



Greensky Bluegrass: If Sorrows Swim

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By **Gideon Thomas**

Kalamazoo, Michigan-based Greensky Bluegrass pose some interesting questions. A band who have designed themselves, and indeed actualise themselves as *not* a bluegrass band (preferring to view themselves as a rock-based outfit, who push the boundaries of their sound towards a more traditional mode), end up sounding a lot like a bluegrass band on new album *If Sorrows Swim*.

Or, perhaps more accurately, their blend of rock aesthetics with string-band formations ends up sounding a lot like country music. Not the vacuous, cotton candy country of daytime radio, but a more real, lived-in vision of the genre. As much as the band discuss progression and moving forward and blending a new sound from old in their press, on *If Sorrows Swim* they are still, in the main part, happy to rest on existing tropes, and whilst the everyman themes and roots-meets-rock sound is acceptably fresh, there is little evidence of their propensity for improvisation and overt innovation. Perhaps they save this for their live performances. No matter, *If Sorrows...* is still a satisfactorily different record, with some interesting delving into songwriting and recording, with tight arrangements and some convincing vocals and instrumentation.

This, their fifth album, was recorded in 10 days, on two-inch tape, with all tracks written by either guitarist Dave Bruzza or mandolin player Paul Hoffman. Many of the tracks bounce along with a pace and element of strength fitting the drive and energy of both rock and bluegrass music, such as the slightly alternative feeling "Windshield", which in uniting both influences comes out like an alt-country song, complete with yearning and sorrow.

The alternative ideas continue on "Burn Them", a cataclysmic look at following one's own path, and not going with others. Themes of solitude and not giving a damn are serenaded by a driving banjo line which adds an intricacy to the arrangements, gathering you up and driving you along. "In Control", meanwhile, is slower, deeper and more introspective. Reflecting on age, experience and life on the road, Michael Bont's banjo still adds feeling and punch.

The banjo, and Anders Beck's deep, expansive dobro are to the fore on "Worried About the Weather", which does leave something of a lasting impression on the listener. As does the cheatin' song "Forget Everything", a neat and complete composition which works on the level the band want it to. Their tales of life and experience—like the emotional "Demons"—do resonate and appeal as real and well-worn. The songs work, as they reflect real situations, really lived.

"Kerosene", with its more rock-like arrangement, exhibits drive of a different nature, veering into psychedelic areas with more rambling guitar work. As in step with the band's philosophy and ideas as it is, it does end up sounding a bit odd, and a little out of place. Likewise "Wings for Wheels", with its rock undertow and slight "journey" in its instrumental break, demonstrates an interesting use of instruments, but does go on a bit. However, it carries an optimistic and uplifting theme to move on and go forward, and does come back together well towards the end. "Just Listening" is a good all around jam to finish off the album, funky and flowing with a barking guitar and a cheeky, funny live feel to it.

If Sorrows Swim is an interesting, ultimately rewarding look into a band and their music, which ends up sounding a little different to how the band pitch it, which, in this age of "I know what this record is going to sound like before I listen to it", is no bad thing.



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