

# Malcolm Holcombe

TO DRINK THE RAIN

★★★★☆

COMPARING Malcolm Holcombe with the likes of John Prine, Chris Smither, JJ Cale, Levon Helm or even Tom Waits is entirely justifiable. Echoes of all the above can be discerned on his latest album, *To Drink The Rain*, his eighth. But to leave it at that would be unfair to the North Carolinian, whose turbulent and eventful life has provided plenty of inspiration for his magical songs. Holcombe's got a distinctive raspy vocal and employs an atypical percussive plucking guitar style, suggesting a modern day, country-blues man.

Recorded with an incredibly tight acoustic band, *To Drink The Rain* was produced by Holcombe's sideman Jared Tyler and features 12 superb, one-take performances. It recalls the feel and atmosphere of Steve Earle's mid-'90's album, *Train a Comin'*. This record is all the better for Tyler's steady hand at the wheel, underlining the central character's roustabout voice, that give the songs their corn-starch authenticity.

A simple upright bass/dobro/guitar/fiddle backing allows an easy rolling spirit, exemplified especially in the lead-off track, *One Leg At A Time*, a rag-time blues, brimful of Appalachian folk wisdom and humour. *Mountains of Home*, a simple country waltz, evokes the spirit of *The Carter Family* in its simplicity.

The title track honestly relates tussles with the man's demons and burdens. Its rhythmically pulsating beat accentuates Holcombe's primeval, howl-like vocal. Beautiful, if bleak, *To Drink The Rain* is a triumph. As a performing artist and songwriter, Malcolm Holcombe is an authentic country-blues bard.

**Gerry Quinn**