

The Versatile Luther Russell

Freewheeling Roots Rocker Goes *Medium Cool*

Stephen Estep

Once upon a time, while pawing through CDs at a pawn shop, I came across a self-titled album by the Freewheelers (1991, DGC/UMG). I liked the sound of the group's name, and I cracked up at the cover art of a tousle-haired tot in a high chair utterly destroying a piece of corn on the cob. Of course I bought the record, and this killer debut album became a favorite that holds up to this day. The fairly undistorted guitars, piano, Hammond organ, bass, and drums helped create for a unique sound; the style is basically twang-free roots rock. The group's influences—a little 70s Americana, blues, gospel, punk, funk—blend together into something untethered to any decade; even the production is blessedly free of late 80s/early 90s affectations that make other great albums sound dated. Where grunge purposefully destroyed the idols of slickness and gated drums, the Freewheelers ignored both courses and just had fun.

The lyrics on *The Freewheelers* also impressed me. Some of the songs delighted in the seamier things, and the love songs were affectionately or painfully detailed. In “Percilla,” an average Joe on the midway falls in love with the bearded lady; the swamp-stomp piano work, the whirlwind of characters, and some sly linguistic work make the song a work of genius. The Freewheelers' songwriter was Luther Russell, who also played guitar and sang. As a vocalist, Luther Russell crooned, rasped, soared, broke, and occasionally pushed too hard, but somehow his style worked. The band continued on a high note with 1993's *The Freewheelers Play Bob Russell*, a rocking tribute to Luther's grandfather, the lyricist for such standards as “Don't Get Around Much Anymore.” George Drakoulis produced *Bob Russell*, a vinyl-only, promo-only record, as well as 1996's *Waitin' for George*, the Freewheelers' final album. *Waitin'* is solid but, unlike what came before, less than outstanding.

After the Freewheelers split up Luther Russell remained active, starting a string of solo records that began with 1997's *Lowdown World*, an earthy effort with strong folk and blues influences. Russell pulled a hard left with the mostly instrumental *Down at Kit's*, which sported a good-time blend of Latin jazz, bachelor-pad grooves, psychedelia, and tongue-in-cheek funk; April—his wife at the time—and a few ex-Freewheelers and other friends help him out. *Spare Change* is mostly just him and his guitar; the careful writing and the intimacy of his voice are enough to keep my attention.



A brutal divorce and a chance run-in with producer Ethan Johns brought about *Repair*; but the accusatory lyrics wear thin, and the mix leaves the texture unconvincing. *The*

Invisible Audience swings back and forth between bluesy harder rock, acoustic playing, and power pop over its immersive 25 tracks. The finger-picked guitar and psychedelic haze of “Motorbike” almost distracts from the grunge edge in Luther's voice. The digital-only *How I Won the West* is a strange, gentle instrumental album of blues and ragas à la John Fahey. The anthology *Selective Memories* collects demos (both solo and with the Freewheelers) and alternate takes, as well as two lo-fi 1988 tracks from the Bootheels, the band



Luther was in with a teenage Jakob Dylan before the Wallflowers were formed. (Luther has also co-written a few tracks for Weezer, produced for Robyn Hitchcock and others, and split a “Russellmania” bill with Leon Russell.)

Medium Cool is Luther's latest solo album, a “rough rock and roll record, roughly about rock and roll.” There's little of the perils of rock and roll decadence. Instead, rock mostly acts as a solace for the songs' characters, a force of renewal, something fresh. It takes courage to be that innocent after all the pathways rock music has staggered down for the better part of a century. The backdrop is mostly guitar, bass, and drums, and the limited aesthetic becomes a purification, not a limitation. It took some time to get used to the Stratocaster's pervasive bright twang, but after a few listens, I noticed a directive on the artwork to “play (expletive-ing) loud.” So I played it expletive-ing loud, and hey, it grew on me.

Luther has also been collaborating with Jody Stephens, the drummer from Big Star, in a group called Those Pretty Wrongs. Their self-titled debut was pretty lackluster, but 2019's *Zed for Zulu* is light years ahead. The production is much more interesting; for example, check out the Klezmer-like clarinet on “Hurricane of Love.” The lyrics on the debut were boilerplate, but here they've had more soul poured into them. Jody's dusky voice carries the album, and it suits the introspective, Zen-like lyrics, which are “hippy” in the best sense of the word. Long may Luther continue his clear-eyed writing and utter lack of pretense. **tas**