

the Stranger

Seattle Singer-Songwriter Robert Deeble Delivers Poignant Heartbreak and Uplifting Joy in New Album, *Beloved*

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[Singer-songwriter](#) **Robert Deeble** had a lot of wind in his sails following the release of his 2011 album, *Heart Like Feathers*. The critical notices for that record of unhurried, hushed folk pop were positive and the shows he played in support of the record were going over well. On top of that, he and his wife were just about to become parents for the first time, adopting a newborn girl after years of failed attempts to welcome a child into their lives.

“There was this kind of beaming hope at that time as I was finishing [*Feathers*],” Deeble remembers. “This was going to be the next thing. We had no idea what a rollercoaster it would become.” Or as he sings on “Uncertain,” a track from *Beloved*, his most recent and most powerful album to date, “Life, it kicked us in the ass.”

The majority of the songs on *Beloved* concern the emotional trials that Deeble and his wife went through soon after bringing their daughter Maliyah home. The couple were able to make their new family happen by joining a foster-to-adopt program, which put them in touch early on with the birth mother. They wrote letters to her and set up time for she and Maliyah to spend time together. But after a year went by, and the Deebles were getting ready to file the paperwork for adoption, the birth mother made an appeal before a judge to get her daughter back. The judge agreed and Maliyah returned to her mom.

“We didn’t know if we’d ever see her again at that point,” Robert remembers.

During the period between the judge’s decision and handing Maliyah over to her birth mother, Deeble channeled all of his fears and sorrows into his music, writing what he called “love letters to a child that didn’t know it yet.” For all the urgency and power found on *Beloved*, a sound that recalls Neil Young at his ‘70s-era heights or Bonnie “Prince” Billy’s best, the lyrical content make the album a shattering listen. Deeble holds nothing back, recounting driving Maliyah back to her birth mom after a visit on “To Find You,” haunted but happy, and on the title track, over the close sound of an acoustic guitar, he balances the laughter of his daughter with the tears that he’s shed over her.

“A lot of the time, I had a hard time getting through the songs even as I wrote them,” Deeble says. “I would try every now and again to play them out. I would break out in a sob and the audience would break out in a sob. I’m talking about people that didn’t know anything about the songs. I remember playing in a bar somewhere in Seattle and did two or three of the songs and this woman came up to me who just couldn’t even talk, she was just bawling. Something in it just communicated with her.”

There is a happy ending to this whole story. A few months after they said goodbye to Maliyah, the birth mom reached out, opening the door to a relationship with Deeble and his wife. At first, she invited them to be godparents but as her life became sadly more unstable, she agreed to let them adopt Maliyah permanently. A difficult but necessary decision that Deeble honored on *Beloved* with the song “The Mulberry Bird” (“And for you/she gave the hardest part/a nest for you that wouldn’t fall apart”).

The most remarkable aspect of this story is how Deeble and his wife, rather than fight this young woman for Maliyah, offered her as much respect and support as they could even as their hearts were breaking.

“It was a tricky relationship,” Deeble says. “We wanted to be supportive but not enmeshed. We used to joke about throwing a trailer in the backyard and being a weird alternative family. But we know that wouldn’t be healthy for any of us. So, we all kind of had to make our own way, and we all had to deal with our own levels of grief.”

Luckily for everyone involved, things are settled down nicely with Maliyah approaching her seventh birthday and helping her father with the promotion of *Beloved* by drawing a little picture on all the mailers for the CDs and LPs that people order. She’s also well aware that the album is all about her and takes some small measure of pride in that fact.

“She will often ask me to sing some of the songs to her in the car or when she’s going to sleep,” Deeble says. “It’s really funny because other than one or two of them, I didn’t write very melodically memorable lines. It’s like having someone sing a Leonard Cohen song to you. It doesn’t quite go over, but she loves it.”

Preview then purchase a digital copy of *Beloved* on [Robert Deeble's Bandcamp page](#), or snag a physical copy at [the release show](#) on Thursday.