REVIEW · BLUES

River Rat Jimmy | Kelly Joe Phelps

Under the dust of tradition, a restless jazz mind ready to change course.

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The guitar has the gait of the Delta: **slang, sleng**, a note that slides and leaves a trail. The sound is **rough, dark, shifting, dusty and sharp**. Behind it is a musician who for years thought like a jazz player: under the dust of tradition a restless mind surfaces, ready to change course, like a river carving a new bed in the rock.

River Rat Jimmy belongs to *Shine Eyed Mister Zen*, released in 1999 or 2000 depending on the edition. Before making his name in roots music, Kelly Joe Phelps spent around a decade on jazz. Ornette Coleman, Miles Davis and John Coltrane were part of his horizon; then encountering bluesmen like Mississippi Fred McDowell changed his direction.

Lap slide became one of his most recognisable signatures. At some point, though, Phelps felt the technique risked becoming a cage, and he walked away from it. On *River Rat Jimmy* what remains is mostly voice and guitar. The music is essential,

but the story refuses to be tidied up: Jimmy stays opaque, the lyric moves through images and offers too little evidence to identify him as a specific person.

Better not to look for a biographical solution. Listen to how much space Phelps leaves between the words. Jimmy could be a memory, a ballad figure or a nightmare shadow, like a face glimpsed through the window of a night train. The guitar recalls country blues, but the structure keeps the freedom of someone who knows modern improvisation. Tradition is not a glass case: it is land to explore, with paths that fork and vanish into the fog.

> ***What happens to country blues when the person playing it keeps thinking like a jazz improviser?***

LISTEN

River Rat Jimmy — Kelly Joe Phelps — is in our playlist Acoustic Blues, Roots & Dust.

Kelly Joe Phelps. Updated every Friday. Selected by ear.