

Mp3 Jeff Solomon - Around The Square



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If you put Joe Jackson in a blender with The Jayhawks and Tom Waits from his "Heart of Saturday Night" era, you might get something like Jeff Solomon. Or you might just get a really gross smoothie. Or life in prison. 6 MP3 Songs POP: Piano, POP: with Live-band Production Details: Jeff Solomon, a NY-area singer/songwriter who plays the piano and baritone ukulele when performing live, admires pop from afar. A quick glance at his musical background may not lead one to label him a pop kinda guy; he started on classical piano at age four like a good immigrant's son (his parents are Romanian but they had him in the States) and then studied the saxophone from grade school thru college, where he became an honors student in classical composition at Cornell under the guidance of recent Pulitzer Prize winner Steven Stucky. But he's been working on his genre-hopping pop songs the whole time, even though the first five CDs he ever bought were Dixieland recordings and his two greatest idols are free jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman and the fiery, young James Carter (both saxophonists). In fact, one of the songs chosen for his new record was written when he was just fifteen, way before he'd ever heard of Ben Folds, Tom Waits, Elvis Costello, Ben Kweller, Rufus Wainwright, Joe Jackson, or any of the other fine folks that he's now finding himself compared to. After spending a few post-college years working the coffeehouse circles and logging experiences as a session keyboardist/saxophonist/arranger, Jeff took a few months off to make "Around the Square," his first independently released collection of songs. It is Jeff's first collaboration with up-and-coming producer Andrew Felluss, a talented engineer who has worked extensively with vanguard producers such as Phil Ramone, Frank Filipetti and the Neptunes. Andrew's engineering credits include projects with Paul Simon, DMX, Peter Cincotti, Mary J. Blige, and Ray Charles's recent Grammy winner, "Genius Loves Company." Jeff, who is also a co-founder of the award-winning comedy group Elephant Larry, has performed at NY venues such as CBGB's Gallery, Pianos and Luna Lounge for a steadily

growing number of devoted fans. And he'd love for you to check out his new CD. The below is a fake excerpt from Songwriter Interviews by Janet Leyre. _____ As one might imagine, most of the younger writers prefer to meet for coffee in the East Village or the Lower East Side. Or occasionally, a beer in Williamsburg will do. Jeff Solomon, a talented songwriter and multi-instrumentalist who has just released his first E.P. entitled "Around the Square," is the first musician I've met in almost a year of interviews who has asked to meet me above 14th Street. And at "The Shake Shack," no less. The queue looks about a half-hour long at the outdoor burger bar in Madison Square Park, which resembles a Coney Island concession stand that got dolled up for a hot date. Solomon recognizes me in my red-framed glasses, as per my instructions, and says hello politely. A clean-cut boy in his early 20's with a Cornell degree, he wouldn't have much trouble camouflaging himself amongst the assistant account exec's waiting on this line for a pricey hamburger. But in loose jeans, a shirt plugging some little-known band ("They're the Long Winters! Why doesn't anyone in New York know them? They're so great!") and a Nintendo wrist cuff, he appears bent on not looking the part. I ask Jeff why he suggested this place. He explained, "It's not like they need my help, but I like supporting my old company." Apparently, he once tended bar at nearby Tabla, the acclaimed Indian restaurant captained by Danny Meyer, who also owns the Shake Shack, and as Jeff has just informed me, half of Madison Square Park itself. "I really admire Danny Meyer. He had the great idea to turn this park around. It's paid off well for his businesses, but he's also beautified this park as part of his deal with the city. It's the only park in New York whose ownership is split between the public and private sector." He blushes, clearly realizing that he doesn't sound all that much like a musician right now. "Well, I just think it's neat. And I liked my job, so I remember all that stuff they told you on the first day that all the cool kids chose to forget." It turns out that Jeff is seriously interested in the fine dining world; his parents even tried to make him transfer out of his music program and enter culinary school. "I didn't want to transfer; my music education was too important to me. But I have a lot of trouble choosing between passions. I really want to do everything. I don't want to have to choose being a musician over being a cook or a comedy writer. I'm going to do them all, for as long as I possibly can." Comedy writer? Turns out I hadn't done enough research. Apparently, Jeff has been building up a loyal following both here in New York and in comedy circuits around the country as one of the five members of sketch comedy group Elephant Larry. Jeff co-founded the group with four other Cornell grads in 2002, and they have won awards and critical acclaim from the likes of

Back Stage, Time Out New York, and New York Magazine for their writing and performing. It comes as no surprise to learn that Jeff also acts as Elephant Larry's sound designer and that he often creates musical sketches for the group. "But all that is kept pretty separate from my songwriting projects. On stage with Elephant Larry, we like to keep the energy levels high, so if we want to do something musical, I'll usually end up writing hip hop or something... So yeah, I guess I may actually be better known for spitting dope rhymes than for the stuff on this record. Hopefully that will change soon." I don't think Jeff will have to wait very long. "Around the Square" is a lush and engaging collection of songs that leaves the listener wanting more. Blending a myriad of pop styles into a cohesive opening statement, this is a serious accomplishment for a songwriter's first recording. As I tucked into my Shake Shack burger, I asked Jeff to give my Dictaphone a concise paragraph on how this record came to be. "A year and a half ago, I was working in publishing, about five blocks away from this park. It was just something I needed to do, to convince myself I could hold down a real job as I started doing everything else. Things with Elephant Larry were starting to pick up, and I was beginning to get some real responses to my songwriting. I played at CB's Gallery, and they liked my act and asked me back, and the crowds were great. It felt fantastic. I started trying to record demos of my songs at home, but I knew nothing about engineering. The more I tried to learn, the more I realized that I really wanted to get out of that job and put my energy into cutting a record. Around that point, I traveled to Chicago for a comedy gig. When I came back, my apartment had been completely destroyed in a flood. I figured that was a good cue to leave the day job behind at get moving. A few months earlier, I had met an engineer named Andrew Felluss while I was moonlighting with this funk band, playing sax. I reestablished contact with Andrew, sent him some of my songs, and we started making this E.P. It took about seven months of working whenever our schedules coincided. I had no idea how lucky I was when I first met Andrew. Working with him opened my ear up to a lot of pop sounds that I wasn't used to employing, having more of a background in jazz and "legit" writing and all that. He gave me confidence in my songs, which is something I hadn't known previously. I'm still getting used to it." Andrew Felluss, Jeff's producer, is a veteran engineer who works primarily with legendary producer Phil Ramone. Under Ramone, as well as Frank Filipetti, the Neptunes, and other great producers, Felluss has engineered on recording projects as diverse as Mary J. Blige, Renee Fleming, DMX, and Ray Charles's "Genius Loves Company" album. Having spent several years behind the boards, Felluss has just begun to come into his own as a producer, and according to Solomon, seems perfect for

the job. "He's a young guy, and he's got incredible recording technique, but from working with all these incredible creators, he's also picked up this old-world sensibility. He has this wonderful way with musicians. We're all insecure, and he's one of those types who can put anyone at ease and simultaneously provide terrific direction. Observing him working with my band, and with me, I learned so much." And the education continues. Jeff suggests we take a walk, and as we start walking around Madison Square, I give myself a quick kick for not picking up on his little joke any sooner. "So, we're walking 'around the square,'" I said. "Excellent." "What? I thought it would be funny!" he replied. "C'mon, it's my first interview; I had to do something kinda silly. And wasn't the burger good?" I concede. "And besides, this isn't the square from the title anyway, it's not like I was hitting you over the head with it." The square from the title is, in fact, Gramercy Park, which sits just a few blocks southeast of here. The last song on Jeff's record, "Gramercy," is a strangely moving piece about city-dwellers striving to find a natural oasis amidst the concrete. Or it's about envying the wealthy and beautiful and feeling embarrassed of that envy. Sometimes I think it's just about wanting what you can't have, although he seems exasperated with this concept, frustrated at his inability to move on and quit dwelling on such matters. Or possibly it's about all three of these things. It seems like all of Jeff's songs have at least two or three main ideas, and I keep changing my mind about how the different themes intersect. I get the feeling that he enjoys having listeners try to take him, or rather the songs, apart and figure them out. He gives you just enough puzzle pieces to begin playing. The track I've played the most off this record so far is the opener, "Temporary Song," a breezy yet intricate tune (an unlikely combination of descriptors, to be sure; just listen to it) that gets about as close as Jeff is willing to come to a summer love song. "Temporary Song" begins with a delicate melody plucked on the baritone ukulele, Jeff's songwriting instrument of choice. ("I got one as a gift about eight years ago and bonded with it immediately," Jeff recalls. "It always plays soft and the sound from it dies almost instantly; what's not to like?") Yet when I ask him how he'd sum up the song, he immediately replies, "It's about frustration." For a second, I want to call him a &\$#! pessimist and beat him up. This song's been making me smile for four straight days every time I play it, and he's frustrated. "Frustration?" I ask, wide-eyed. "I thought it was a love song!" "Well, yeah," he allows. But it's about someone who wants more time, feels like he needs more time to show someone how much he cares. He feels like he's doing his best but it's not good enough. And it's driving him a tiny bit crazy." He laughs. "Okay, it's a frustration-love-song. ...Oh crap." I ask him what's the matter. "I never called it that before,"

he replies. "And using that term just made me realize that I've written way too many frustration-love-songs." He laughs again and sighs; I assume this is what pessimists look like when they're having a ball. _____ Janet Leyre is a freelance writer who is compiling musician interviews for a forthcoming book. Janet holds a degree in English from NYU and she does not exist.

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