



THE COMMONS

THE COMMONS 'American Ghost'

There are always a handful of groups that I review that leave me perpetually scratching my head at the upturned noses of the music industry. And why so many god given talents go unnoticed while our dumbed down society creams their jeans over Fergie and Hannah Montana? Maybe it's my age showing but I really don't care about "Let's Make Some Noise" angst or whatever ridiculous thing it is you're doing with your "London Bridge."

What I do care about is passion and soul. I look for talented playing, lyrical clarity and sincerity, and as much of the real deal as possible. I can smell a Bruce Springsteen wannabe a mile away. Music can be used as an escape, but it should also be used to create impressions and stimulate the mind in the same manner as a good book with an intriguing story.

American Ghost is the fifth release by The Commons and, like their fourth record, *Dirt Waffle*, Keith Monacchio and crew just keep showing a rapidly advancing understanding of composition and what it takes to pull a listener into the middle of a CD and keep them there until the end. Their

description of this album as a "sonic storybook" is dead on.

No stranger to hard work, The Commons have been slugging it out since 1999 and before that, Keith Monacchio was also a part of The Semibeings, a well known band that had three major albums: *Sickness & Health* (on Shimmy Disc Records), *3 Pawns Standing* (on C/Z Records), and *The Semibeings Are Bums* (also on C/Z). When that band agreed that it had run its course, Keith spent a year or more playing solo shows before assembling the current lineup.

So what are these guys doing that's so much better than many other rock bands out there in rock club land? Well first of all, I wouldn't consider The Commons a rock band in the normal sense of today's definition. I would say they are a rock and roll influenced bunch of gypsies that learned their craft from a vast array of country and roots flavored artists.

Produced by guitarist Sean Glonek, *American Ghost* is one of the best musical offerings (in this style) coming out of Jersey this year, bar none. It even features The Commons' homage to the late Chris Barry in the CD artwork. It's a record that I've replayed again and again, and I'm amazed at this band's nonchalance at

what they have actually accomplished.

How does a sound like this come out of Monmouth County? We're not Nashville, Tennessee or Austin, TX, but it's like that's where they come from. Not necessarily in image as much as the stylistic viewpoints of rough and divinely imperfect survival, elements that breathe believability into their sound. *American Ghost* is a collection of all peoples lost in our dying American landscape.

The track's opener, "Big, Big World," walks quietly into the room and sits beside the fire to tell its tale with an honest look into the soul from eyes that show the unrest and a zest for a better existence, and a different life, accentuated with Sean Glonek's truck stop style slide guitars and Keith's slow strummed acoustics and warm pianos reminiscent of '70s Bob Seeger, and The Band.

"Gas Huffin' Housewife" launches gut punching heartache from a broken woman with laid back vocal shots that throw out ragged lines like, "I remember when I got letter from my mom, she said I hate to break it to you, but I never liked you none. Can you imagine that? A dear john from your mom?" Catrina Sparacio's string style accentuates the tragedy

beautifully, right beside the lyric of desperation and temporary escape.

I'm jumping around a bit so not everything is in order, but at this point the disc shows its rock and roll wild side on tracks like "Fast Food Parking Lot" with Cars styled chugging and Counting Crows vibed vocals, and the cool Tom McDonald bass vamp on "Emma Rae" with foreboding message "Emma Rae, Ya better make some money," and "John Somebody," a rocking blues flavored tune reminiscent of "good" Pearl Jam (aka Jeremy) and the bad ass snarl of The Smithereens.

The fast and hooky "Kate And Joe," with its Johnny Cash "Ring Of Fire" snap, courtesy of Tom Kale, and its Van Morrison ragabilly vocal style that tells the story of a couple that no one can ever quite figure out how they make it happen in their topsy turvy world, but they do. A story of a relationship on the fly and a prayer, like most real ones with the classic line, "They open up a joint bank account. Kate keeps the checkbook and the balance count, Joe can't be trusted, he's got that gambling problem, he'll bet it all away."

"Beat Up Car" (my favorite) brings it back down with classic Commons groove. Glonek's

Coldplay styled guitar swells gleaming in and out between the smooth, fervent vocals of Monacchio and melodic solo work of saxophonist Ceilidh Madigan bring to mind dustings of Lou Reed and feature what sounds like a Fender Rhodes sprinkling iced melody down over the top of the entire tune.

If you listen to the use of space on the aptly named "Isolation Room" you'll hear not only the gray and wide influence of Springsteen's *Nebraska* but also intelligent use of Charlie Rich country tinged pianos and haunting Chris Isaak styled guitar swells that move upwards and onward like a high rolling wave that gradually beaches before fading back into itself.

"Greenhorn" is straight out of middle American desolation with some of the coolest guitar licks this side of a Clint Eastwood western, and Keith's lyrics demonstrate the art of aural sculpting, reminding me of a blend of Marc Cohn and Gordon Lightfoot. Monacchio's own brand of somber intimacy just nails down the track in the most poignant of ways.

Monacchio's style on this disc is never hurried. He takes his time with what he has to say and draws the listener directly into his

confession; for the story, every word sincere and from the heart as in the jewel of the disc "Hey Josephine" is an innocent and touching ode to a fading existence and of a life remembered through the eyes of a man overflowing with gratitude and love without regrets. Once again violinist Catrina Sparacio's enhancements are key on this closer.

The Commons have been featured on many media outlets, one of the latest being included on TV Land's "High School Reunion—Looking Back From Dirt Waffle." The Commons have also been on tribute records ranging from the Pixies to The Who and others. They are constantly being added to numerous radio playlists and tour extensively, playing over 150 shows a year and with this latest release, maybe more.

One thing's for sure, if the industry ignores this effort they are ridiculous, but *American Ghost* is still strong enough to push ahead independently and "haunt" the entire country...and as Chris Barry would say, "The World Beyond." The Commons are: Keith Monacchio, vocals and guitar, Sean Glonek, lead guitar, Tom McDonald, bass, and Tom Kale on drums. Visit thecommons.net for more info.