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## Graded on a Curve: Robert Deeble, *Beloved*

BY JOSEPH NEFF | MARCH 28, 2018

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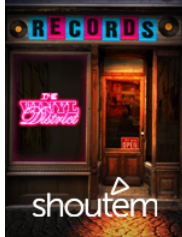
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Singer-songwriter **Robert Deeble** lives in Seattle, but as a musician, he simultaneously inhabits well-trodden ground; although the man's sizable discography has garnered deserved acclaim and welcomed the input of numerous notable guests, thus far he's flown somewhat under the radar. With his new record *Beloved*, this just might change, as the 11 tracks heighten Deeble's already substantial emotional heft through sharp writing and execution; altogether, it feels like his strongest record yet, and undeniably his most personal. It's out March 30 on vinyl, compact disc, and digital through Mind Bomb Publishing.

Regarding musicians (and the bands they frequently constitute), the ranks of the underappreciated are considerable in number, and perpetually so. However, this unfortunate (if obviously subjective) circumstance seems especially common within the realms of the singer-songwriter. Or perhaps better said, for many practitioners of the style who've been saddled with the baggage of not getting enough recognition, it becomes one aspect of the overall allure; to those listeners who do appreciate the work, it can become part of the appeal.

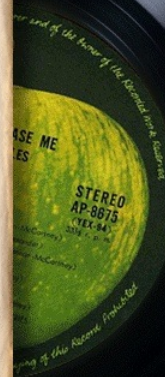
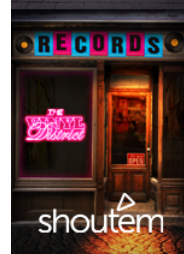
Ah, the basis of cult status. Fred Neil, Karen Dalton, Tim Hardin, Tim Buckley, Judee Sill, John Prine, Nick Drake, Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Victoria Williams, Mark Eitzel, Howe Gelb, Vic Chesnutt; the list can continue for a while, but (along with a tendency for leaving us too soon) it's a stone cinch that this sampling would've preferred/ would still welcome a larger listenership to the small, intense fanbases they achieved and maintain.

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It's probably a stretch to tag Robert Deeble as a cult singer-songwriter, but it feels right to say he's gathered a committed following, which in our crowded contemporary musical landscape is no small accomplishment. His is modest success that's unfolded gradually. Deeble debuted in 1994 with *Days Like These*, a record with a few strong moments including a closing guest spot from Victoria Williams, but he made considerable strides with *Earthside Down*, which came out '98, and progressed through three more full-lengths, '03's *Thirteen Stories*, '05's *This Bar Has No One Left*, and '11's *Heart Like Feathers*.

After time spent with his stuff, the conclusion that he's deserving of broader success was an easy one to draw. *Beloved* seems certain to make progress in this direction, though in an interesting twist, many of its songs were written with one person in mind. Specifically, they were conceived as letters to the one-year old girl he and his wife had foster raised, written as she was being returned to her birthmother.

This may read as the impetus for a heavy listen, but the sounds extend naturally from his prior stuff, which largely accentuates mood over catchiness without becoming ponderous. Records as personal as *Beloved* can often be accompanied with the aura of eavesdropping, but this is instead an engaging album, and surely one shaped by ensuing developments that can be described as happy; Deeble and his wife have been reunited with their former foster child Maliyah, first becoming Godparents, and later by her birth mother's invitation, her adoptive parents.

The record opens with a version of the lullaby chestnut "You are My Sunshine," fitting here as it serves to establish the overall themes to come, and through the blended vocals of Deeble and Tara Ward, it's appropriately sweet and pretty. As a prelude, it's quite effective, and it also segues nicely into "Uncertain": in part via string-section flourishes (a recurring aspect in Deeble's work), the track is as instrumentally resonant as it is lyrically sharp.

Deeble has been influenced by both Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams, poets who will no doubt positively impact a lyricist's turn of phrase, but who are more felt here in the directness of the words. This is not to say that the man is only terse; "Coal Miner" opens things up, and benefits from more strings, crisp drumming, harmonies from Tomo Nakayama and Jen Wood (of the Postal Service), and a swell borrowing from the Beatles (which I shan't spoil) at the end.

The result can be somewhat reminiscent of early Low (with whom Deeble's has shared at least one stage), but with the singer-songwriter aura intact and indeed reinforced on "To Find You," a spare setting that makes productive use of the upright bass (a common instrument from his earlier records that's appearance here helps to unify his discography).

Deeble's earlier stuff has inspired personal thoughts of Leonard Cohen, Nick Drake, a more reserved Conor Oberst and more, but on "Even Now," for the first time he conjures a mild similarity to *Third*-era Alex Chilton. It's a likeness of vocal timbre and temperament that's assuredly aided by the string arrangements, which are a positive attribute throughout the LP and especially in the short instrumental passage "Reprise."


In "The Mulberry Bird," which is dedicated to Maliyah's birth mother, Deeble exudes the gradual pacing established on his prior albums while pulling away from any easily-pegged influence. It leads into the title track, which registers as the set's emotional highlight, and through bright fingerpicking, baroque atmosphere, and the return of Tara Ward's voice, its instrumental one, as well.

"Sleep" reintroduces the aura of lullaby (and to a lesser extent, those Beatles, as well) as pedal steel broadens the palette. Likewise, the metronomic drum-box rhythm in the playful "(...) the Ballad of Little Miss M," which also features singing from Deeble's daughter. "Recovery" reminds me a bit of '90s Lambchop (with shades of Brian Wilson in studio mode, maybe). It has vocals but no lyrics, and as an outro, bookends well with the prelude of "Sunshine."

Altogether, *Beloved* is a sturdily constructed and emotionally robust affair, as discipline drawn from maturity broadens its heft. It'll serve as a fine introduction to Robert Deeble.

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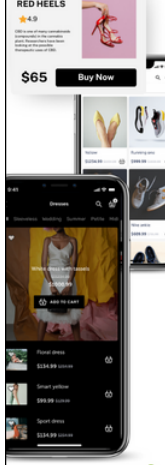
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