



NEW ALBUM

SHOVELS & ROPE

By Blood

DUALTONE

8/10

Two for the road: the Trent and Hearst double act rolls on. *By Stephen Deuser*



SHOVELS & ROPE have perfected the art of getting a lot out of a little. Over the past decade, Michael Trent and Cary Ann Hearst have remained steadfastly committed to the idea of their band as a duo. They write all the songs, play (almost) all the instruments, and produce all the records at their home in Charleston, South Carolina, not because they're trying to keep expenses down but because those self-imposed limitations create exciting new musical possibilities. This approach has produced five albums of rowdy, rough-round-the-edges rock'n'roll, along with two Busted Jukebox collaborative covers albums, a long-running music festival in their hometown, a children's book and two children. "It ain't what you got, it's what you make," goes one of their better-known songs, summing up pretty much everything you need to know about the band.

By Blood features two additional players, adding horns to the swaggering "Twisted Sisters" and fiddle to the sweaty work song "Hammer". But their contributions only underscore the dizzying array of sounds Hearst and Trent can produce with just their own four hands, four feet and two voices. They traipse through world-weary country on the title track, revved-up rockabilly on "Mississippi Nuthin'", even

brash punk on "The Wire". The lineup is small, but the attack is mighty; at their best Shovels & Rope sound like two or three bands all playing at once.

If there's a downside to this approach, it's that there isn't much of a creative trajectory to their catalogue. Artists are typically expected to evolve over time, to define an aesthetic early on and then elaborate upon it, but *By Blood* doesn't sound too different from Shovels & Rope's breakout, *O' Be Joyful*, from 2012 or any of the albums in between. What staves off tedium and repetition is the volatility of their playing, the excitement in their voices as they holler and pound away, not to mention their propensity towards self-mythologising. Trent and Hearst have always made themselves and their partnership one of their primary songwriting subjects, with each album adding new chapters to the story of Shovels & Rope.

That continues on *By Blood*. The rousing opener, "I'm Comin' Out", could be an ode to their second child, and "C'Mon Utah!" is a cowboy tale that doubles as a touring epic: "C'Mon Utah, get me over

that ridge," Hearst and Trent belt together, ostensibly singing to a trusty horse but possibly pleading with an Econoline to deliver them safely to the next gig. And on "Hammer" they remind you that making music isn't easy, that it takes hard work to pound out these notes and rhythms. "From the Bible to The Beatles to the way we get paid," Trent testifies, the song barely holding together, "I'm out here every day with my hammer."

In this context, a touring anthem like "Carry Me Home" takes on even greater weight as a meditation on what's lost and what's found during a life spent on the road. There is something inviting in Trent's depiction of the downtime between shows, and he savours the details of long drives: "One hand on the heater, the other flippin' the radio/Full Moon Fever, full cup of coffee, heavy metal on an open road." But they sing the world-weary chorus to each other, asking for and offering succour and support. "Carry me home, I'm burned out to the bone."

By Blood is an album about hard times everywhere, not just in the touring van. Trent and Hearst have always been keen storytellers, digging deep into characters at loose ends, laying them out in the lyrics and then finding new depths and new sympathies in the performances. They rewrite the 18th-century murder ballad "Pretty Polly" for the #MeToo era, resetting the story among the bleak parking lots and backroads of contemporary America and howling the song like ghosts hounding the killer.

The standout on *By Blood* may be "Mississippi Nuthin'", a class-warfare ballad told in the voice of a high-school quarterback who's long outgrown the gridiron glories of the past. He's literally begging for a job, with Trent and Hearst turning his exclamation, "I got ideas!" into a surprisingly tender chorus. The song is rich in detail and implication, and such is the excitement of Shovels & Rope's delivery that you find yourself rooting for this anti-hero. He's just one of many characters on this album who seem to take on lives of their own, first and foremost among them Trent and Hearst themselves.

SLEEVE NOTES

- 1 I'm Comin' Out
- 2 Mississippi Nuthin'
- 3 The Wire
- 4 C'mon Utah!
- 5 Carry Me Home
- 6 Twisted Sisters
- 7 Good Old Days
- 8 Pretty Polly
- 9 Hammer
- 10 By Blood

Produced by: Michael Trent
Recorded at: The Whip, John's Island, South Carolina

Personnel:
Michael Trent (guitars, drums, vocals, everything), Cary Ann Hearst (vocals, drums, guitar, everything), Daniel Coolik (fiddle), Nathan Koci (horns)

Q&A

Shovels & Rope: "Murder ballads are a touchy thing."

joys of being in this band. It forces us to think about the songs in a different way.

How crucial is it that Shovels & Rope remain just the two of you?

Michael Trent: It's never been crucial. It's always just been more exciting that way. In the studio we have never worried about it too much. Obviously there are things on the records that we won't be able to re-create live, but figuring out how we're going to pull it off is one of the great

What kind of responsibility do you feel rewriting a murder ballad like "Pretty Polly" in 2019?

Cary Ann Hearst: Murder ballads are a touchy thing. Obviously we don't condone murder, yet we have felt comfortable throughout our career revisiting the motif. Even though murder is wrong, the story of murder is

almost as common as love. We aren't trying to glamorise or normalise this behaviour by reinterpreting this old ballad in a new way. We aren't trying to make a moral statement one way or the other. Love, loss and violence seem to be intrinsic to the human experience whether we like it or not. On one hand, we're keeping a folk tradition alive. On the other, should we be condemning such a tradition? I could see the argument for the latter.

INTERVIEW: STEPHEN DEUSER