

Solace Review from The Phantom Tollbooth

Is there balm in Gilead? "Solace" answers yes.

Solace for Seasons of Suffering (www.solaceproject.com)

Artist: Steve Bell (www.signpostmusic.com)

Label: Signpost Music

Time: Disc One – 14 tracks/62:53 minutes, Disc Two – 11 tracks/62:24

An email from a friend suffering from renal cancer ignited a sense of passion and urgency in Steve Bell. Ben's words moved him: "I want to see a 'sustaining' CD from Steve Bell, a compilation that would help those who are dying and those who love them—to bring peace and comfort...(and) understanding. What songs would be there? Which would help most for someone dealing with loss—the passing of a loved one—helping them face death and passing?"

Ben has gone on to his reward, but the project he envisioned has come to life in a two-disc set. With his suggestions, 14 songs that have meant the most to others were compiled from eight different albums recorded over a 14-year period. Bell updated five older songs that sounded dated.

Many of the songs are derived from ancient prayers, poems and Psalms. I like his choice to adapt rather than using the exact words. He makes the writings into songs that flow smoothly.

The acoustic guitar leads the way for bass, piano, stringed instruments and background vocals by daughter Sarah. This collection is so strong that it could serve as a greatest hits package. But it does so much more than that.

The prophet Jeremiah lamented, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored?" (Jeremiah 8:22 NASB). "Solace for Seasons of Suffering" answers the question. Suffering souls find comfort and understanding in songs and spoken word.

Don't get the idea from the subject matter that this is all melancholy. The songs are varied and worshipful, and the interviews have their lighter moments.

I suspect that many on this side of the border are not familiar with this award winning Canadian artist, which is a shame. He has a great voice and is a singer/songwriter committed to artistic excellence. He doesn't like the "Christian artist" label because of the negative connotations, but all of his work is animated by his Christian faith. His primary concern is producing good art. I introduced a friend of mine to his work and now Steve Bell is their favorite artist.

The second disc consists of a slightly edited audio magazine released previously. Titled "Can God Be Trusted?" the program is hosted by Steve Bell and includes uncommon reflections on the themes of suffering and loss. Author and theologian John Stackhouse addresses the question: Can God be trusted? Presbyterian minister Chris Vais reflects on his battle with Lou Gehrig's disease. Lydia Harms shares honestly about how badly she responded to the loss of her husband, and Jamie Howison talks about "Broken Books and Broken Music." "Bigger As You Go" by Bruce Cockburn and a new version of Cockburn's "Wondering Where The Lions Are" by Steve Bell are included as examples of broken music. The latter song is an unfinished version from a project of Cockburn covers that Bell has been working on.

The CD packaging is beautiful and includes a colorful booklet with words to all the songs. You don't have to be suffering to enjoy this CD, but this would make a great gift for anyone who is going through a difficult time.

Michael Dalton
October 15, 2005

4.5 tocks