

There are singer-songwriters, and there are troubadours. Singer-songwriters are sensitive, polished souls, sharing their journal entries with the world... whereas troubadours do their best just to stay out of jail. In the wake of Ben de la Cour's astonishing new record, *Shadow Land*, you can add his name to the top of the list of younger troubadours to whom this ever-so-occasionally poisoned chalice is being passed.

There are the titans of the form; artists who risked everything to have the grittiest, most authentically artistic life that manifested itself in songs that spoke with great passion and brutal honesty. Men and women who sang the truth: Townes Van Zandt, Robert Johnson, Warren Zevon, Gil Scott-Heron, Judee Sill, Dee Dee Ramone, Janis Joplin, Mickey Newbury, Nina Simone and every other troubadour who has attacked convention riding on little more than guitar string and a song. Their influences shine on *Shadow Land*, but the sound and the stories here are all Ben's.

*Shadow Land* shimmers. It's both terrifying and soothing – suffused with honesty, craft and a rare soul-baring fearlessness but with enough surprises to keep the listener guessing. It gets down and dirty with electric guitar but also features Ben's diffident fingerpicking in quieter moments. Ultimately, it is a darkly beautiful meditation on what it means to be human. Ben's voice renders raw emotion with authority as he recounts tales of suspicious characters, lost love, murder, bank robbers, suicide and mental illness against a backdrop of a dark and haunted America. On the brilliant "From Now On" he sings "it's hard to hold a candle / in a wind so wild and strong." That one line sums up the troubadour's life about as well as anything ever said about it before.

To say Ben de la Cour has lived an eventful life in the course of keeping that flame lit is to put it mildly. As young man he was a successful amateur boxer (taking in the lithe frame he sports today and his aquiline undamaged features, you'd never know that small-time pugilism was ever a feature of his life) which may have inspired the line "never trust any man / if he don't have no scars". After playing New York City dives like CBGBs with his brother a decade before he could legally drink, he had already stuffed himself into a bottle of bourbon and pulled the cork in tight over his head by the time he was twenty one. There were arrests, homes in tough neighborhoods all over the world, countless false starts as well as stays in psychiatric hospitals and rehabs as Ben battled with mental health and substance abuse issues. But in 2013 he finally found himself in East Nashville and 2020 saw the release of far and away the best of his four albums - *Shadow Land*.

"I'm kind of from all over." Ben says, "I was born in London, I left when I was one and we ended up in Brooklyn. I left home when I was seventeen and spent almost a year in Havana, back when I was boxing. I never turned pro, but I had a handful of fights and was pretty serious about it. That's how I ended up in Havana. I didn't even know any Spanish when I arrived" he laughs. "That's when I read *On the Road* for the first time. You know, when you read a book like that and you're nineteen, completely alone in a foreign country... it makes an impression. After that I lived in London for a few years, playing in a metal band, living in a van, working shitty jobs. I lived in LA for about a year, I was in New Orleans for a few years, and I've been in East Nashville for the last seven."

"When I got back from Havana," he continues, "I had a 'come to Jesus' moment where I was thinking, you know, I've got a little bit of boxing talent, but I'm never going to be make it as a pro. I wasn't tough enough. But I'd brought my acoustic guitar with me to Cuba and I'd spend my days getting my ass kicked and then go down to the Malecón at night to drink rum with my friends and play guitar for tourists. Try to make a little money, have a little fun." Then, a self-realization hit Ben a couple of days before his twentieth birthday; boxing was over, and a

budding troubadour was born, one with lyrics as sharp and surprising as an uppercut from the ropes.

*Shadow Land* comes in steaming with “God’s Only Son”, a gut-bucket western about a bank-robbing drifter who may or may not believe he is the messiah that sounds like Ennio Morricone being fed through a meat grinder. “High Heels Down the Holler” is Appalachian gothic at its finest; a twisted and unsettling tale featuring a threatening fiddle that weaves its way like a water moccasin through grimy, hypnotic slide guitar. On “In God We Trust... All Others Pay Cash” Ben’s scathing put-down of corporate crooks “putting candles on dog shit and calling it cake” seethes alongside a band channeling “Stop Breaking Down.” On the other side of the fence are the delicate, atmospheric “Amazing Grace (Slight Return)” and “The Last Chance Farm”, a heartbreaking tale about Ben’s first day in rehab.

Ben turns on a dime on “Basin Lounge”, all pure jittery New York Dolls vibe highlighted by a boogie-woogie piano that would make Jerry Lee proud and a snarling guitar that brings to mind Joe Strummer’s The 101ers. One of the album’s crowning moments arrives with “Swan Dive”, a gorgeous feat of narrative storytelling. A gentle waltz, it tells a shattering tale of lost love and suicide, questioning how close to the edge we really are. When he sings, “My heart does a swan dive, right out of my chest, into a river of sorrow,” the desolation is palpable. The final track on the album, “Valley of the Moon”, is a terrifying meditation on what Jack London referred to as the ‘white logic’ of alcohol-induced psychosis, while simultaneously contemplating Chuang Tzu’s meditation on material transformation in a voice as cold and dead as the man in the moon himself.

You would be forgiven for thinking that *Shadow Land* was an East Nashville record, but you would be wrong. Ben de la Cour, the drunk and unhinged miscreant, decided to write a grant proposal in hopes of receiving funding from the Canada Council for the Arts. “I locked myself away and wrote this fifty-page grant proposal without really sleeping. And then I went straight to rehab” he laughs. When he got out, Ben de la Cour caught a break - Manitoba Film and Music ponied up to cover the recording costs. So *Shadow Land*, which drips with swampy, deep south vibes, was actually recorded in Winnipeg with producer Scott Nolan in the middle of a polar vortex. “I figured everyone is making records in Nashville. For better or worse I don’t get that excited about doing what everyone else seems to be doing. Scott is a great artist in his own right and has produced several records that I really love, and we bonded over Nick Cave and the fact that we’re both recovering metalheads. So we holed ourselves up in his studio in Winnipeg and got to work. I flew my brother Alex out so he could play drums on it - we haven’t made a record together since I was twenty. They have some amazing pickers in Winnipeg. It’s like the Tulsa of Canada.”

“You know,” Ben continues, “you write songs because you want to connect with people, and so you don’t want to make a record that obscures those songs – that’s just as bad as making a record that sounds like everything else in an attempt to appeal to people in a calculated way. You need to make something that interests you. There’s a fine line between artistic expression and pointless self-indulgence, but you also want to have a good time making a record, otherwise what’s the point? I work really hard on songs. So I don’t want to paint over that. Everything has to be in the service of the song. That’s one of the reasons we recorded almost the whole thing live, vocals included. I wanted to have fun. In an evil way.”

Ben de la Cour’s music has been featured on **SiriusXM Outlaw Country**, **BBC Radio** and **NPR** while receiving high praise from **American Songwriter**, **Maverick Magazine**, **No Depression**, **Twangville**, **Dusted Magazine** and **Daytrotter** amongst others. He is a former **Kerrville New Folk Winner** and currently spends over a hundred days a year on the road touring the U.S, Canada, Europe and Australia.