

Mp3 Blake Thomas - Flatlands



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The 3rd studio recording from "Madison's [WI] best country singer/songwriter" *John Mendelsohn (The Isthmus) 11 MP3 Songs in this album (41:53) ! Related styles: COUNTRY: Country Folk, FOLK: Alternative Folk People who are interested in David Gray Patty Griffin Townes Van Zandt should consider this download. Details: Blake Thomas wants your liver Hard living has given the country singer stories to tell John Mendels(s)ohn on Friday 05/16/2008 Maybe it was better we didn't know. How life-threatening our stress levels that frigid Tuesday night in early March if we'd known how close we were to losing one or both of our most notable young musicians! Over the course of their weekly two sets each at Mickey's Tavern, Robby Schiller and Blake Thomas had, as was their wont, kept their whistles very wet so wet, in fact, that they wound up not at the house on Ingersoll Street they share with other musicians and dumpster-divers and dogs and girlfriends and folksingers, but at B.B. Clarke Beach on the shore of Lake Monona, on whose frozen surface they decided to cavort. And what glorious drunkards' fun they had, at least until the ice cracked and Robby plunged into the hypothermia-inducing water. How Blake managed in his own condition somehow to yank him out, and then, ignoring every red light on the way, never exceeding the speed limit by less than plenty, to get him home and into a hot shower is anyone's guess. In the end, though, the balance sheet showed one pair of boots, Robby's, lost to the lake, but one ripping yarn acquired by both. And the possibility of a non-posthumous release of one excellent album, Thomas' Flatlands, on which you're rarely more than a couple of bars from an acute observation, both gorgeously written and soulfully sung. There's a car in flames by the side of the road Well, it looks like any minute now it might explode I'd love to help but I wouldn't know what to do It's kind of the same way I feel about you "I Don't Want Your Heart, I Want Your Liver" is a glorious addition to the canon of wry country odes to alcoholism. But Madison's best country singer/songwriter never hits his stride more emphatically than

when immobilized by despair, as on "Please Cash This Check for Me," in which, throwing out the rhyme and meter rulebooks, he evokes with heartbreaking vividness a moment of abject desperation. And every word of it true. "I was living in Austin. I took my car in to be fixed. It was going to cost more than I had. I found an old check from back when I'd given guitar lessons and took it to the Western Union office." Daunted by the emaciated 24-year-old's appearance he was drinking too much at the time to be very attentive to personal hygiene the woman behind the glass hesitated to oblige him. "I spent half the morning running back and forth to where I was living, trying to get her the phone numbers she needed, like my former employer's, but he wasn't around when she called." Thomas eventually got his money without having to wait the usual three days only because the woman took pity on him, and decided to accept his self-description as A Good Man. Kindness is the currency of the free and the poor There's nothing in this whole wide world that she can't afford Blake Thomas grew up in a one-story white house wedged between cornfields in Carver, Minn., half an hour south of the Twin Cities, and remembers an idyllic boyhood of running through the fields catching bugs with his elder brother, of eating rhubarb raw. He was in second grade when his schoolteacher parents, who'd wed as 19-year-olds, divorced. In third grade, he began to play the saxophone, and in so doing got closer to a little girl on whom he had a crush. His interest in the instrument served him once again his sophomore year in high school, when a pair of senior girls befriended him because of his proficiency on it. "Being accepted not only by women," he remembers with a shy smile, "but older women! It was great!" He began to play the guitar. The next year most of his new friends left for college, and he started all over again socially. His relationship with his closest friend revolved around their getting high together in the friend's basement, or with his friend's mom. His grade-point average plummeted. His mother was concerned. His interest in the sort of electric blues that Eric Clapton played led him to discover Mike Bloomfield, which in turn led him to Dylan's Highway 61 Revisited. "After I heard that, it was pretty much it." A group of older fellow students recruited Thomas to be the singer and songwriter for the Drake Physics Project, most of whose shows were at the local Lutheran church. "Our saxophone player was on the church board, so he had the key. We hung out and drank communal wine. But it got me out of smoking a lot and selling pot." He played standup bass in community jazz bands and pit orchestras. After a brief stay at a community college where his literature teacher assigned books he didn't like, Thomas moved down to Chicago. He lived near White Sox stadium and, because he was too young for bars, played coffeehouses, most notably Burkhart's Underground, run

by a giant with a dreadlocked waist-length beard and tales of having photographed William Burroughs. He was getting \$30 per show, and audiences liked him. "At 19," he chuckles, "I thought I was awesome. I'm a lot less confident now that I know what I'm doing!" He moved to Milwaukee and played between punk bands in underground basement shows. When the scene started to go haywire because of the burgeoning popularity of heroin, he moved to Duluth, where he worked as a housekeeper at a hotel. Then he thought he'd go to Boston and "be the next Bob Dylan." He'd buy himself \$3 worth of breakfast at a diner, get high, and then play six hours in the subway, earning up to \$10 an hour. He hobnobbed down there with a violinist from the Boston Symphony Orchestra and resisted the attempts of drunks to get him to play Jim Croce's "Time in a Bottle." It was in Boston that Thomas wrote the first of his songs he thought were really good, but disgruntlement with the Boston coffeehouse scene "everybody was way too supportive of each other" and love inspired him to move next to Minneapolis. He liked his parents being 30 minutes away, and disliked the girl he'd imagined himself in love with turning out to be a suicidal alcoholic. "There are only so many shouting matches you can have on a staircase with somebody threatening to slash her wrists before you realize, 'This probably isn't a healthy situation.'" He fled back to Milwaukee, where he was miserable "living in a shitty cold attic with spiders and drinking my mind away." He got beaten up, relieved of \$3, and left for dead walking home from a party. He thought maybe he'd give Madison a try. Thomas arrived on the first day of 2004, bought a computer and recording software with money he'd managed to squirrel away, and formed a band, the Downtown Brown, with himself as singer and songwriter. They moved into a house on Monroe Street together and, over the course of a year, recorded an album, Real Life Theater, in between establishing themselves as favorites at Luther's Blues. But then, just before their album was about to be completed, a key member declared himself tired of life below the poverty line and abandoned music for Internet development. But Blake landed on his feet, forming a trio with a pedal steel guitarist and the Brown's fiddle player, and securing a Monday night residency with two fellow musicians at Brocach. "I loved playing there. We were treated well, and even paid well." He was also giving guitar lessons and felt financially stable for the first time ever. After a year and a half at Brocach, he recorded his 40 Minutes album in three days, less than a hundredth as long as the first album had taken. In "Kaitlyn," a distillation of a great many Dylan love songs (and "The Times They Are a-Changin'"), and "Seahorses" it contained two tracks of rare beauty. Two weeks before he was scheduled to move to Texas "Whenever I'm any place too long, I get wacky, and I wanted to see where

Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt had played" Thomas fell seriously in love for the first time. Once down in Austin, though, he learned that the object of his affection had decided to reconcile with her old boyfriend in Nebraska. He spent the next month "getting obliterated, drinking all my money away" until his friend Josh Harty, another Madison musician of note, later to become a member of the Ingersoll Street household, rescued him, taking him on a grueling self-booked two-month tour. Lacking the funds, at tour's end, to return to Texas, he moved into local music booster Kiki Schueler's basement for six months, and eventually got himself booked at both Mickey's and the Crystal Corner, where he regularly performs the songs of others with his (and Harty's) band the Classic Tawnies. A few weeks after he and members of the Blueheels moved into the house on Ingersoll Street, he did the bulk of the recording of Flatlands in a single day and declared himself "in a really good place mentally for the first time in a while, reconnecting with people from my past, saying sorry for being such a fuckup." Not, of course, that he's repudiated alcohol-fueled up-fucking. "I love drinking," he says, "though I certainly don't want to wind up like [his hero, country singer] Townes Van Zandt, who pretty much drank himself to death. That would be a bitch. "Mostly I do it to attain pleasure rather than escape pain, though I do find life kind of boring. If there were a good reason to quit drinking, I would. But unless you're losing jobs and losing friendships, I think you're probably okay. "We don't get angry when we drink. We just do really dumb, life-threatening shit, like falling through ice, which is sweet in the sense that it gives me a story to tell. I know it's a dumb way to look at it, but if I didn't have a true story to tell, I'd feel like a fraud." The instrumental accompaniment on Flatlands is as rote as it is deft, and melodic interest is very sparse indeed, perhaps surprisingly so given that the composer is a musically literate multi-instrumentalist. That, though, turns out to be by design. "I worry that a pretty melody would distract from what I'm singing. I love a good tune, but I'd rather listen to Tom Waits anytime." Thomas finishes the second of the two PBRs he's brought along for self-fortification to an inquisitor's home, runs a surprisingly tiny hand through flame-colored hair, and admits, "I want to get out of town. In Austin every Saturday afternoon you can see Merle Haggard's old Tele-picker Red Volkert at the Continental Club. Every night of the week you can go see something fairly mind-blowing. But in Madison I very rarely see anything that makes me think, 'God, I need to get my shit together!' It's nice here, but I don't feel challenged to do better." He looks accusingly at his two empty bottles and shakes his head. "I'd quit playing music in a second if I thought I could be happy doing something else."

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