

Blackie and the Rodeo Kings // *O Glory*

If any band was uniquely positioned to withstand the impossible demands made by despicable COVID-19, it was Blackie and the Rodeo Kings. The proof is in their blazing new album, *O Glory*, their 11th and undeniably best and most multihued.

The veteran roots-rock (and blues and folk and then some) trio featuring ace singer/songwriter and guitarists Stephen Fearing, Colin Linden, and Tom Wilson has never fit a typical mold. For starters, the members live in different cities: Victoria, BC, Nashville, TN, and Hamilton, ON, respectively.

They formed over 25 years ago as a one-off saluting late folk hero Willie P. Bennett but kept going when smitten crowds demanded it. Before forming Blackie, all three had highly accomplished careers, having played solo, in bands, and alongside the planet's biggest names, among them Richard Thompson, Steve Berlin, Andy White, Emmylou Harris, The Band, T-Bone Burnett, Leon Redbone, and Daniel Lanois. All three had also written for and/or produced countless others, demonstrating a collective versatility.

So, when the customary "band writes and records, then goes on tour" playbook was heaved out the window by the pandemic — and with it, their excellent *King of this Town* album which had the misfortune of dropping in January 2020, just as tour-busting lockdowns were coalescing — Blackie and the Rodeo Kings simply did what they always do. They chuckled at the absurdity of it all, then figured out a way to go to work.

Ironically for a band steeped in analog tradition, the solution to the challenge of *how* to work turned out to be technology. And yet, the alternately charging and contemplative and very organic-sounding *O Glory*, is "more spiritual and political than anything we've written before," Linden says. That framework came in large part from Wilson's own latent discovery that he was both adopted and Mohawk, a tale captivatingly told in his 2017 memoir, *Beautiful Scars* and revisited throughout *O Glory*.

"My art and my perspective have shifted, and my efforts now are to shine a light on Indigenous issues and bring my own identity into focus," confirms Wilson, also a noted visual artist who is currently working on another book.

He continues: "It took me 56 years to find out the truth about myself. Hopefully I have at least 20 more years to finish this journey. Blackie and the Rodeo Kings are a part of that."

In addition to that storytelling gravitas, *O Glory* is also a vivid sonic snapshot of five lifelong career performers — including Blackie drummer Gary Craig and bassist John Dymond — at the top of their musical game who, having achieved major label success at a median age of 60, have nothing left to prove to anyone but themselves. Which, as might be imagined, was the tallest order possible. *O Glory* is a resounding testament to the everlasting search for excellence.

"Our band functions best when we're not too introspective," Linden says. "We learned a lot by interpreting Willie's songs. The satisfaction you get from sitting with your friends singing songs you love just never grows old. We try to keep that spirit in everything we do."

Adds Fearing, "Like a lot of musicians, after the initial shock of the pandemic lockdown, the impetus became finding ways to connect with the world. Technology has come so far in the last few years, and it

has made remote recording possible. I pounced on it. Colin gave me a lot of advice and took charge musically. It was then a matter of coming up with songs and getting them to each other.”

Which is what they did, with Wilson, Craig, and Dymond mostly hunkered down in Hamilton, Fearing in Victoria, and Linden — once again Blackie’s producer and also its nexus — in Nashville, shepherding song ideas, musical snippets, and lyrics back and forth.

O Glory’s 13 songs were thus meticulously built piecemeal at various studios (home and otherwise), with Wilson, Linden, and Fearing writing or co-writing all but one track while swapping lead and backing vocals.

“Some days our drummer Gary sent me some loops to work with and most of my own playing came from those sessions,” Linden explains. “We built the record around those sessions because they sounded complete from the very beginning. I would send a track to Tom who would sit in his house and add a vocal to it. That’s how most of it was done. Then John and Gary, working at Jukasa Studios, added most of the drums and bass as I watched remotely in real time. I produced those tracks as effectively as if I was in the room.

Linden continues: “When we had stuff together, we would send it to Stephen who had written some good songs and made recordings and added to each other’s. For the one song the three of us wrote together (the gently countrified “I Sleep Like a Fugitive,” sung by Fearing), I had a lyric Stephen ran with and then Tom wrote the bridge to it. We made our contributions that way.”

The resulting *O Glory* is flat-out thrilling and startlingly cohesive, given its construction. Take lead single “O Glory Lost Those Blues Again,” a wistful corker powered by the testimonial hum of organ behind Wilson and Linden’s shared vocals, one of six such co-leads on the album.

For keeners keeping score, Fearing sings lead on three songs and Linden on three including album opener “Stop and Listen,” a Mississippi Sheiks cover circa 1930 which Linden contemporized with additional lyrics. “The song had a sadness I felt in the wake of George Floyd’s murder,” Linden says.

Wilson sings solo on one track, the mournful, cinematic “Grand River,” which depicts an ugly chapter of colonial land theft against Indigenous peoples, its centuries-long impact conveyed with a weariness in Wilson’s voice that’s palpable.

In a similar vein, Fearing’s rollicking, pull-no-punches “Far From the Middle” emerged during live dates Blackie performed in February 2020 with Adrian Sutherland, an Indigenous artist from Attawapiskat First Nation, whose album *When the Magic Hits* was also produced by Linden “in captivity.”

Recalls Fearing, “We were backstage somewhere in northern Ontario. Adrian casually commented that filling a glass of water from a tap was still a novelty for him because he had always lived under a boil-water advisory on his reservation. That really struck me and stuck with me.”

Elsewhere, the propulsive, guitar-goosed “Buffalo Girl,” a Linden/Wilson co-write and co-sing, “explores the relationship between the cities of Hamilton and Buffalo,” Wilson explains, though the heady track might have been cut in Laurel Canyon in the 1970s.

Says Linden, “I love singing harmony and Stephen is one of the greatest harmony singers I’ve ever sung with. We have a nice stack, so to speak, with my voice being close to Tom’s and Stephen’s above that.

When you sing by yourself, you hear flaws. Singing together produces a sound greater than the sum of its parts. I learned that from singing with [The Band's] Rick Danko and Levon Helm."

Fearing returns the love. "Colin is a great producer, and we all know each other so well having worked together for so many years. It wasn't like Colin" — who also mixed the new album — "was going to get something from one of us he didn't understand.

"This band is a strange and wonderful beast. We've endured divorces, health issues... so, I'm kind of used to weird shit happening to us," Fearing howls. "I don't question it anymore. And even though we haven't seen each other in two years, I fully expect us to delight in our familiarity when we finally do get back together.

"*O Glory* is a celebration, and we need to celebrate right now," Fearing adds. "The mandate is to bring joy."

Mission accomplished.

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