

KEITH RICHARDS 'CROSSEYED HEART' – ALBUM REVIEW

Like aged whiskey that the barman keeps in the cellar, *Keith Richards'* first solo album in 23 years blows the dust from his solo career, revealing the golden, velveteen texture within.

There it begins with the delta blues *Richards* is so fond of, that he grew up listening to and attempting to emulate, before finding world-wide fame with *The Rolling Stones*, fifty years ago. Opener and title track of the album, 'Crosseyed Heart' belongs deep in a smoke filled dive bar and sets the tone for what's to come. It is acoustic blues and this stripped back approach lays *Richards'* husky nicotine stained vocal bare. As expected, there is worldliness here. Here stands a man who at seventy-one has become much more than just *Mick Jagger's* right hand man. He is a legend in his own right, the Rasputin of the rock world. So much has been written about him, it's hard to pick the fact from the fiction and maybe as listeners, we don't want to. It seems for the man himself the tales have twisted into each other so much that many have become memories.

'Crosseyed Heart' is full of dirty, gritty rhythm and blues riffs. It's real, it's edgy it's raw. This is showcased to excellent effect on the first three songs. 'Heartstopper' and 'Amnesia' in particular, on which *Richards* announces, "*I'm waiting 'til the shit kicks in, you understand me?*"

'Blues in the Morning' is *Richards* in full on *Chuck Berry* mode; it drips with sex and tension, the way all the best blues does. He's having fun, playing the songs he wants to play, getting lost in tales of dangerous situations and mysterious women. You can hear how much *Richards* is enjoying this and that in turn makes you smile as a listener. You can almost hear that distinctive guttural wheeze of a laugh as each track ends.

There is a reoccurring theme on 'Crosseyed Heart': the law and the fact that, like any rebel worth his salt, *Richards* has rarely been on the right side of it. This works to great effect on lead single, 'Trouble,' with the line, "*just because I can't see you anymore, that's because, honey, you're doing two to four.*" It does have a strong flavour of the *Stones'* more recent work, and so this is possibly why it was chosen to take the lead, reel people in with what they expect and then surprise them, totally. In 'Robbed Blind' he's at it again, someone has been wronged and *Richards* laments, "*the cops, I can't involve them, they'd only interfere.*"

There are cover versions that come straight from *Richards'* record collection. Firstly, *Lead Belly's* 'Goodnight Irene,' which strays from the original in that the guitar playing is much more intricate. You can tell how much *Richards* loves this song and wants to pay homage to a major influence of his. The emotion really pours from his husky burr and the addition of a mandolin adds a melancholy resonance, turning it into a beautiful, flawed love song.

Secondly and quite surprisingly, is a cover of *Gregory Isaac's* 'Love Overdue.' Its place, half way through the album, does well to offer a change of pace but it doesn't quite work because it is so faithful to the original, you are left wondering whether it needed to be covered at all. The one thing *Richards* does is offer a bluesy vocal and so that offers slightly more depth.

During the later portion of 'Crossedeyed Heart' you start to think things have become more introspective with the waltzing balladry of 'Something for Nothing' (with its gospel backing singers) and 'Just A Gift.' Then suddenly, 'Substantial Damage' smacks you around the head like a concrete boulder, with its stomping, fat, sleazy riff. *Richards* is busy lambasting a lover and their annoying habits. He is shouting, "*substantial damage, baby, you're killing me.*" This is time to get even; this is the time to settle scores. He's no fool and he's going to let you know it.

The closer, 'Lover's Plea,' is slide guitar led. There is a softer side, the whiskey bottle has been drained, the bar is closing and punters shuffle out but they know they'll hear more of *Richards'* stories; he's got a lifetime of them, just itching to get out.

'Crossedeyed Heart' is out now on *Virgin/EMI*.