

Mercyland, by various artists

reviewed by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [May 15, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Mercyland

by Various Artists

Tone Tree

Growing up, my listening habits progressed from the evangelical subculture's schlockiest pop to its Americana fringe to secular alt-country. One common thread: prolific sideman Phil Madeira, whose fine Hammond organ work was as ubiquitous as

decision theology in the record collection of my youth. As I left that walled garden behind as a listener, Madeira was doing the same as a player. These days, he tours with Emmylou Harris.

Madeira plays the hell out of anything with keys, and he's no slouch with frets. He's also a producer and a songwriter, and while *Mercyland* features a lot of artists, it's Madeira's project. He's explained that the idea grew from his frustration with narrow, exclusive faith. Madeira wanted to make a record about a God defined by love, and he asked colleagues to cowrite and record songs with him.

Shawn Mullins's "Give God the Blues" has gotten some attention for its plainspoken take on pluralism, but it's B-list stuff in this company. The Civil Wars turn in a sharp folk duet with "From This Valley," with Emmylou Harris—American music's most inevitable backup vocalist—chiming in. Mat Kearney and Amy Stroup each contribute a lovely modern-country ballad, and the gospel-blues title track shows off Madeira's own husky voice along with his sophisticated writing:

There's only one song—Cindy Morgan's beautiful old-timey "Leaning on You"—that I might call a hymn. I'm not pushing a strict formal definition here, just observing that most of *Mercyland's* material is geared for soloists, not congregational singing. Also, the album's subtitle seems to imply a dearth of existing hymns for Christians who believe that God's essence is love and not judgment. That isn't quite true, either.

But hymns or songs or whatever, Madeira and friends have produced a hope-filled and uplifting album. Now he's raising money for another project, ostensibly a solo record but again featuring many talented guests. I'll keep listening.