



SON VOLT

Notes of Blue

“There are only two kinds of songs,” Townes Van Zandt said, well before he died. “There’s the blues, and there’s zip-a-dee-doo-dah.” The new Son Volt album is titled *Notes of Blue*.

Simple as that, maybe.

Just now pushing fifty, Jay Farrar, the creative force behind Son Volt, is still not as old as his voice. Not nearly. His singing voice, an ageless gift which sounds something like old timber looks, like the unpainted walls framing Walker Evans’ best portraits from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: simple, durable, weathered and grooved and unplanned.

Unplanned.

Notes of Blue will be the twentieth album — including a couple live releases and two movie soundtracks — to which Farrar has lent his voice and songwriting.

He is not quite a famous man, which is probably a comfort except when bills need paying. Plenty praised, though, from the moment his first band, the influential Uncle Tupelo, recorded a punked-up version of the topical Carter Family song “No Depression,” and named their debut album after it. Photographed for magazine covers, including the inaugural edition of *No Depression* magazine, which argued for the arrival of something called alt-country back in 1995, when Son Volt’s first album, *Trace*, came out.

To be clear, *Notes of Blue* is not the blues of appropriation, nor of beer commercials, nor especially of the W.C. Handy awards. It is the broader blues of the folk process, where they have always lived, irrespective of culture and caste. The blues as one of many languages available to shape and recast as the song needs. The blues as a jumping off point.

Or, as Jay says, “For years I’ve been drawn to the passion, common struggle and possibility for redemption that’s always been a part of the blues. Everyone has to pay the rent and get along with their significant others, so many of the themes are universal. For me, the blues fills that void that’s there for religion, really. That’s the place I turn to be lifted up.”

The possibility of redemption.

“There will be damage, and there will be hell to pay,” he sings on the opening track “Promise the World”. “Light after darkness, that is the way.”

The bleak prospect of redemption, he sings on the first single, "Back Against the Wall": "What survives the long cold winter/Will be stronger and can't be undone."

Quintessential Son Volt. Tough, solitary, unflinching.

"There's always a threat of darkness on the horizon," he says. "There's also a path to a better way inherent in the blues."

And if that echoes the plaintive words of a long-gone hillbilly singer, there's no accident in that. "Hank Williams is really the key," Farrar says. "He showed us that the blues as a music form was an integral part of country music early on."

For *Notes of Blue*, Farrar's notion of the blues focuses on specific guitar tunings, courtesy Skip James, Mississippi Fred McDowell, and Nick Drake. And on the structure of the songs themselves – repeated lines, a few phrases borrowed from older blues. Both provided entry points to his new songs.

"To me there's always been a mystique attached to those three tunings and those three performers," Farrar says. "So I was compelled to get inside those tunings and see what was there. Skip James' tuning in particular, supposedly has its origins in the Bahamas, it's a D-Minor tuning, so it has built into it kind of an intangible haunting effect. Something you can't quite put your finger on but it's there."

Those entry points mean that *Notes of Blue* features far more fingerpicking than previous Son Volt albums, and even (a nod to Fred McDowell), the bellowing, rambunctious slide of "Static."

"All of that was the target," Farrar says with his wry, concise clarity, "but the arrow landed somewhere between Tom Petty and ZZ Top."

Add one more piece, the almost feral blues of the George Mitchell field recordings. "All the performers are unheralded," Farrar says, "and yet compelling."

Belleville (where Uncle Tupelo grew up) is not St. Louis is not Ferguson, but we in flyover country are by now accustomed to our role in the greater society. We provide wheat and corn and fuel, a migratory labor force. The occasional spectacle.

And yet Jay Farrar seems nearly at peace with all of it. "Yeah, there's a glimmer of hope," he says. "What I get from the blues is that there's a chance for redemption. Whether this record achieves that is anyone's guess."

**For press information about Son Volt, please contact Jim Flammia
at All Eyes Media jim@alleyesmedia.com or (615) 227-2770**