

Van Wagner – Family Guitar

written by Beach Sloth | January 17, 2021



A soulful slice of Americana, Van Wagner plays straight from the heart on “Family Guitar”. These are stories of compassion sung by voice and sung by guitar. Everything about the album has a crispness to it, tapping into deep folk traditions. Singing about what he knows and doing it justice, his voice has a steady, calm reassuring presence to it. By keeping things to the absolute essentials, he is able to explore these narratives, thoughts, and musings in earnest with exquisitely vivid detail. Intimate to its very core these are pieces that feel as if you are right there with him.

Michael Hurley’s work definitely works as a starting point for a bit of his own muse, as the album feels highly reminiscent of his debut album “First Songs” back in the early 60s. Like Michael Hurley, Van Wagner’s sound might come from any period of time it possesses that level of classic within it. Also, Michael Hurley’s origins are not that far from Van Wagner’s own familiarity with rural Pennsylvania. Beyond that, the album also draws from John Fahey’s American Primitive Guitar movement, one that emphasizes a raw unvarnished truth and a directness in terms of the guitar playing. Van Wagner has that incredible connection with the listener for he keeps things simple, almost deceptively so for behind these pieces are wide slews of influences, from the ancient to the modern delivered in a timeless fashion.

The mood is set with the carefully crafted opener, the contemplative “Sawhorse Gabe”. Vocals feel so vivid as they perfectly play with the elegant guitar work. Rhythms get a tremendous workout on the spirited performance of “Montour Ridge” where Van Wagner delivers every line with passion like a long-lost fable. With a small hint of triumph comes “I’m from the Mountains and I’m Going to the Sea” where his lyricism verges on the poetic, as it incorporates the natural world with a modern vernacular. Delicate phrasing works wonders on the lovely album highlight and title track “Family Guitar”. Impeccable storytelling the way that the piece unfurls feels so raw and so real. Powerful playing gives “Big Man with a Little Guitar” a distinctly Nick

Drake cadence as there is a clear jazz influence. Meditative to its core is the cyclical sound of “Mr. Danville”.

Crystal clear “Sun and Rain” has a physicality to it for every single gesture is magnified as if under a microscope, for his voice here sounds so close and so endearing. Aptly named the downcast spirit of “Confidential Blues” has a forlorn quality. Powerful rhythms work in unison on the toe-tapping joy of “Johnny Martin”. Rather delicate with its placid reflective tones is the wistful “Day of Descension”. Done perfectly the kindness of “It’s Ok to Cry Now” features some slender, sly gestures that feel akin to a sonic hug, full of a warm welcoming presence. Rather fantastically ending the album is the spry playfulness of “Hupaday Daydingo”.

“Family Guitar” revels in a simple beauty, with a perfect balance of emotion and storytelling, as Van Wagner sings from a lifetime of experience.

[Spotify – Family Guitar](#)