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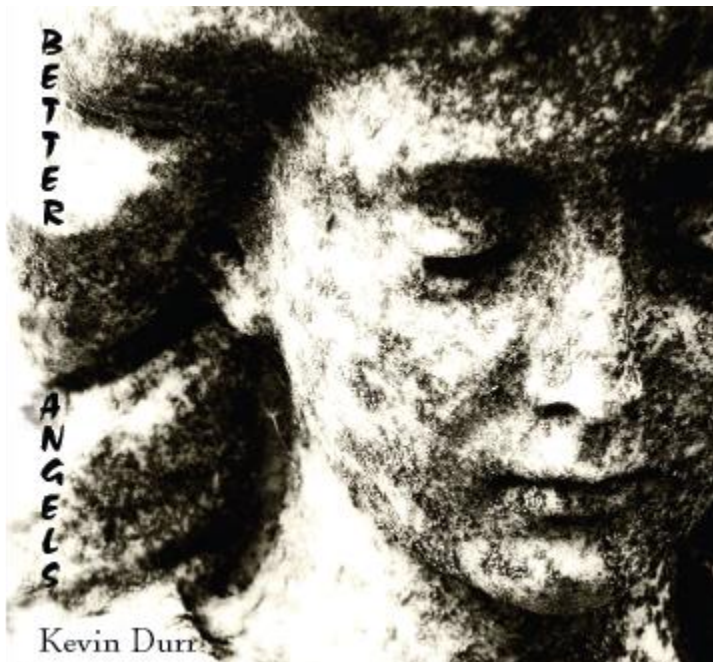


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CD REVIEW: Better Angels by Kevin Durr

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The fourth release from Chicago based singer/songwriter Kevin Durr since his 2003 recording debut with the release *One Look, Better Angels*, is twelve song collection illustrating how much further Durr has managed to refine a creativity vision largely complete with his first release. This continued evolution comes with life's added experiences, a deepening of his playing talents, and his ability to transform those influences into his art. The transition is increasingly seamless. *Better Angeles* finds Durr achieving a near ideal balance of art and personal beliefs in a way many artists aspire to, but most find thwarted by their more dogmatic tendencies. Durr's concerns as a lyricist supersede choosing sides; if he chooses any side at all, he aligns himself with life and the heart and it is only by the happenstance of human affairs such concerns overlap with the political and social issues of a given moment in history. The same mix of acoustic and pop sounds powering his earlier collections is intact with *Better Angels* and makes these songs even more accessible.

There's a confident and effectively minimalist stride to the acoustic guitar opening "I'm Not Sleeping Anymore" and Durr's plaintive singing is nicely accompanied by some superb backing vocals (Flannery Devine & Cortney Blake). The song hits full flight and benefits from urgent drumming that navigates the song's transitions with a solid command of fundamentals. The violin playing and its extended instrumental breaks is, arguably, the song's musical highlight. "Method in the Madness" has a steady mid-tempo pulse and some more backing vocals enhancing another fine Durr vocal. The drumming hits some particularly nice fills here without ever becoming too self-indulgent; they add just a little extra propulsion to the song's forward movement. This song embodies Durr's personal touch in a way that's generally representative of the album as a whole with its pragmatic, but ultimately affirmative, takes on life and its challenges. He moves into more sensitive territory with "The Writing on the Wall" (Frosty Baylor) and the elegiac tone of this piece is greatly accented by the return of violin to the mix and the lyrical content is deftly laid out for listeners.

There's a languid acoustic and quasi-orchestral sway defining the song "Beyond and Above" with excellent interplay, once again, between the vocals (Abigail Tieck) at the song's heart. This is singing, across the board, that gets beneath the skin of each track and interprets them with palpable respect for their lofty musical and lyrical aims. The song transitions unexpectedly near its midway point and picks up the pace with a sweeping acoustic chime anchored by some of the album's best drumming. "All Night Long" kicks off with an orchestral rave up of sorts before settling into a churning, muscular arrangement certain to capture listener's attention while the song "Joy" (Duet with Lori Smuckler) brings listeners back to the acoustic quasi-classical inclinations of some of the album's earliest tunes while taking on the theme of its title with clear-eyed identification and maturity. Kevin Durr's *Better Angeles* is a work of melodic complexity, superior musical arrangements, and quality songwriting few today will readily match or surpass.

by Jason Hillenburg