

Houston Jones

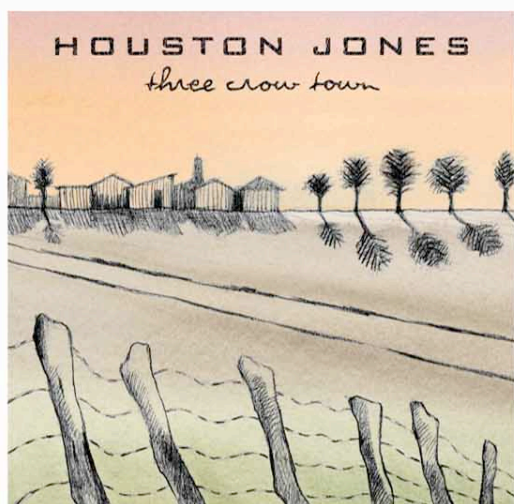
Three Crow Town

CD Review By Julia Park



Slip the new CD from Houston Jones into the player and indulge yourself in what they call "High Octane Americana." No fooling. *Three Crow Town* is the name of the disk, and it absolutely lives up to the hype. From the get-go, this vibrant quartet launches into the American rhythm and swing of "Bedlam Road," followed by spot-on country in "There She Goes (I'm Almost Gone)" and the romantic "All I Want is You" (surely destined to become one of the best wedding songs ever). "Things Unseen" with its refrain about the Prodigal Son, is a clear-eyed vision of personal faith.

Houston Jones offers a stellar blend of acoustic guitar-driven country-Western paeans to the open plains, jailhouse blues, gospel-inflected done-me-wrongs, and irresistible Celtic string instrumentals in a pastiche of sound and emotion. These guys sound like they've been playing forever, as a part of the American cultural landscape, and their original songs are like pages pulled from the folk songbook. It just gets better and better. Nary a song on the CD is without its merits.



Instrumental cuts like "Daley's Reel" feel distinctly influenced by Bach's *Brandenburg* symphonies, while "Gypsy Hornpipe and March" is a guitar party; "Jig Etude" is right off the boat from Ireland; you expect to hear feet clattering on the dance floor, *Riverdance*-style. And the "Toccata in Swing (Hold the Aria)" carries allusions to Big Band with the snazzy beat, blended with exquisite fingerwork, and a little bit of Gypsy-style *palmas* thrown in.

Lyrics that include such word-pictures as "Rode the whiskey train to Bedlam and back again, callin' out your name..." - with an infectious bluegrass strum and textured harmonies behind it take the listener directly into an 1880s railroad camp, or is it a lonely drinking man in his own personal hell, infused with longing in the here and now? "Dear God, I'm your lightning rod - strike me where I stand...one less soul to save." It's songwriting like this that makes

you want to give up your day job and become a veritable Lotus Eater with an iPod.

This rich diversity of sound comes from the musical heritage of these musicians. The band is comprised of Chris Kee, bass; Peter Tucker, percussionist; Travis Jones, guitar/vocals; and Glenn "Houston" Pomianek.

Kee, a classically trained cellist with a degree in ethnomusicology, is an original member of The Waybacks; his influence can be clearly heard in the instrumental numbers. Tucker has worked with a broad range of groups (from the Monks to The Waybacks), as has Jones, whose vocals provide a sure and steady lead through several emotional territories. Pomianek is a Bammie Award-winning lead guitarist who is also a co-founder of The Waybacks and Hearts on Fire. Altogether they form a cohesive, organic group of musicians who play to each other's strengths; it's clear in the performance and the production.

The band graced us locally with a gig at McGrath's Irish pub in Alameda a few weeks back to an overflow crowd. Missed it? Luckily, they'll be back. After a swing through Texas, HJ will touch down at McGrath's again Feb. 24 at 8 p.m. They'll also be at Caffé Trieste in Berkeley March 3 and at the Bistro in Hayward March 10. Check out the schedule of gigs online at www.houstonjones.com.

And pick up a copy of their CD via their Web site. This is on my top 10 until further notice.