Through The Mystic* – produced and recorded by Jeff in his own Arcana Studio – delivers a richly textured yet always intimate canvas of guitars, piano, banjo, keyboards, bass and percussion all played by Black, with contributions from longtime friends like mandolin legend Sam Bush, resonator guitar master Jerry Douglas, and vocals by fellow formidable singer/songwriters Matraca Berg, Gretchen Peters and Kim Richey. The album’s 14 songs traverse personal paths of love, faith, doubt and spiritual grit, bound by tones of folk, blues, fiery execution and gentle hush. It’s a collection that plays from the heart, cuts to the soul, and reaps truths that only Black can sow.

Jeff’s four previous acclaimed albums, numerous indie-film soundtracks, fan-sponsored tours and a catalog of songs covered by artists as diverse as Alison Krauss, Waylon Jennings, BlackHawk and Dierks Bentley have forged his reputation as a road warrior and songwriter’s songwriter throughout the Alt-Country, AAA and Folk fields. His pioneering podcast ‘Black Tuesdays’ – glowingly profiled by NPR in 2005 and subsequently copied by numerous performers – constitutes 100+ downloadable EPs that continue to grow both his live audiences and record sales. It’s a unique melding of old-school touring and new-digital content, creating a community of devout fans who have in turn made *Plow Through The Mystic* possible. “I was lucky a long time ago to realize that as an artist in these times, I need to stay in touch with the people who come to listen to my music and pay their hard-earned money to see a live performance. And I think that has to do with everything I try to say in my songs,” Jeff explains. “This new record only comes out of the gate ‘in the black’ because of my audience’s sense of what something is worth to them. I’m an ‘independent artist’ only by industry definition. I am honored to live in my little village, since apparently that’s what it takes.”

For his first album since 2005's *Tin Lily*, Black took his analog dedication and digital vision to a whole new level. "I'm very dirt-road with my writing. It's always been a candle, guitar and piano, pencil and paper," he says. "I'm usually working on 8 or 10 songs at the same time. Those ideas become their own entities, and some of them are quite insistent. Working in my own studio allowed me to capture ideas in the moment without losing any urgency." As Jeff began to craft the songs – several of which he'd been performing on the podcast and in concert – he discovered textures within them he hadn't heard before. He also found that the freedoms he'd created within his writing/recording process allowed him to reach for the phone. "The greatest talent of any good producer is knowing whom to call to bring their own muses and magic to the recording," he says, "then knowing how to get out of the way." Jeff's first call was to longtime friend and collaborator Sam Bush, whose 1996 recording of Jeff's "Same Ol' River" remains one of the Father of Newgrass' biggest hits, and with whom Jeff most recently co-wrote the title track to Bush's 2010 Grammy-nominated album *Circles Around Me*. "At this point, I would feel strange not working with Sam on a record," Jeff says. "He brings everything up several levels. In fact, it wouldn't be the album it is without Sam, Jerry, Matraca, Gretchen or Kim. Everyone who came to play or sing listened to the songs and helped me to lift them up and them in with great care. It's where they all reside musically, bringing all those years of experience and all that love of what's happening in a song in that moment. They all raised the bar, and I was happy to follow." Finally, the album was mixed by Dave Sinko (best known for his work with The Punch Brothers, Béla Fleck and Don Williams) and mastered by 3-time Grammy winner Joe Palmaccio (Hank Williams, Sr., Jeff Buckley, Bill Withers) to seal the album's distinctively organic sound and power. "The best things that happened on the record were because I was experimenting and exploring," Jeff says. "I was able to constantly circle these songs, see how they felt, let them breathe. And if I was quiet enough long enough to hear what they were doing, I would find the moments that let me travel inside and made me smile."

Ultimately, *Plow Through The Mystic* is at testament to those moments, where an artist shares their journey with an honesty and passion that lets listeners know they've been invited along to chart the course. "This is such an old-school album in every sense of the word," Jeff says. "It follows a path, and that path is always open to interpretation. But I hope that people might feel the same affirmation I take from writing these words in my journal. Most of all, it's the sense of where we are now and where we're going that's more important than where we used to be." For Jeff, that place is where he can make music on his own terms in his own time for a devoted audience that's come to expect nothing less. And Black knows that those truths and that audience are what truly pull the plow. "If a person's really lucky after a few decades on the planet, you begin to feel more comfortable in your own skin," he says. "Beyond all the self-doubting and second-guessing, there's always that inner compass way down deep that will tell you – if you're listening – that you're generally headed in the right direction."



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