

Review

Curtis & Loretta: *When There's Good to Be Done*

By Adam Granger

Check your pulse. Got one? Okay. Then you're not going to get through Curtis and Loretta's new album, *When There's Good to Be Done*, without shedding some tears. And not because this is a crappy album, but rather because it's the best, most poignant, most powerful album of the nine this duo has recorded over the last quarter century.

I slipped the CD into my car's player on a return trip from a gig I had played, and had to pull over or risk driving through tears before the first selection—the title cut—was half over. The song was about a Florida woman who read about a Minnesota child who needed a kidney and decided to give her one of her own. This was not going to be your typical folk album; this was going to be more “Jimmy Crack Corn and I *Do Care*.”

The genesis of this album was a Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant given to Loretta Simonet, the pair's songwriter. She used it to seek out and interview people with stories to tell and, with her partner Curtis Teague, created this fine album beautifully recorded by Doug Lohman at Armadillo Sound.

These are amazing stories—of a survivor of the 35W bridge collapse, of Native children raised and abused in state schools, of the parents of severely autistic children—and each song is more powerful than the last. Some of them are sad, some of them make you angry and some are sweet-but-not-saccharin.

I am appreciative of the inclusion of a lyric booklet with this CD, although I first listened to this recording in my car and was able to understand every word (it's astonishing how many albums there are of which that *can't* be said). At the front of each song is a picture of the song's subject and a thumbnail of their

story. This makes an already personal album all the more so.

Loretta's songwriting has improved steadily over the years and now, a hundred songs later, it sparkles. It's hard to write topical songs: one has to adhere to a narrative arc into which, because a true story is being told, words like “neurotypical” and phrases like “ovarian cancer” must be adroitly inserted. That it may sound like I'm trying to be funny here attests to the difficulty of this task.

Never timid vocalizers, Curtis and Loretta sing with the confidence of a team who knows that they've got good material and good stuff. C & L's promo sheet references Curtis's tight harmony singing, a characterization with which I disagree. Tight harmony would have Curtis right next to Loretta, tonally, like the Navy's Blue Angels flying in wingtip-to-wingtip formation, but Curtis is everywhere, in a good way. One of the benefits of a two-voice configuration (as opposed to three or four voices singing in harmony) is that the second voice has lots of leeway—tonal options. It can sing a third harmony, or a fifth, or a seventh, or an octave, or an accidental, or in unison, and Curtis does all of these. So rather than the Blue Angels, the aeronautical image is more of a Simonet Regional Airlines plane flying straight and true and a Teague Gyrocopter circling, dipping and diving, but never colliding. This is one of my favorite things about C & L: one never knows exactly where



Photo by Jennifer Bong; cover design by Crystal Rockvam

Curtis is going to line up vocally against any given note in Loretta's melodies but—and this is critical—he always lands on a right note. His choices delight; he is the consummate Happy Wanderer.

Instrumentally, the pair are a folkie power duo. Capable of double-digetry, they limit themselves to a half dozen instruments on *When There's Good to Be Done*. Loretta is a fine guitar player who understands the value of the bass note and the strum as separate entities and handles them deftly. And her folk harp playing just gets better and better. Curtis plays mandocello, banjo and guitar, managing, as he always does, an alchemical combination of sangfroid and devil-may-care in his playing. A host of guests round out the album complement, including a women's choir that redefines “spirited” on the last cut, “Willmar Eight (We Are All Equal You Know).”

When There's Good to Be Done is a gem, and would make one heckuva great Christmas present. Just sayin'.