

Duane Slaymaker

Songs from the Old Road

There is a pleasant ease in the way Duane Slaymaker writes, plays and sings on *Songs from the Old Road*. Nothing seems forced or contrived, as if through his 18 years and 3,000-plus shows of trial and error, Slaymaker has learned exactly what will work and what won't.

Stylistically, the album is diverse within its own realm, which is acoustic-based singer-songwriter pop. The songs meander from folky to a little bit country and, yes, a very little bit rock and roll. The fact that the songs are all a bit stylistically vague or middle-of-the-road seems to be something Slaymaker is at peace with. In fact, it's a bit emblematic of himself as a writer, which he touches on lyrically at several points in the album. So, here is a regular guy with a pretty regular voice writing and performing regular songs. This makes for a pretty, well ... regular listening experience. There are no "wow" moments or surprises in this collection of songs, but unremarkable as they may be, the songs are pleasant to listen to. Regular songs about regular experiences have an important place in life and community, and Slaymaker is fulfilling this role well.

Instrumentally, *Songs from the Old Road* is usually stripped down to little more than acoustic guitar and one or two vocals. The record is occasionally peppered with production nuances applied with taste and subtlety so they add to the songs without distracting any from their simplicity. The steel guitar, piano and sparse percussion are all well played and make for welcome complements to Slaymaker's easygoing vocals. His voice moves naturally from James Taylor territory to a modern male country style of singing, complete with the expertly placed voice cracks and slight drawl (even Australians have it now!). "Big Enough" is one of the more country tunes, and, in fact, if it were recorded by an obnoxiously overblown, honky-tonk, red-state slickster, it could be on country radio. Fortunately, Slaymaker kept this one for himself.

In all, there are moments on *Songs from the Old Road* that are a bit sentimental and maybe even cheesy, musically and lyrically. However, the honest and heartfelt way that they are assembled and delivered makes the songs go down easy. In a climate where musicians are all too willing to make horribly overwrought music and dress up like clowns in desperate hopes of getting to the top (see Slaymaker's song "At the Top"), it's refreshing to hear a laid-back, regular-guy alternative.

