

DRINKING MY TOMORROWS – ELEVATED COUNTRY SONGS

By Bruce Fessier
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Brian Michael Tracy's debut country album, "Drinking My Tomorrows," is like a reminder to get your affairs in order.

The poet-turned singer-songwriter from Idyllwild, Calif., has penned an excellent batch of Gram Parsons-influenced country narratives packaged into a clean, austere sound guided by producer Kenneth Gibson. Tracy's stellar studio band features "jazzgrass" pioneer Barnaby Finch on piano and Marty Rifkin on pedal steel guitar, an instrument he previously showcased while touring with Bruce Springsteen in support of the Boss's contagious 2006 Pete Seeger tribute, "We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions." But the songs at their core could be added to the canon of recent recordings by the likes of Chris Stapleton, Sturgill Simpson, and Hayes Carll.

The title track kicks off the album with catchy, traditional acapella harmonies that can't help but draw you into the LP. But what really distinguishes this collection of songs is its contemplation of such weighty issues as life and death.

"When the Light Comes In" hits you like a diesel truck with the line, "There's nothing more that the doctors can do." Then it pulls you into the drama with the male lead character telling his lover, "Close your eyes and let the light come in/ For your next life is waiting."

The Lumineers have made a career of songs about death and dying, but Tracy writes about it with such authenticity, you have to wonder if he's all right (Just for the record, he's fine. Don't call the paramedics or psychiatrists just yet. He says this is all a product of his imagination).

The last third of the album tackles not only a dear who's departing in "When the Light Comes," but the act of departing in "Last Lonely Train" and the art of dying in "Dying to Know."

It's not morose, like a country version of Frank Sinatra's "For Only the Lonely." It's more of a thoughtful rumination on mortality.

Other parts of the LP might drive you to drink just to complement the sauce Tracy adds to such tried-and-true country fare as "lost love" and "meaningless love affairs."

The strength of the album is the expressive lyrics. The metaphors in songs like "Fifty Miles From Empty" and "Ghost To My Own Heart" raise the quality of the writing above the trite cliches of so many country pop songs. I love the poker references in "Middle of the Night."

I like the vocal harmonies of Kasaan Hammon, especially on "When the Light Comes In," and the choral effect she gets on "All That Comforts Me." But I'd like to hear more vocal variety and

emotional range from Tracy. He may not have the octave reach of Wallen or Sam Hunt, or the depth of expression of a Johnny Cash, but more could be done with his vocal arrangements – from sounding more conversational on "Cold, Cold Breeze" to adding a male harmony vocalist to sing a third above the melody to give certain verses a climax higher up the scale.

The production actually sounds a little too perfect – like a pair of shoes that are too tight because they just came out of a box. I look forward to this pandemic ending so we can hear Tracy and his band play before a live audience to let the sound get really comfortable, like a pair of slippers with a little wear and tear.

Bruce Fessier is a Palm Springs, CA-based music journalist who has written about every Coachella and Stagecoach festival for The Desert Sun and USA Today, while also writing music feature stories for Palm Springs Life and newspapers around the country. He earned a CV Music Lifetime Achievement Award for Music Journalism in 2019.