

Liner Notes for *Postcards of the Reckoning* by Tris McCall

Right at the beginning of "Reckoning," a key track on the album you're about to play, the Jersey City folk-rocker Sean Kiely sings about the unswerving arrival of a moment of revelation. Kiely's narrator — who is likely Kiely himself — is visited by a clear and brutal reality. Though he tries to hide it from sight, soon enough, it's back in his bare hand. The language Kiely uses to describe this experience is spare, poetic, and elegant, because that's how he always approaches his storytelling. But the thing he's describing is anything but clean. It's trouble he's singing about on *Postcards of the Reckoning*, and no matter how beautiful the album sounds, or how light his touch, there's no disguising them. Kiely is showing us the dangerous dance of choices and consequences, and indicating, in his sweet, supple, gentle manner, that we will never outpace the repercussions of our actions.

And so he brings us echoes, song after song, of dangerous things past, and brings us, firmly, to the present moment — a lonesome, mournful clock-tick that contains all the decisions that led to it. It's the pained lover's parting on "One More Song," and the knowledge that no matter how sweet that melody is, there'll be no encore. It's there in the portrait of a mess of a family man on "All of Them Singing," and the recognition he suddenly sees in the eyes of the people closest to him. It's in the sad and solitary bike ride taken by the main character on the beautiful, aching "Bright Idea," and his admission that the threadbare lies he'd been telling himself about love and relationships had finally worn out. His protagonists have flown far, gathered speed, and coasted on their own momentum, but at last they've run out of sky. That's where we find them: banging up against limits that we all face, because we've put them there ourselves through our own behavior.

But if they can get through that moment — if they can accept the reckoning — they can be freed from what fetters us. It won't be easy, and it may not be pretty, but to Kiely and his characters, it's the only way to go. A reckoning means an honest self-assessment, and the longer it's forestalled, the longer these characters must exist in the calm, nebulous, weightless zone of emotional

in-between-ness. Suspended animation is no way to be. Better to face the truth, no matter how uncomfortable, and get on with it.

Sean Kiely matches these stories of human beings in transition to music that is gentle but stubbornly unusual — full of pivots, compositional left turns, and unexpected note and chord choices. Though he and his collaborators never sound drilled, the tracks on *Postcards* are impeccably performed, evocative of folk traditions, but more often redolent of the waterfront at night and the strangeness of the Hudson County post-industrial landscape than it is of the woods. Kiely is pleasantly uncompromising: friendly and approachable, but sharp-toothed. Attitude hums and hisses in his grooves.

His realization of this sound has made him a favorite in his hometown. Since the release of *Your Logo, My Logo* in 2015 and *It Sure Was Good* in 2018, he's become a regular attraction on local stages large and small. As his reputation grew, so did his scope — and his curiosity. Kiely began to share his music with other scenes: first regionally, and then nationally. He entered into an aesthetic dialogue with like-minded artists from around the country. *Postcards of the Reckoning* (2024), his most varied and ambitious project, is the result of that exploration and that inquiry. Everything that endeared this artist to Jersey City remains here, including the adventurous melodies, the radiant harmonies, the smart, sharp-minded lyrics, the distinctive combination of open-heartedness and world-wise wariness, the heartbroken confessional storytelling, the nods to classic '60s pop, '70s AM gold, and '80s college rock recalcitrance.

At the same time, he's made room in his mixes for everything he's learned over the past ten years. He's found clever ways to match his personal style to the styles of talented musicians from other regional traditions. Kiely's reckoning might have left his narrators bruised by tragic happenstance, but just listen: they're reaching out past the moment of realization and desolation. In acts of bravery and faith, they're readying themselves for whatever comes next, and the music reflects this pivot from introspection to engagement.

Postcards of the Reckoning was recorded at Kaleidoscope Sound in Union City under the supervision of Jeremy Delaney [John Agnello, Alessia Cara, Eddie Palmieri]. Kiely brought along musicians he's worked with before, including

frequent collaborator Jared Engel, a standing bassist who straddles traditional country and early jazz with poise, and drummer Bill Campbell, the rare indie rocker with enough subtlety and nuance to make him a favored session player for R&B artists.

But the familiar faces are only part of the tale. Much of the personality of *Postcards of the Reckoning* comes from its accomplished guests: musicians who have developed distinctive instrumental and narrative voices, and who, like Kiely, can't help but sound like themselves, no matter what project they're doing. Jean Rohe, an award-winning folk singer-songwriter whose omnivorous albums demonstrate an understanding of gospel, country, and Brazilian pop, adds her voice and her arrangement skill to kickoff track "Iris." The delicate, subtly tough "Hold Me Out (Hold Me In)," a standout cut, gets a similar treatment from Elizabeth Ziman of Elizabeth and the Catapult, the beloved Brooklyn songwriter who draws with equal confidence from art pop and theatrical maximalism.

Then there are the ringers: multi-instrumentalist Abbie Gardner of the harmony-singing folk trio Red Molly, whose dobro contributes mightily to the ruminative atmosphere of the album, and Bobby Hawk, string arranger for Taylor Swift's Grammy-winning acoustic sets, who adds folk-orchestral muscle to the anthemic "One More." Mandolinist Maddie Witler of Della Mae is a constant presence on the set — an eight-stringed voice in counterpoint with Kiely's own — leaping out of the track to add a fleet-fingered lead on "All of Them Singing," and adding impeccable sonic decoration and campfire sway to throwback closer "The Times Old Rag." A great downpour of empathy comes from violinist Minnie Jordan, inheritor of the Texas fiddling tradition and Kiely's most relentless interlocutor. Sometimes she falls on these tracks like colored light through a filter, and sometimes she announces herself boldly, answering the singer with countermelodies, bolstering him on passages of emotional intensity, lifting him up, filling the sky with fire.

They're all here to bring texture and depth to Sean Kiely's writing, which is forthright and magnetic — even when it's painful to hear. *Postcards of the Reckoning* chronicles a vexed period in the songwriter's life, lived at a brutal time in the history of the world, right in the heart of a place as turbulent as

Jersey City. The author of these tales has taken some hits. We all have. Remarkably, he hasn't retreated an inch. Instead, he's had his reckoning, and he's taken a step forward: toward the world beyond the Delaware and Hudson, toward brighter skies, toward other people. He never stopped singing. He hasn't stopped following his muse down dangerous alleys. He's still on his feet. And he's surrounded by friends.