

WILLIAM LEE ELLIS' *GOD'S TATTOOS*
TO BE RELEASED BY JULY 11 BY YELLOW DOG RECORDS

"There's no one else playing exactly the same sort of music as William Lee Ellis. It's as if he's invented his own sort of 'holy blues' genre." – Jim Dickinson

Memphis-based **Yellow Dog Records** opens a new chapter in American roots music with the July 11 release of **William Lee Ellis' *God's Tattoos***, a twelve-song acoustic dreamscape produced by rock veteran **Jim Dickinson** which blurs the line between the sacred and the secular, at once embracing and departing from American folk traditions.

On *God's Tattoos*, his third album for the Yellow Dog label, Ellis sings of the Apocalypse, devils on his shoulder and his search for spiritual meaning, combining a love for slide guitar, gospel-blues music, and rootsy rock-n-roll with genuine reverence for shamans and sages ranging from Leadbelly, Mississippi John Hurt and Rev. Gary Davis to Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung.

In Memphis, where the line between Saturday night and Sunday morning is hopelessly blurred, it's an approach so familiar it could be its own tradition: Musicians who pack the city's clubs by night can be found on church pews or accompanying the choir, nursing hangovers even as they cleanse their souls.

Instead of worshipping in the conventional sense, established roots guitarist and singer songwriter Ellis – son of acclaimed bluegrass banjoist **Tony Ellis** and godson of that genre's patriarch, Bill Monroe – roams a metaphysical no-man's-land, where blues, gospel, folk, acoustic pop, and even a rumba beat underscore his quest.

As Ellis himself explains in the liner notes, the album's title refers to "the indelible ink of experience", or the emotional scars we all accrue during a lifetime of happiness and heartbreak, joy and pain – "The cuts are made for us, it's the colors we choose," goes one memorable line. "Got yourself another one of God's tattoos."

God's Tattoos was produced by **Jim Dickinson**, the Memphis studio sage whose credits range from Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones to Ry Cooder and the Replacements, and whose inspired guidance at his North Mississippi-based **Zebra Ranch Studio** brought out the full eclectic potential in Ellis's tunes.

Backed by bassist **Amy LaVere** and drummer **Paul Taylor**, Ellis puts his own twist on tradition in tracks like Hurt's "Here Am I, Lord Send Me," and "Search My Heart," inspired by Rev. Gary Davis. He also enlists Dickinson for keyboard work on the acoustic pop parable "Perfect Ones Who Break," and employs his singular slide guitar on "Snakes in My Garden" and "Four Horses."

Ellis then slips into uncharted territory, taking listeners from Buenos Aires to Marrakech on the unforgettable title track, and traveling to Japan – where he lived for the better part of a decade – for lyrical inspiration on two of the album's tunes. Friends like accordion player

Rick Steff (Cat Power, James Blood Ulmer), vocalists **Reba Russell** (U2), **Jimmy Davis**, and Memphis soul greats the **Masqueraders** (Isaac Hayes, Dusty Springfield) drop in to enhance the album's southern flavor, while Ellis's country-blues mentor **Andy Cohen** trades his guitar for a rare dolceola keyboard on the elegiac instrumental "The Missing Moon and Stars."

Throughout, Ellis's own distinctive guitar work becomes the album's main motif, an assemblage of sounds ranging from the vibrato effects of "God's Tattoos" and "Perfect Ones Who Break" to the Richard Thompson-gleaning distortion (not to mention Jimmy Page 12-string) of "Search My Heart," to the experimental yet lyrical E-bow sustain of "When Leadbelly Walked the River Like Christ" to the classical guitar counterpoint of "The Missing Moon and Stars." Surprisingly, this entire array of sounds was produced by Ellis on his variety of vintage acoustic instruments, without the need for electric guitars.

Whether singing "dream songs" like "Cold and Weary" and "Jesus Stole My Heart," alluding to 9/11 on "The Call," or breathing mantra-like life into the John Fahey-esque "Dust Will Write My Name," Ellis eloquently stakes his claim as a master musician and skilled lyricist, one who parlays time-honored music forms into a personal exploration of sound and soul.

The result is a song cycle of an album that builds on the musical and philosophical themes Ellis explored on previous Yellow Dog albums *The Full Catastrophe* and *Conqueroo*, ranked one of the Best Records of 2003 by *Acoustic Guitar* magazine. Fitting somewhere between Ry Cooder's *Into the Purple Valley* and Buddy Miller's *Universal United House of Prayer*, *God's Tattoos* is a unique addition to the Americana catalog, one that's difficult to peg in a single pass and just as difficult to forget on repeated listens.

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