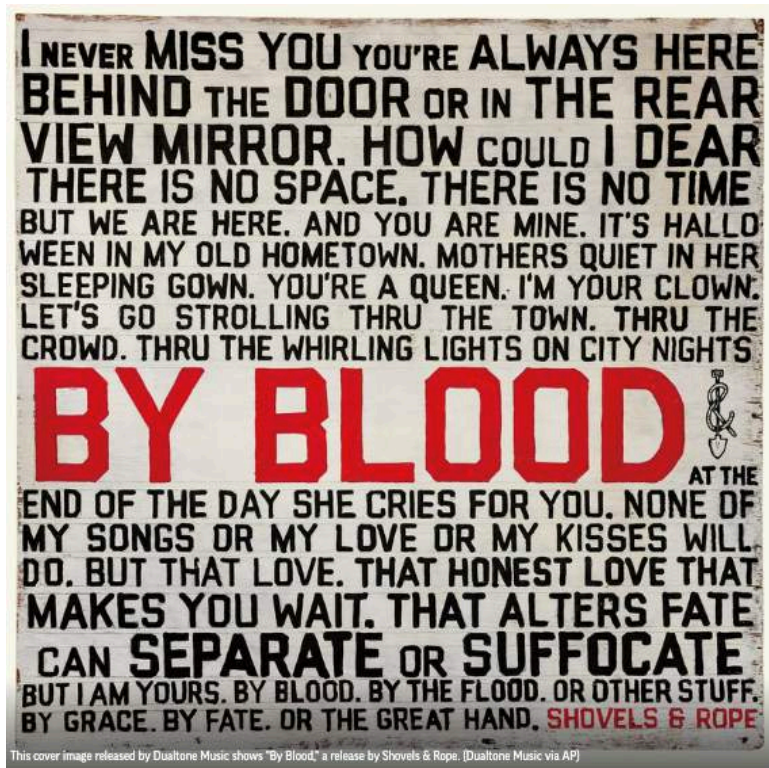


# Music Review: Shovels & Rope keep folk tradition alive

By RAGAN CLARK April 10, 2019

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Shovels & Rope, "By Blood" (Dualtone)

The traditions of folk and bluegrass style may seem all but dead — gone are the days of murder ballads, tunes written on horseback and songs yearning for life out west. Gone are those days, unless you are folk-rock duo Shovels & Rope.

"By Blood" is a 10-track album that stays true to the heritage of folk and bluegrass music in theme and style, while adding Shovels & Rope's own spin and a rockabilly edge.

The duo of Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent display a tightness on the album that transcends typical bandmate cohesion. Married for a decade, the two are perfectly in step on every track, filling the space between one another with Trent's gravelly voice and Heart's coarse, yet salient vocals.

On the bluegrass and folk songwriting side, there's "Pretty Polly," "Hammer," "Mississippi Nuthin'" and "C'mon Utah!" All adhere to the story-telling style of the genre.

"C'mon Utah!" is a battle cry on horseback during a journey out west. "Pretty Polly" tells the tale of a woman he couldn't let go and couldn't let stay, so he "buried pretty Polly in a poor pathetic grave."

"Mississippi Nuthin'" is a cleverly honest ballad about a narrator down on luck, reminding a friend of what they've been through together. "Maybe I'm just the blue-collar version of you," the duo sings, "but I've got a plan that's gonna turn it all around."

"Hammer" is a stomping, fiddle-infused labor song, respecting the convention of country to honor hard work and perseverance. "They shut my water off/ I've got a nasty cough/ But I'm out here every day with my hammer."

With harmonica solos, thundering drums and energetic riffs, "By Blood" is an upbeat record that still makes time for somber moments. The songwriting on "Good Old Days" and "Carry Me Home" is honest and raw, from the former's self-loathing ("I hate myself a little more each day") to the latter's admission of desperation ("I'm no good when I'm alone/ I'm burned down to the bone").

While not everyone can relate to riding horseback to Colorado, there are themes of struggle, desperation and determination on the album that are universal. Times may be changing, but Shovels & Rope prove that folk themes still have a place.