

Rough Shop

Just Because It Was Christmas

Santa's Last Stop / Perdicion Records

Release date: December 12, 2009

For most musicians given the assignment of churning out a holiday-themed recording to cash in on some extra sales around Christmas time, there are certain formulas to be followed. Pull a few roasted chestnuts from the fire, slap together a couple of traditional tropes (Santa Claus, snow, sleigh bells, gifts, maybe a religious thought) into an original song, and voila! Instant stocking stuffer.

Rough Shop wasn't told they had to make a Christmas record. Thanks in part to guitarist John Wendland's life-long love of music devoted to the holiday, and in part to the band's annual Christmas-themed benefit shows chock full of guests and former members, Rough Shop just figured this was the logical thing to do for a third album. So, rather than revisiting what everybody else has done, they dug up some fairly obscure cover songs, wrote originals which transcend the clichés of the genre, and brought in as many talented friends to help out as they could find.

Formed in Saint Louis, Missouri in 2004, Rough Shop revolves around three talented singers/songwriters/musicians. John Wendland and Andy Ploof, who write the lion's share of original material for the band, have played together since 1994, when they formed One Fell Swoop. After that band broke up in 2003, Wendland and Ploof recruited Anne Tkach, formerly of Hazeldine and Nadine, and since then of more bands than most people can count. Originally a six-piece outfit, Rough Shop has been known to perform as a trio, as a quartet (with the addition of drummer Spencer Marquart), and in various permutations with other musicians.

Ploof and Wendland, heralded as among the "Best Songwriters in St. Louis" (Riverfront Times 2003), worked separately and together on the 8 original songs on *Just Because It Was Christmas*. Ploof came up with the title track, a ringing endorsement of the ways people match their emotions to the spirit of the holiday. Wendland, in turn, composed "This Silent Night," a melancholy tale of the ways reality doesn't always conform to the ideals of the season. Ploof imagined a weary but still joyous Santa Claus at the end of a long, hard night in "Santa's Last Stop." Wendland put together the sweetest love song of his career in a dedication to his wife, "Happiest New Year." And they wrote together the irreverent and hilarious swing tune, "Big Man Under the Tree," in which Kris Kringle tries on Mom's pantyhose and drinks Schnapps instead of milk and cookies.

Then it was time to look for songs from outside the band. Wendland has never sung better than on his performance of Australian singer/songwriter Paul Kelly's remarkable "How To Make Gravy," delivered from the point of view of a man unable to join his family for the holiday dinner because this year he's in jail. Steve Carosello, of Saint Louis rock band the Love Experts, helps transform Dolly Parton's relatively unknown seasonal masterpiece, "Once Upon a Christmas," into a wintry sonic storm, while Tkach turns "One Special Gift," by the band Low, into a fragile piano-and-vocal meditation.

Into the Sawhorse Recording Studio along with co-producer Jack Petracek (and engineer Jason McEntire) went Ploof, Wendland, Tkach and Marquart. They invited former members Sean Anglin and Mike Tiefenbrun to play on a couple songs, and brought in vocalists Carosello, Kate Eddens and Toby Weiss, all of whom have performed at the band's annual Christmas benefits. They added keyboardist Jon Parsons, who has played live with the band from time to time, as well as pedal steel guitarist Michael Ludwig, pianist Tim Sullivan, and a string quartet led by Ploof himself.

On *Just Because It Was Christmas* there's no hint of ironic distance from the act of celebrating Christmas. Nor is it a leaden, overly-reverent, uncritical recitation of what everybody has heard before. It is a collection of beautiful, emotionally truthful, sometimes funny, sometimes sad songs, and it deserves to be added to the list of exceptional Christmas albums.

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