

Album Review – Life, Death, Love and Freedom – John Mellencamp

This is the latest offering from that doyen of a man who is at once the cool all-American rock star who also has a deep social conscience. I first became a fan of John Mellencamp in the late 1980s when he produced such classic albums as *Scarecrow* and *The Lonesome Jubilee*. On the inside cover of the latter album, there is a verse from the first chapter of Ecclesiastes which says,

“Generations come and go, but it makes no difference. The sun rises and sets and hurries around to rise again. The wind blows south and north, here and there, twisting back and forth, getting nowhere. The rivers run into the sea but the sea is never full, and the water returns again to the rivers, and flows again to the sea...everything is unutterably weary and tiresome. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied; no matter how much we hear, we are not content. So I saw that there is nothing better for men than that they should be happy in their work, for that is what they are here for, and no one can bring them back to life to enjoy what will be in the future, so let them enjoy it now.”

Life, Death, Love & Freedom is written in the same spirit of the above passage. I reckon Mellencamp and Solomon would have a lot to talk about if they ever met. They would both be able to relate to life being bitter when there is no sense of purpose. And they would both strongly believe that it is best to continue to do your best, even when your sense of purpose has seemingly left you behind and you're wondering where it all went wrong.

Mellencamp has always come across to me as someone who Philip Yancey would describe as on the 'borderlands of faith'. He has obviously been strongly influenced by Christian faith, however it seems to be a faith that was quite judgmental and fundamentalist, the very faith that Yancey himself describes as nearly destroying his love for God.

After listening to some of the songs on this album, you may come away feeling depressed, or you may just come away with a sense that we are all on a journey and we are either walking toward or away from God at any one time. These are songs of raw honesty about this journey - its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows. They talk about exactly the types of issues that the album title describes – life, death, love and freedom. The lyrics arise out of life experience – experience that for many people is hard and where the struggle to get through each day can sometimes be too much. Mellencamp empathises with those for whom life can be overwhelming, and he longs for a better day for all.

The opening song, 'Longest Days' sets the mood for the rest of the album, with its simple truth that,

“nothing lasts forever
Your best efforts don't always pay
Sometimes you get sick
And don't get better
That's when life is short

Even in its longest days”

As well as a realistic take on life, a deep humility has always come through in Mellencamp's writing, and this album is no exception. 'If I Die Sudden' is a quiet request for a minimum of fuss to be made when his time comes, and a recognition that life has been good to him. Similarly, 'A Ride Back Home' is a cry out to Jesus for the security of a faith that always seems so distant, a cry born of a realisation that life cannot be handled on one's own and that we need help from a higher source –

“Now it's starting to get to me
All of this inhumanity
Hey Jesus can you give me a ride back home
... Hey Jesus this world is just too troublesome for me
I try to fight off all these devils but I'm just too weak
...can you give me a ride back home”

The strength of Mellencamp's attraction to so many has always been his ability to relate to the common person and their struggles. This, along with his strong sense of justice, comes through again in songs like 'Jena', 'Without a Shot' and 'Troubled Land', songs which focus on the tragic history of American racism, the loss of meaning, and the paradox of living in a land of plenty where many still suffer deep oppression.

This is a reflective album, born out of years of observing the difficulties that millions of people in his beloved land have to face, from the daily hardships of survival to the seeming futility of a life which consists of nothing more than birth, growing up, working and then returning to the dust.

Life, Death, Love & Freedom is an album to listen to in the quiet of a late night, when your thoughts sometimes turn to how life is turning out for you. But just like Solomon in Ecclesiastes writing about the emptiness of a life without purpose, this album finishes on a hopeful note with the ever present possibility that, despite the struggles, despite the pain and meaninglessness that all of us sometimes feel, we can always rediscover purpose and sing a brand new song.

by Nils von Kalm
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