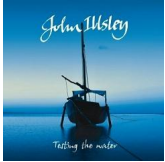


John Illsley - Testing The Water (2014)

Written by bluesever

Wednesday, 13 June 2018 14:45 -

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1 *Railway Tracks* 4:59 2 *Nothing To Do* 4:24 3 *Testing The Water* 5:10 4 *Sometimes* 3:47 5 *Run For Cover* 4:55 6 *Darling Heart* 4:51 7 *When God Made Time* 4:54 8 *This Is Your Voice* 5:01
Backing Vocals – Jessica Greenfield, Jessica Illsley Bass, Acoustic Guitar, Lead Vocals – John Illsley Drums, Percussion – Paul Beavis Guitar – Simon Johnson Keyboards, Arranged By – Guy Fletcher Lead Guitar, Slide Guitar – Robbie McIntosh Saxophone – Nigel Hitchcock Trombone – Mark Nightingale Trumpet – Tom Walsh

John Illsley's track record as a solo artist is leisurely to say the least. 'Testing The Water' is his fourth album in 30 years and happily it's his best.

Aside from a parallel career as a painter, he's had to deal with some major health problems. And while he approaches some of his songs in the manner of an artist colouring his canvas, he's also drawn on those latter adverse circumstances to imbue his material with an extra lyrical depth to match first class musicianship.

Without the heartfelt lyrics, 'Testing The Water' might have been a pleasant series of musically linked ideas and feels, but John's songs shift from the micro to the macro. He's unafraid to put himself on the line both in terms of contemporary events and personal introspection.

His world view gives several of his songs a critical edge, though a cursory listen to the disarmingly languid feel of 'Run For Cover' might initially suggest otherwise.

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The reggae inflected 'Darling Heart' is similarly built on a dichotomous foundation, as the gentle musical lilt packs an unexpected lyrical punch in a velvet glove: 'Can you be a politician and a human being too?'

It's a measure of the album's substance that the deeper you delve into the songs, the more the message and the music coalesces and draws the listener in.

'Testing The Water' never preaches, but John unflinchingly focuses his lyrical gaze at the big questions of our time. In that respect, the album is a mirror image of the man himself. He's been a rock star and a painter who has cheated death and now he's a concerned citizen of the world who uses music to make sense of everything.

His own musical imprint also answers a lot of questions regarding his role in Dire Straits, specifically in terms of song arrangements, rhythmic subtlety and the ever present feel.

His phrasing, intricate word plays and song tempos are undoubtedly influenced by Mark Knopfler, but there's no doubting the quality of the songs themselves, with their subtle harmonies and instrumental excellence.

He opens with a husky vocal and some familiar train metaphors on the guitar driven 'Railway Tracks', which nicely levers us into a mid-paced album full of smouldering songs, delicate guitar parts, an aching, whispered world-weary vocal and a flow that gels the album together.

There's no escaping the Dire Straits influence on 'Nothing To Do', but the title track is wholly John's own work, being a beautiful marriage of heartfelt lyrics, a military drum beat and a nuanced muted trumpet part, all delicately shaped by a polished production.

'Sometimes' ups the tempo in a J.J. Cale vein with layered harmonies, while 'Run For Cover' is much more spiky, with the gruff vocal and rock arrangement giving his lyrical message extra emphasis.

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Best of all is the melodic and wonderfully titled 'When God Made Time'. It's predicated on harmony guitars and is lyrically inspired by a chance conversation in a wet garden in Southern Ireland. The hook is almost surreal: "When God made time, he made plenty of it."

He finishes a beautifully wrought album with another message on the relaxed ballad 'This Is Your Voice'. With no Dire Staits reunion on the horizon, 'Testing The Water' impressively plugs the gap, but strictly on John's own terms. ---Pete Feenstra, getreadytorock.me.uk

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