

CRAWDADDY!

FEATURES

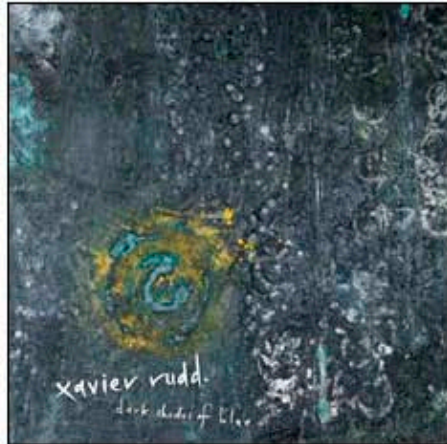
REVIEWS

ABOUT CRAWDADDY!

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Xavier Rudd

by j. poet



Xavier Rudd
Dark Shades of Blue
(Anti-, 2008)

Xavier Rudd is a rocker, but that's where his similarity to anyone else you've heard lately stops. He may play electric guitars on *Dark Shades of Blue*, but his style is hard to pigeonhole. Sure, there's blues, folk, and rock of what one must call a psychedelic nature for lack of a better term, but the delivery is all his own. The opening tracks give you a good idea of what to expect from the rest of the album. "Black Water" opens with the ancient, otherworldly droning of the didgeridoo—which Rudd, an Australian, calls by its Aboriginal name, "yidaki." The didg introduces Rudd's thick, muddy electric guitar sound and while the result is faintly bluesy, it's more linear than a typical blues tune, moving forward without resolving neatly. The instrumental morphs into the album's title track, a vaguely Hendrixian excursion that rides a shifting, disjointed rhythm that's hard to pin down. The drums provide a slow, powerful pulse while Rudd's distorted guitar and odd bass lines, usually produced by thumping an ordinary guitar's bass strings with his thumb,

swim upstream against the beat to create a dissonant cosmic groove. The mix blends the sounds of didg and guitar into a murky, mysterious primal sound. Rudd's vocals, half sung/half spoken, add another percussive element to the sonic landscape. The melody is broken up into discreet notes, with no flow, accenting the tension of the lyric, the struggle of a troubled mind trying to find its balance in a world gone mad.

Some quick background: Rudd usually plays on stage alone, a one-man band who juggles three didgeridoos (set up in a custom-made rack), stomp box, an oddly configured nine-string acoustic guitar, Dobro, bass guitar, banjo, harmonica, percussion, and an assortment of electric guitars. For the past year and a half, he's been touring with drummer/percussionist Dave Tolley, who brings his own singular approach to the album's rhythms. Rudd grew up in Torquay and Bell's Beach in southern Victoria, Australia and taught himself to play guitar, clarinet, sax, and other instruments, but never thought of being a professional musician. In the early 2000s, he began traveling the world, playing on the street to make ends meet. His wife encouraged him to turn pro, and he developed a unique stage setup to allow him to play all the sounds he was hearing in his head by himself. A few self-recorded and produced CDs, sold first at gigs, slowly built up a buzz, especially with jam band fans. His 2004 album, *Solace*, which was basically his stage show recorded by himself in the studio, got picked up for distribution by Universal's Australian division and hit the Top 20, eventually becoming a platinum album. His non-stop touring slowly built his international reputation. The elements he combines—folk (Aussie and American), reggae, blues, rock, and world music—aren't unfamiliar, but he manages to blend them in a way that's slightly askew, goosed along by the sound of the didgeridoo, an instrument probably unfamiliar to most rock fans. He's also a political activist campaigning for environmental causes and Aboriginal rights.

Now, back to the review. "Secrets" is your basic reggae tune. Rudd's double-tracked organ and guitar blend with Tolley's laidback one-drop rhythm, then devolve into an extended dub frenzy marked by Rudd's impressive slide guitar work. "Guku" might be about the Iraq war; a subtle Middle Eastern rhythm from Tolley's tom toms lays the groundwork for Rudd's guitar work, long sustained notes that complement his mournful vocals as he gently sings "You fought and you won / Now my brother you're gone." The song ends with a snippet of a traditional Aboriginal song. The guitar/didg sound also drives "This World As We Know It", a big rock-driven tune, with a distorted vocal, stomping beat, and metal guitar; it's a bit of Ozzie protest boogie that overwhelms with its simple power. "Uncle" is the most psychedelic track, with a fuzzy processed vocal, lots of guitars, a hurricane of didgeridoo noise, and a punishing rock rhythm that builds to a climax, sounding like Rudd's version of an apocalyptic Aboriginal vision.

On the quiet side, there's the mellow Jawaiian skank of "Edge of the Moon", a giddy love song that Rudd sings in voice that approximates the young Bob Marley. "Shiver" is a protest song that starts with soft ambient sounds supporting Rudd's acoustic guitar. The song unfolds slowly building to the weary wordless vocal harmonies of a bridge that suggests white South African folk music. The melody is beautiful, but the lyric leans a bit too heavily on new age clichés.

The album closes with two love songs. Rudd's bluesy bent notes, subtle sitar work, and Tolley's clay drums accent "Hope You'll Stay", a simple, concise love song. "Home" is a protest waltz that calls to mind the sound of the British folk revival of the '60s. The drums come in to support another vocal bridge, with Rudd crooning the word "home" over long, sustained, single guitar notes. The lyrics speak of life's simple pleasures and the hope for a better time to come, maybe in the next life. Words that could sound like clichés achieve a tranquil state of grace to close the album on a high note.