



LUCERO

Among The Ghosts

THIRTY TIGERS

8/10

Memphis veterans make their most cinematic album yet. *By Stephen Deuser*



AS a band that calls Memphis home, Lucero have always walked among the ghosts. Over nine records in nearly 20 years, they have

found boundless inspiration in the old sounds of the city. In its heroes living and deceased, in the ruins of old music scenes long forgotten. Using punk and country as a foundation, they've absorbed the lusty energy of Sun Records rock, the strut of Beale Street blues, the tight R&B rhythms of Stax and Hi Records, and the exuberant songcraft of Big Star and The Scruffs. In addition to working with Jim Dickinson, Cory Branan, and John Murry, Lucero recorded their last handful of records at Ardent, even using that famous address as the title for 2009's *1372 Overton Park*.

Those deep local roots may explain the band's dogged longevity. Formed when alt.country was still the default label, they've managed to weather the Southern rock and bar rock revivals of the 2000s, building up an avid cult audience without the benefit of hit singles, flashy videos, press coverage, or even much in the way of label support. In 2005, Lucero were the subjects of a fawning documentary titled *Dreaming in America*, which followed the band as they jumped from a floundering indie label to a major and posed the crucial question, Why isn't this band bigger? It's remarkable that they have survived for so long and almost miraculous that Lucero

SLEEVE NOTES

- 1 Among The Ghosts
- 2 Bottom Of The Sea
- 3 Everything Has Changed
- 4 Always Been You
- 5 Cover Me
- 6 To My Dearest Wife
- 7 Long Way Back Home
- 8 Loving
- 9 Back To The Night
- 10 For The Lonely Ones

Produced by: Lucero and Matt Ross-Spang
Recorded at: Sam Phillips Recording Service, Memphis
Personnel: Ben Nichols (vocals, guitar, Mellotron, synthesiser), Brian Venable (guitar), John C. Stubblefield (bass), Roy Berry (drums, percussion), Rick Steff (piano, B3 organ), Michael Shannon (spoken word), Jim Spoke (saxophone), Sam Shoup (string arrangement), Eugenia Figueroa (viola), Dara Hankins (cello), Gaylon Patterson (violin), Heather Trussell (violin)

have done some of their best work in the past few years, in particular 2015's *All A Man Should Do*.

Add to that list their latest record, *Among The Ghosts*. To record these 10 new songs, Lucero hauled their gear downtown to 639 Madison Avenue, better known as Sam Phillips Recording Service Studio. The man credited with inventing rock'n'roll opened the facility in 1960 after outgrowing Sun Studio, and during its heyday it hosted sessions by Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Willie Mitchell and Charlie Rich, among many others. There they worked with the very much alive producer/engineer Matt Ross-Spang, best known for his work with Margo Price, Anderson East and Jason Isbell. He further streamlines their sound, highlighting the contributions of every band member while leaving the songs rough around the edges.

Discarding the barroom dramas that have populated previous albums, *Among The Ghosts* is a loose song cycle about soldiers and cowboys, wanderers and outlaws, fathers and husbands. These are rough-hewn songs about men leaving home and reaping bitter harvests, sung

in Ben Nichols' barbed-wire voice and enlivened by his keen eye for detail. Matter-of-fact in his sentiments and sober in his delivery, he's always gravitated toward the masculine literature of Cormac McCarthy, Larry McMurtry and Ernest Hemingway. But another storyteller looms over *Among The Ghosts* – namely, Jeff Nichols, Ben's brother and a filmmaker specialising in well-observed Southern tales like *Take Shelter* and *Midnight Special*. Michael Shannon, the actor who starred in both those movies, appears on "Back To The Night", delivering a spoken-word monologue that sounds like a voice summoned by séance. Similarly, one of the quietest and most affecting moments on the album is "Loving", an aching love song Ben penned for his brother's 2016 movie of the same title.

Perhaps more crucially, *Among The Ghosts* is Lucero's most cinematic album, as the band draw from their wide arsenal of sounds to convey these characters' worries and regrets. Lucero treat these songs like short films. Rick Steff's organ swirls around the chorus of the title track, like the first cold winds of a dark storm approaching. Brian Venable's guitar casts sparks throughout "Cover Me", a violent gunfight saga, and you can almost smell the flint and gunpowder. And Roy Berry's drums – always the band's secret weapon, the derringer hidden in their dusty boot – pushes these songs along at odd tempos, placing beats where you don't expect them. He plays double-time on "Bottom Of The Sea" and goesos closing track "For The Lonely Ones" at a reckless pace. If these songs are short movies, Berry shows us the sprockets in the filmstrip.

"Back home my wife and daughter don't know where I am tonight," Nichols sings on the title track, "but soon I will find a road that leads me home." That's the sad situation all of his characters face, but it's Nichols' own predicament as well, which lends these third-person story-songs a first-person immediacy. *Among The Ghosts* is shot through with the melancholy of missing home, which is more than enough to keep them on the road another 20 years.

Q&A

Ben Nichols "A lot of this LP was recorded live on the floor"

Why did you want to make this album at Sam Phillips Recording Service? We recorded our last three albums at Ardent, another legendary Memphis studio. I loved those records, but it was time for a change. Plenty of great records have been made at Phillips, but mainly it was the room itself that made us want to

record there. The way he had the building designed and built makes it a unique place with unique sounds.

Did the place change the songs at all? We approached this record differently from the get-go. No pre-production. We just set up and I started playing guitar lines I'd written. We went with whatever seemed to work. Then I'd go home at night and put the

pieces together and write lyrics. A lot of this LP was recorded live on the floor.

Several of the songs on the record seem to be set in the past.

My songwriting in the past has been mainly autobiographical. On this record I focused more on a storytelling approach and wanted to work on the craft of songwriting. I wanted to write about lives other than mine. I've done it a couple of times in the past, but it's still new to me. I think with this record I'm starting to get the hang of it.

INTERVIEW: STEPHEN DEUSER



DANBALL/MICHAEL FOSTER