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Music Review: JD Malone and The Experts – *Avalon*

By Richard Marcus



When you write about music for any length of time there comes a point when you've become so inundated with press releases describing this band or the other that you forget there was a time you actually enjoyed listening to it just for possible pleasure of the experience. Part of the problem is how much of the music industry has been taken over by the celebrity mania that has gripped popular culture as a whole. With the huge number of what are nothing more than glorified talent shows clogging the airwaves sensationalizing stardom and the pursuit of fame, music has become a means to an end instead of the *raison d'etre* for far too many so-called artists.

When somebody stands up on stage and sings a song for some other purpose than serving the music the heart and soul have been torn out of it. There's only so much of this you can take before you start to turn your eyes and ears elsewhere in the hopes of finding people who at least play with a passion born of the music, not for personal aggrandizement alone. At least that's what I've found myself doing more and more over the past couple of years as I've begun looking further and further abroad in search of music as fulfilling as what I once encountered in almost every local bar and tavern.



However, once in a while you get lucky and still stumble across a band that plays for the sake of playing. They might just be some local bar band with more passion than talent, but there are also those out there — outside the spotlight — who haven't forgotten what it really means to play rock and roll; guys who play because they love to, who have the ability to communicate that love and remind you that rock and roll was supposed to have been about having fun all along. Such a band is [JD Malone and the Experts](#), and the proof is in their first, full-length CD, [Avalon](#), on the aptly named [It's About Music](#)

label. This is actually a two-disc set, a CD and a DVD, with the DVD containing footage of the band rehearsing some of the album's tracks in the studio.

Malone has been kicking around music for years, paying his dues, and the same goes for the rest of the band; Tom Hampton on pedal steel, baritone, twelve-string electric and lap guitars as well as dobro, and mandolin, Tommy Geddes on drums, Avery Coffee on electric guitars and Jim Miades anchoring them all on bass. It would be tempting to paint these guys as blue-collar musicians and give them some sort of romanticism, but that would be doing them a huge disservice. They are all dedicated musicians who have been working steadily in a field where being able to make a living at what you love is a major accomplishment in itself. We get so hung up on fame and celebrity that we often lose track of what it might mean to be able to pay the bills by doing what you love. Of course it's not the most secure profession — it doesn't come with health and dental or a pension plan — but only a small minority of musicians ever become celebrities anyway, and the rest of them are still doing it more for love than money.

The love part of the equation really shows through on the DVD. However, even on the studio tracks on the CD — the last four tracks on the CD are audio tracks from the DVD, basically live versions of songs played earlier — you can't help but be aware of how much this has been a labour of love for all of them, especially Malone. Save for covers of the old [Creedence Clearwater Revival](#) tune "Fortunate Son" and [Tom Petty's](#) "I Should Have Known It," Malone has written all the songs on the disc, so he's naturally the most emotionally invested in this release. Yet in spite of that, there's an obvious, easy camaraderie between him and the rest of the band which allows the music to find that perfect spot between sloppy and uptight which makes rock and roll come alive.

Taking their lead from Malone the band makes it sound like they're enjoying every note they play. When a band is too uptight they can give the impression they're working to finish the song without making any mistakes, The result is usually a letter perfect recording, but one that sounds like it could have been played by machines. Here what you have is a group that takes that extra fraction of time required to enjoy the moment while they're in it, which imbues a song with life. Whether it's an up-tempo rocker or something closer to country it doesn't matter; you can't imagine any of these songs being played any better.

As for the material itself, none of them are going to be anything new or innovative either lyrically or musically. Most of them are along the lines of the traditional rock and roll song, dealing with guy and gal relationships. However within that formulae Malone manages to work in some turn of phrases which take tunes out of the realm of cliché and give them their own identity. "I've seen you crashin' angry/I've seen you paper thin," he sings at the opening of the disc's title track. The second line sticks in your head with its mix of ambiguity as to what he might mean by it and the vulnerability it suggests in contrast to its predecessor. It hints at an understanding of emotional complexity you don't usually find in most relationship songs and tells you Malone is willing to push a little deeper than normal for this type of music.

Vocally Malone occasionally falls into the trap of equating strain with emotional intensity, but if he were to stop and listen to himself he'd realize that he's far more effective when he allows himself to relax and open his throat when he sings. Listen to the difference between how he sounds on some of the slower tunes when he doesn't push as hard and you'll hear how much more believable he becomes. He just needs to trust in his own abilities as a vocalist a little more and it will make a world of difference. He has the potential for an interesting and expressive voice that would make already good music even better.

JD Malone and The Experts aren't doing anything that's new under the sun with *Avalon*. However, they serve as a timely reminder that rock and roll was meant to be fun and that, when played as well as it is by these guys, it doesn't need to be anything else to justify its existence. Far too many bands today seem to think they have to do something with their music in order to be taken seriously. Unfortunately in the process they end up taking themselves way too seriously and don't really sound like they're enjoying themselves. How they expect us to have fun listening to them if they don't have any fun playing, I don't know, but you won't have to worry about that with Malone and his band. These guys definitely love what they're doing and you'll find that you can't help but love it too.