

THE SECRET BEACH, *We were born here, what's your excuse?*

The Secret Beach is an ever-shifting group of musicians and co-conspirators orbiting around the songs and voice of Prairie-based songwriter Micah Erenberg. The band moniker – in the same vein as classic groups Guided By Voices, The Byrds, and Tame Impala – helpfully points out that a songwriter is not an island (or indeed, a beach) unto themselves, and the contributions from the involved parties go a long way in making this project what it is. Following their 2022 debut, *We were born here, what's your excuse?* is the new album from The Secret Beach, and this generous helping of warm, well-crafted pop songs will make it tricky to keep this secret for very long.

We were born here, what's your excuse? is unquestionably a musical delight (more on that later), but it's also a subtle nod to the oft-overlooked Canadian province of Manitoba, lazily known to many as either a landlocked frozen tundra or the butt of a joke on *The Simpsons* (hence the album's title). The shuffling, introspective “22” muses on Erenberg's time in Winnipeg's Osborne Village, watching gentrification run rampant while freezing cold for the better part of the year. Winnipeg – where Erenberg has spent considerable time, and shoulders its own share of poverty and crime – dubiously boasts more 7-11 stores per capita than any other city, and “Blame Manny” details a mugging in one such all-night spot.

Musically, one of Erenberg's primary inspirations for this record was the classic Bob Dylan & The Band album *Planet Waves*. The casual, homespun vibe of that LP had long held a special appeal for the songwriter, and after deep-diving on some of the album's finer details, Erenberg discovered that *Planet Waves'* producer, Rob Fraboni (also known for his work with the Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys, and Tim Hardin, to name but a few) was still active and, as it turned out, still open to working with new projects. After a few phone calls, it was decided that Erenberg would travel to the veteran producer's studio of choice in Connecticut where the two spent five days marinating in the songs. Fraboni offered his enthusiastic perspective on the tunes, shared some of his well-honed musical philosophies, and a friendship was quickly cultivated. The songwriter stuck this experience in his back pocket and used it as fuel to write a few more songs and complete the final mix of the album.

We were born here, what's your excuse? is an album teeming with warmth; its 17 tracks casually unfurl spools of intimate texture, hushed melodies, and a wholly inviting atmosphere that puts the listener virtually in the same room as these timeless tracks. The songs – many of them barely cracking the two-minute mark – fly effortlessly by, nodding to many major players in the pop music canon. The spectre of Elliott Smith hovers over many corners of the record, including opener “Beautiful Everything” as well as the achingly tender one-two punch of “Long Distance Gossip” and “Natural Metaphor”. And indeed, whiffs of Dylan and The Band appear throughout, with the latter uniquely evoked in the album's organic, live-band feel, and the former's lyrical mastery mirrored throughout. More contemporary touchstones like Brooklyn indie-folk auteurs Woods and M. Ward (“Where Did It Go?”) are also apparent, and early '00s heroes Grandaddy are called to mind on “LA Haircut”, a cleverly sardonic critique of misplaced ambition.

While Erenberg played a whole pile of instruments on the album himself, The Secret Beach wouldn't be what it is without the help of the carefully selected crew of fellow travellers tastefully deployed throughout the album. We're talking about the sort of players whose first priority is to shine a light on this collection of songs, seeming almost invisible in the apt-ness of their contributions; but repeat listens will have the listener revelling in the finer details, which include vocals and pedal steel from acclaimed country duo Kacy & Clayton, keys and guitar courtesy of Liam Duncan (aka Boy Golden), and duel backing vocals from Duncan and frequent bandmate Fontine. Erenberg captured the album

on a variety of classic vintage tape machines, burnishing the album with a sepia-toned analog patina that makes it sound as if it could have been made any time in the last five decades. And while the spirit of *Planet Waves* looms large, one would be forgiven for hearing hues of early McCartney solo albums, Big Star's *Third*, and fellow Canadian DIY legend Chad VanGalen.

We were born here, what's your excuse? is out now on Victory Pool Records. Find it in stores or online wherever music is found, lay out a blanket in the proverbial sand, and please enjoy the latest offering from The Secret Beach.

(Chris Dudge, 2023)