

Sing Out!

Off the Beaten Track

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The music of Chicago songwriter, troubadour and music educator Mark Dvorak is best described in one of his lyrics: "Another hopeful song for a dismal day." The themes on this, his fourth album for Waterbug, are often gloomy - the coming of middle age, lost love, a fallen soldier, or just "livin' with the blues" - but he delivers those songs in a clear, sweet tenor that conveys humor and optimism. For example in singing about coming middle age, he jokes that he has "something left to say," but just "not quite as loud."

The same upbeat spirit characterizes Mark Dvorak himself, a longtime teacher at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music who has traveled the country for his entire adult life, singing traditional folk songs and his original compositions, and also fittingly is a member of the Weavers tribute quartet WeaverMania!

In this album, his musical styles draw from the entire range of the folk vernacular, including Appalachian balladry ("The Saddest Town"), traditional country ("God Bless the Open Road and You"), frailing banjo breakdowns ("Ruben You Can Play Your Banjo"), slow waltzes (on the title song), and aw-shucks shuffles.

Mark is joined by well-known Chicago artists including Michael Smith and members of the Sons of the Never Wrong. Together a fine sort of slap-and-shuffle accompaniment often resulting in a funky jug-band sound that fits the music well.

Altogether the album is a worthwhile reminder of the uplifting spirit and the deep traditions that contemporary writers draw from the roots of folk music. - *Scott Sheldon*