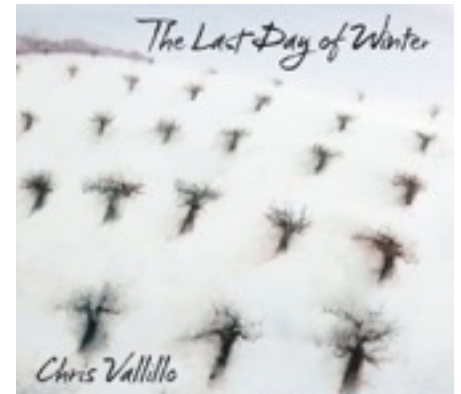


Jonathan Aird  
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## Chris Vallillo "The Last Day of Winter"

*Gin Ridge Records, 2012*

*As much as the rocks and mountains, these are the bones of the land.*



Let's get one thing straight from the outset - whatever he may say to the contrary, Chris Vallillo has too many guitars. On this album he makes use of around a dozen acoustic guitars, as well as an electric guitar, a banjo, a lute and a mandolin. He doesn't play the bass, though I imagine he could manage it at a pinch.

What he has set out to create here, to great success, is an album mostly of roots standards - played as instrumentals, and each tune has been chosen to compliment the acoustic features of one or other of his vintage guitars. This has led him to craft a very mellow album - not hick cozy all-round the campfire nor yet a kitsch collection of flashy takes on well-known tunes. No, by showing restraint in the playing and with a deep respect for these often simple tunes - "Old Joe Clark" is a song that anyone can sing, "The Water is Wide" and "Farther Along" can be attempted by any congregation - Chris Vallillo has pulled out their inner core of beauty.

The heart of each track lies in his slide guitar, which breathes new life into the softly flowing "Shenandoah", or springs playfully around as on "Steel Guitar Rag" and the slightly less than traditional "Tequila".

Mingled among these traditional tunes are four new songs, and these are mostly acutely observed and related scenes revealing a heartfelt attachment to the workings of a man made topography as on "Silhouette Against the Stars" and "River Road" or the emotional topography of friendship described on "Lettie's Song". Vallillo lives these songs, and although beautifully constructed they shun contrivance. "Silhouette Against the Stars" vividly paints a rural scene of combines and grain trucks which effortlessly echoes with the labors of the farmland's first settlers, invoking the timelessness of the rituals of farming "as another harvest comes". It's so rich that it's a jolt to realize that it is fabricated from one voice, one acoustic guitar and one cello. "River Road" is a happy partner song to this - easily referencing record crop yield and fields of alfalfa as it meanders along the river side, to the accompaniment of some gorgeous dobro playing.

"Bloody Williamson" - which features the only banjo and electric guitar of the album - is a seven minute epic which broadens the scope of the songs to tell the tale of the 1922 Illinois coal mining strike. In a tone both resolute and resigned the build-up of tensions, the clashes as scab workers were brought in by a duplicitous mine owner, the deaths of several miners at the hands of mine guards and the subsequent fatal retaliation against the non-union labour is laid out like an unfolding newsreel. As with "The Black Leg Miner", it takes the worker's side - "the things I saw and did that day I carry in disgrace / yeah but they got what they got coming a bloody slaughterhouse / those dirty scabs that tried to take the bread out of our mouths" - and in tone, singing and playing it is a triumph of a song.

Like many gentle albums, this grows in the esteem with repeated listening, slowly revealing the beauty contained within. Surely only a hopeless noise addict could fail to fall for its tranquil charms.

**Rating: 8 out of 10**