

# JAMES McMURTRY

On *Just Us Kids*, James McMurtry follows up his critically acclaimed *Childish Things* with a dozen new, sharply drawn illuminations as he continues to hone and expand his considerable gifts. And the self-produced opus (James' fourth venture pulling strings on both sides of the glass) unquestionably represents his most ambitious, accomplished and ass-kicking presentation to date.

*Just Us Kids* will be the first release for Nashville-based Lightning Rod Records; label president Logan Rogers previously worked as Vice President of A&R for Compadre Records on McMurtry's previous two albums.

The Texas native long has been known as an astute, clear-eyed observer and concise, no-holds-barred chronicler of the human condition, but a growing socio-political edge fairly exploded just prior to the 2004 elections when his scathing, palace-rattling "We Can't Make It Here" was made available online as a free download. The seven-plus-minute diatribe against social injustice and the Administration's hypocrisy and deceptions reperculated wildly across the Internet *and* the airwaves, igniting a grassroots firestorm that has brought legions of new fans to the singer/songwriter's work. As of this writing, fan-made videos of "We Can't Make It Here" have been viewed more than 150,000 times on YouTube.

Released in autumn of 2005, *Childish Things* featured an uncensored version of "We Can't Make It Here"; the CD spent six weeks at #1 on R&R's Americana Music Radio Chart in 2005/2006 and racked up James' best sales totals in a decade en route to capturing nods for both Best Song and Best Album from the Fifth Annual Americana Music Association Honors and Awards.

*Just Us Kids* — McMurtry's ninth full-length album — picks up on the heat of *Childish Things*, and while he insists that "the majority of the songs are not political," it's also clear that he's not even close to abandoning his burgeoning role as a searing political gadfly.

So, roll over Kate Smith — this "God Bless America (pat mAcDonald Must Die)" bears no resemblance to the ubiquitous Irving Berlin chest-thumper; it's a scorched-earth cataloging of the old-boys' club glad-handing, cronyism and "belly up to the trough" feeding-frenzy of corporate and state war profiteers.

"Cheney's Toy" juxtaposes the Hollywood hubris of the Bush administration against images of Guantanamo and a brain-damaged U.S. veteran (free downloads of it have been provided at both McMurtry's and Lightning Rod's websites for a "make-your-own-video" fan contest).

"The Governor" probes the roles of class and wealth in the solving and prosecution of crimes, and "Ruins of the Realm" sorts through the fallout and detritus of a cynical, unilateral approach to global "mapping."

"Just Us Kids" is a sonically-majestic, lyrically-grounded heartland rocker that takes a bemused look at the passage of time relative to one's own sense of age and image; with one's sense of internal youthfulness belied by the inevitable flesh failures, the title track glides through the years, arriving at the mid-life realization that we're "not so skinny, maybe not so free/not so many as we used to be . . ."

"Freeway View" is a honking, breakaway rock 'n' roller propelled by Ian McLagan's dazzling ivory-tickling while, according to James, the Dylanesque "Hurricane Party" inhabits "an old man cussing himself for what he misses and what he missed, occasionally noticing what's happening *now* — it's a reminiscence at the end of the world."

The sublime "Ruby and Carlos" looks at a relationship eroded by miscommunication and conflicting ambitions (with Gulf War Syndrome further roiling the waters). Ruby and Carlos aren't doomed by a single fatal flaw; instead, their love is exhausted by a series of minor disconnects, finally dying the death of a thousand cuts. "Fire Line Road" looks at incest and meth addiction as the normal, everyday, ghastly horrors that they are — exposing some of the ugliest dirt we've always swept under our societal rug.

The moving set-closer "You'd a' Thought (Leonard Cohen Must Die)" imbues its tale of a couple strained by individual weaknesses and stubborn old habits with a generosity of spirit and wry resignation. McMurtry says the parenthetical tag is there because "the lyrics kinda reminded me of a Cohen song, and I was still writing it while we were supposed to be recording it, and it just went on and on. So when I finally came up with it, I said 'If it wasn't for Leonard Cohen, you wouldn't have had to spend half the day waiting on me.'"

The core band throughout is McMurtry on guitar, his longtime road band The Heartless Bastards (bassist Ronnie Johnson and drummer Daren Hess) and "guest Bastard" Ian McLagan (The Faces) on keys.

Extra texture arrives via some hand picked, well-placed cameos: Timbuk3's pat mAcDonald adorns several tracks with his patented, haunting harmonica and all-around otherworldliness. Swamp-king C.C. Adcock (McMurtry: "He's as subtle as a brick through a windshield . . .") saws off some six-string mayhem on the raucous opener "Bayou Tortous," and the splendid Jon Dee Graham (whose band shares the Continental Club's stage with McMurtry & Co. on Wednesday nights in Austin) shreds maniacally on "Fireline Road."

And that's James' 17-year-old son Curtis McMurtry blowing baritone sax on "Bayou . . ."

McMurtry's own guitar work tends to be overlooked relative to his spectacular tunesmithing, but despite his poor-mouthing — "I can't afford to pay to have it done, so I had to learn how to do it myself" — it's a flinty, muscular style perfectly suited to punctuate and emphasize his cogent, acerbic revelations.

These recent years have found James McMurtry's many skills steadily coalescing into an increasingly substantial, formidable whole: the voice, the tunes, the stories and the musicianship have become elementally interwoven to create the inimitable fabric of a distinct, singular artist who's determined to get to the heart of the matter, shake things up and do whatever it takes to make a difference.

In his regular column for *Entertainment Weekly*, noted author (and passionate rock 'n' roll enthusiast) Stephen King cited McMurtry as "the truest, fiercest songwriter of his generation."

Amen to that. And *Just Us Kids* makes it clear that there's much more to come.

—Jim Musser, January 2008

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