

DUALTONE

Jeff Black

Tin Lily

A tin lily is just what it says—and much more than it seems. A thin piece of metal shaped in the petals of a delicate flower, it's designed to take a soft glow, often from a candle, and give it more shine. It's a hard element that does what it can to spread something as ethereal yet as essential as light.

Jeff Black's songs do much the same thing. They start in a personal place, often hidden back in the darkness, yet they always strive to illuminate. He's a burly, bare-knuckled, blue-collar son of the Missouri plains with dark Irish blood who digs into tough topics with a gentle heart. There's nothing predictable about a Jeff Black lyric other than it will be sung robustly and it will head towards hope instead of dwell on despair.

Black's fourth album, *Tin Lily*, is as hard to pin down as his previous work, where he has collaborated with everyone from rock experimentalists Wilco to Americana favorite Iris Dement to progressive bluegrass stalwart Sam Bush. As usual, Black found an inspired collection of musicians to collaborate with him on the self produced *Tin Lily*.

Mandolinist Sam Bush, who's last album was named after his cover of Black's song "King of the World," joins former Johnny Cash bassist Dave Roe, former Steve Earle drummer Craig Wright and guitarists Will Kimbrough, who's currently working with Rodney Crowell and Jimmy Buffett, and Kenny Vaughan, who performs with the likes of Kim Richey and Lucinda Williams among so many others. Engineered and mixed by Billy Sherrill, the song cycle on *Tin Lily* exemplifies the duality that make Jeff Black such a compelling, vital and important performing songwriter.

"Black is an artist of substance," wrote Billboard in a review that compared his piano ballads to Randy Newman and his rockers to Bruce Springsteen. Paste magazine adds, "The search for spiritual sustenance and lasting meaning underpins Black's reverent, battling-the-darkness-and-winning songs." He concedes that, while he doesn't want to offer in-depth explanations of what his songs mean, "I love songs about freeing the spirit, about minimizing the struggle the best you can, about treating your individuality as something that's precious and important," he says. "Those are the topics I come back to because those are the ideas I keep examining within myself." But Black is too complicated to make it easy. His songs take unexpected turns, cursing and snarling at points, showing their lust and their desire as well as their determination to remain bound for glory.

The disc opens with "Easy On Me," a rolling, blues-inflected warning of sorts whose narrator makes an unapologetic plea "*Hey I know what you want from me/but I've given all that I can give/you believe what you believe/but I think I need my soul to live.*" Black knows the way of the

heart when it's filled with love. But there's no greeting card sentimentality here. Songs like "Hollow Of Your Hand" and "Heaven Now" depict love in the real world, where it is often tempered by the trials and tribulations of everyday life, "*We leave the ground to reach for something true/take all these hand me downs and make them new/rave on beyond the waiting and let it go/she's so beautiful.*" The swaggering rock of "Libertine" leans toward the altruistic meaning of the word with total abandon. The soulful piano jam / thump shuffle of "Free At Last" proves that the piano is indeed a rock instrument and that soul music by definition should always be categorized by the source and not necessarily the retail bin.

Washed in the spirit and built on simple truths, his songs are ambitious epics performed with brawny passion. Irony does not reside here; Black's compositions ring out with the unadorned truth of the moment they were conceived. His desire to dig deeper, to cut to the marrow is another hallmark of Black's writing. He knows the world is painted in more subtle shades than black and white, so he writes songs with a painter's eye for nuance and detail. His songs delve into complex emotional territory with a simplicity that often belies the craft that goes into their making.

As anyone who's seen his moving, funny, and unpredictable concerts already knows, He never plays the same show twice, pulling from his commercial catalog "*Birmingham Road*" Arista 1998 "*Honey And Salt*" Blue Rose 2003, "*B-Sides And Confessions Volume One*" Dualtone 2003," and the new music on "*Tin Lily*", he responds to the moment and to whatever voodoo is floating through the air shared by a unique collection of people on any given night with the stories and songs that transcend the role of a singer/songwriter and his instrument. What makes a Jeff Black record or show exciting is that, as a listener, you know the singer is there not to perform for you, but to take you on a journey with him.

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Kissy Black
Jocelyn Harms
Lotos Nile Media
PO Box 23050
Nashville, TN 37202
615.298.1144
kissyblack@lotosnile.com

