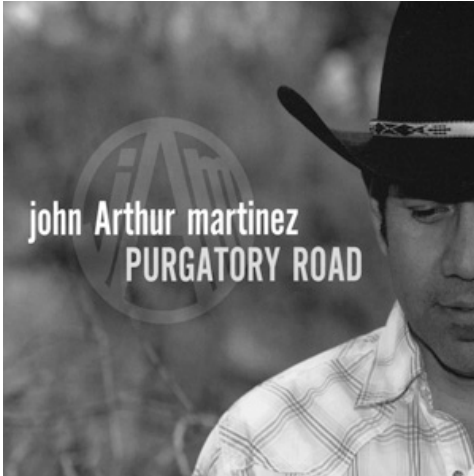


john arthur martinez - Purgatory Road

By: Bobby Peacock

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It's funny how the most commercially successful *Nashville Star* winner by far was Miranda Lambert, who placed third way back in the show's first season. I bet you don't even remember who the winner was that season, do you? (Buddy Jewell.) In between those two artists was some guy named john arthur martinez (who uses lowercased letters in his name as a nod to the poet e.e. cummings). Like Jewell, jAm was a good ol' southern boy in his 40s, with a couple indie records already under his belt. Unlike Jewell, however, martinez has a lot more to say, and a much more effective way of saying it.

Purgatory Road is led off by a pair of dusky mid-tempo about one desolate man: he was raised in a pickup truck, he's fought with the bottle, lost all his paycheck on a bad bet, made some deals with the Devil, and now he's "too low-down broke to buy [his] own beer," so he holds up the Quick Stop. Between the dark lyrics and gritty production and the bitter resentment in his vocals, these two [songs](#) pack quite an emotional punch.

"Can't Outdrink the Truth" carries that same bitter tone, with the narrator trying in vain to drown a broken heart; martinez sounds so truly agonized over his former love that the lyric cuts right to the bone. Next comes "Thunder & Lightning," using a very intriguing metaphor, comparing a former lover to thunder and lightning only to add "but you bring me no rain," leaving him like a wilting, drying flower on parched ground. "Que No Puede Ver" ("Can't She See") brings some Tex-Mex spice to the album, blending a lonesome steel with congas and accordion, as well as some evocative Spanish lyrics. (This [song](#) is also the oldest on the album, having been written in the 1980s.) A Latin flavor also shows up on "What Good Is I Love You," about a man who comes to senses over his broken heart after reading the Bible. This song hinges on the great lyric "What good is 'I love you' if it ain't never been said?"

The mood brightens halfway through, starting with "Closer to My Dreams," a more upbeat song about a man who decides to run away from home and pursue his dreams of becoming a musician. He finds the delicate balance of yearning and slight regret over his leaving, making for a very compelling song that still fits nicely on the album. "The Ride" also keeps the more upbeat tone, using convincing Western similes to describe the excitement of falling in love. Lyrics such as "Even if we never reach our destination, the reward is in the ride" say so much more than the simple motivational-poster lines of, say, [Miley Cyrus](#)' "The Climb." This song and "On the Run" transition easily to the sultry "Cobalt Blue," about a sexy female that the narrator just can't look away from. The slowly-shuffling closer "When You Whisper in My Ear" is a soft, sweet love ballad with a crying steel solo, sounding like a great 1990s neo-traditionalist ballad even on the Spanish second verse.

Cowboy imagery is prevalent on the album: horses, being "on the run," Colorado eagles, sleepy border-towns, et cetera. Such imagery is hardly new, but between Martinez' skillful use of the language and the relative lack of cowboy themes in modern [music](#), it feels fresh and intriguing. Minor chords, lonesome fiddles and loud electric guitars are prevalent, maintaining a deep, dark, dusky tone on even the up-tempo songs. All of the songs rely on sharp, detailed lyrics, not once forcing the messages or relying on a trite line for the sake of catchiness. There's no way in the world that this album would ever be a commercial success, but even if it just sells a few thousand copies back home, I'm sure jAm will

be satisfied. Because he has made one impressive piece of work.

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