

Carol Pacey & The Honey Shakers

Bliss

Bliss is Carol Pacey & The Honey Shakers eagerly awaited and long overdue third album. Following *Yeah Yeah Yeah* (2014) and *Eyes on the Prize* (2016) the band themselves have set the bar amazingly high, but the trifecta has been achieved. It's rare that an Americana act rocks harder than most rock'n'roll acts, but that's why Carol Pacey & The Honey Shakers are far from being just any old Americana act. CPHS has cultivated their own sound and invented their own genre: Americana Thrash Pop.

It's a winning combination and a loveable mix that keeps you propelled with a down home, hook heavy vibe at a breakneck speed. It's the Honey Shakers indelible art to be sure and they've run with it--they've grown that genre from their own devices and it still stands true with *Bliss*, just with a little more edge this time around. On the record Carol Pacey & The Honey Shakers are, Andy Borunda on lead guitar, Dante Fiorenza on bass, Ben DeLuca on drums and of course the Desert chanteuse herself Carol Pacey on lead vocals and acoustic guitar, as well as several notable studio guests making this their most accomplished album to date.

It's a brave move opening an album with a title like "If Romance Is Dead Then I Want to Be Dead Too"--I mean this would maybe be expected on an Emo record or a Goth platter--but it's a tough sell for upbeat Americana. It verges on a Rockabilly punk freak out that will almost certainly have cross genre appeal to the Gothabilly crowd. It's an unusual start to an album called *Bliss*, but damn does it get the blood pumping, feet stomping and hips shaking. It's a stunning, explosive beginning and really serves to set this album apart from its predecessors. Hot damn.

"Caged Dead Birds" continues in notably darker, more aggressive vein than has been present on their previous efforts and it's clear that on this album Carol Pacey & The Honey Shakers are really giving their all toward making this a much more rock'n'roll record. This tune could be put on a compilation of obscure protest rock from the late 1960s and you would be certain it fits there. It's loud, fast and it rules with a caustic lead vocal from Pacey that seems to be delivered without her patented smile.

The first signature single from this album is "Crumb" and it almost knocking the "pop" out of their own equation, underscoring once more how much of a rock'n'roll album this is. It's the tale of a femme fatale feeding a crumb of affection and maybe some adoration to a lover much in need of external validation. It's clearly the protagonist calling the shots here and making use of their lovers every flaw to get exactly what they want or need out of the situation. The setup for the song and the delivery are near works of genius. It's worth noting that the lyrics are entirely gender neutral which may be an Americana first, honestly--this could be sung by a man or a woman without changing a pronoun. I only mention "femme fatale" here because Carol Pacey is one hell of a powerful woman and she works that guile throughout every lyrical moment found here.

"Whisper My Name" is the first ballad to find its way to Bliss, it's a slow burning rocker in the end, but it's definitely on the sultry side. Andy Borunda's power chords charge the song with guitar lightning that

keeps it truly exciting throughout. It's a sexy number that emanates from the desert with something that suggests creosote, sage and the smell of Sonoran Rain. Maybe it's the sheer stormy electricity corralled by the rhythm section and Borunda's guitar work that shines in the forefront. The added flourish of Amanda Lubking (Cockswain) on violin is simply icing on the cake and a genius move.

The title track is a bluesy little number, that starts a bit like some Deep South Swamp rock before it really kicks in after a minute and rocks the hell out. "Bliss (The Dead Cat Song)" is the third and last track to have the word "dead" in the title for those who like curious patterns. It's one of the most fascinating song structures the band has ever played with, part bluesy dirge, part pop laden paean, part rock and roll salvo. It's a fascinating tune that promotes repeated listens, because of its perfect peculiarity. It's the shortest track on the album, yet one of the most compelling.

The Violent Femmes "Add It Up" has been a cover in CPHS's set for some time and it's a close companion to their cover of Dramarama's "Anything, Anything" from *Eyes On The Prize* (2016) in delivery and vision. It certainly aims to maintain the rock ethos that's present on the album and it's a fantastic a cover that they make very much their own. Featuring Danny Torgersen on trumpet, it's a truly unique take that revitalizes a song that's seen endless covers since its 1983 release into the wild. It sounds like an insane studio party and it's a great way to kick off the second half of the album.

Torgersen reappears on "Plan B" with Trumpet in hand, an excellent road song with a locomotive rhythm that rushes in the second side of the album like a hot desert wind, you can taste the wind whipped dust on this one. It's one of the most radio ready tracks here and should be in serious consideration for single status as its hook will stay in your ears for days on end. The lyrics are delightfully self aware urging us all to live in the moment a bit more and refrain my hiding our heads in the sand. It's another rhythm monster that will not allow you to stand or sit still while it plays--it compels you to dance. It's got a life affirming groove that makes you want to be better and everything here coalesces into one manic frenzy.

"I'm Gone (Stupid Clown)" brings us back to Earth with a slow, reflective start and we're treated to harmonica courtesy of Bob Corritore giving this some supremely Western flair, which just goes to show how well this band can blend genres without ever betraying their identity or sound. It's possibly the most introspective tune on the album, but it's also one of the most relatable. The absolute delight is when Pacey rages through the chorus declaring "When I'm gone, I'm gone!" and your cheering for the protagonist whose had it rough.

There's a feeling "Done" starts with that recalls vintage Stevie Nicks, early Pretenders or any number of luminaries in the rank of strong women delivering flawless vocals of defiance and strength. Pacey taps into something here and its stunning on one of the most minimal arrangements found on the album. There's some inexplicable quality to it that takes your breath away and makes you wait to exhale all at once. It's a shining gem about defining one's boundaries once and for all. It's also thematically connected to much of the rest of the album which looks toward saying goodbye to a problematic past and moving forward to an uncertain future, which is certainly better than where they've been at the very least.

"Somewhere Beautiful" is the grand finale to this affair, sending *Bliss* out on an amazing note with Torgersen adding keys and joining in background vocals with Joe Asselin (Sanitation Squad). It's a slow burning number that serves as a complete indictment of a man who only serves himself and makes a life out of selfish interests, upon whom love is completely wasted, while at the same time it is a hopeful look toward the future with someone else living somewhere in beautiful harmony. The near Gospel choir that appears toward the end sends a smile with the shivers and goosebumps as the album truly ends somewhere beautiful, with the keys ringing and the guitar singing. It's a spectacular finale that puts the rest of the album in perspective.

Bliss is very nearly a concept album for the times, a diary of the perspective of a strong woman dealing with life in 2019, saying goodbye to the toxic relations in her life and moving on toward a vision of her own design, fortified by love and a belief in a better world, a better tomorrow. It's a far darker album than the Honey Shakers previous efforts, but it's certainly their best record to date, showing a depth and emotional maturity made possibly by real world conflict and I suspect more than a few "dark nights of the soul." It's brilliant from beginning to end, creating a cohesive sound, with perfect pacing and painting a fascinating picture in sound of life as it is authentically experienced and lived.