

Live At The Variety Playhouse (DVD)

Shawn Mullins

MVD Visual, 2008

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED: 11/15/2008

The specialness of Shawn Mullins' music has always resided in his deft matching of keenly human observations with appealing melodies. Mullins is a natural-born storyteller, and his best songs, whether rendered in simple acoustic fireside settings or rich full-band arrangements, tell stories that resonate and stay with you long after the music fades.

The new Mullins concert DVD *Live At The Variety Playhouse* -- filmed before an adoring, sold-out hometown crowd at an historic Atlanta venue -- bests its peers by presenting Mullins in both solo acoustic and full-band electric settings consecutively. The first set presents six solo tunes, followed by a set of nine cuts with a full band including guitarist Peter Stroud (Sheryl Crow, Stevie Nicks, Dixie Chicks), mandolin/pedal steel player Clay Cook (John Mayer, Marshall Tucker Band), organist Marty Kearns, bassist Patrick Blanchard, drummer Gerry Hansen (Randall Bramlett, The BoDeans) and a guest appearance on background vocals by acclaimed soul singer Francine Reed.

The first set showcases the core of Mullins' appeal. "Twin Rocks,

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"Oregon" is a terrific opener, a quiet, brilliantly crafted story-song about sharing an evening by the side of the road with a wise and wizened drifter. A trio of new songs from 2008's strong studio release *honeydew* include "For America," a gently purposeful tune which Mullins introduces by declaring "it's not meant to be a protest song; it just is what it is."

The acoustic set concludes with a pair of typically sharp Mullins character studies in "The Ballad Of Billy Jo McKay" and "Lonesome I Know You Too Well." In both Mullins manages to delve into the lives and minds of essentially Southern characters while giving them dimension far beyond the typical archetypes. This is rich, rich stuff.

The electric set rumbles and soars without ever really rocking out, but it's not meant to. This is personal, intimate, singer-songwriter rock, small in scale but big of heart. Set-opener "Shimmer" remains one of Mullins' best, a poignant proto-anthem to the innocence and hope offered by each new generation. "Anchored In You" is another fan favorite lit up by a rolling melody and beautiful sentiments.

The core of the electric set feature the highlights from Mullin's two strong post-Sony albums for Vanguard -- "Beautiful Wreck," "Cold Black Heart" and "House Of The Rising Sun" from 2006's *9th Ward Pickin' Parlor* and "The Ballad Of Kathryn Johnson," "All In My Head" and "Cabbagetown" from *honeydew*. It's sweetly melodic folk-rock, the sort of music that makes you smile and think, tap your feet and nod your head, too.

The final encore could hardly be anything but Mullins' one huge commercial hit, the superb "Lullabye," a rumination on fame

and identity that namedrops Hollywood figures in a song that nonetheless brims with sparkling intelligence and nuance. It's a beautiful thing when a song like that can actually break dumb-pop's stranglehold on the charts.

Live At The Variety Playhouse is intimate, endlessly musical and deeply entertaining in a low-key, cerebral way -- essential viewing for any Mullins fan and, for everyone else, the perfect introduction to one of America's most underappreciated songwriting treasures.

Rating: [A](#)

User Rating: Not Yet Rated

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