

Bluegrass Headquarters

CD Review

CD: *Bluegrass Headquarters*

Artist: **Jussi Syren and The Groundbreakers**

Artist Website: www.syren.fi

Label: Bluelight Records

Label Website: N/A

Reviewer: Mississippi Chris Sharp

Finland is said to be the world's happiest country. That may be, as the Nordic countries have long found out how to make the best out of their lives in lands of short summers and long winters. With that in mind, I found myself wishing for a plate of Poronkärjistys or sautéed reindeer, one of the national dishes of Finland, as I listened to **Jussi Syren and the Groundbreaker's** CD, *Bluegrass Headquarters*. This CD starts and hardly stops for a breather. The first head-turner was the title cut, *Bluegrass Headquarters*, whereas the band was burning it up, some extremely hot fiddling had me reaching for the label to identify the fiddler. Mike Cleveland, it read. No wonder it turned my head.

I like that of the eleven songs on this CD, seven were penned by Syren, including the poignant *Okinawa Waltz*, which I enjoyed, which, along with *The Ballad of the White Death*, were about the only two songs in which one could catch one's breath. The instrumentals *Drop C Ride*, written by

Groundbreaker's banjoist, Tauri Oksala, and the bluesy/modal *Road to Tammelund*, composed by Syren, were particularly enjoyable, with beautiful fiddle work by Cleveland and clear mandolin work by Syren. It reminded me of Monroe's *Last Days on Earth*, though I'll bet a dollar to a dime Monroe never had a plate of Poronkäristys.

Syren's gospel tune, *Put the Bible Back in School Rooms*, was as Stanley-esque as anything I ever heard, while the *Ode to Bluegrass Mandolin* worked in a medley of tunes between the verses. The rest of the CD put me in remembrance of Jimmy Martin in speed and drive, other than the traditional *Walking in Jerusalem Just Like John*, which had me thinking of The Sullivan Family.

Included in the mix of tunes was Billy Joe Shaver's *I Been to Georgia on a Fast Train*. I counted it several times, and this song was played just at 180 beats per minute, which is about as fast as a train can go in Georgia. Apparently, they can go faster in Finland. It was blistering. If it had been any faster, I don't know if my hearing could have kept up. Let no one say that the Finns cannot play as fast as the North Carolinians, both of whom can play faster than this Mississippian. Never mind me; just pass the Poronkäristys.

I particularly liked the Bob and Joe Tanner song *Bitter Tears*.

Bluegrass is alive and well in Finland. Served up with some fresh sautéed reindeer, Finnish Bluegrass would be just the thing to go with on this cold, Mississippi, February night. I expect a February night is much colder in Finland. Maybe Jussi

and me will retreat to our saunas, the biggest difference being that I have no snowbank to plunge into after I come out. Maybe we'll both take a ride to our Gulf Coasts: me to the Gulf of Mexico, he to the Gulf of Bothnia. No matter how cold, we'll both have some hot bluegrass to warm us up.

The liner notes indicated that this CD was recorded live in the studio with the exception of Cleveland's fiddle and the dobro overdubs. I enjoyed the natural room reverb or the excellent plate reverb that the recording engineer used. To my ear, many of the tracks could have benefited from a little more separation and less bleed-over. Other than that. I'll say nicely done.

Jussi Syren and the Groundbreakers' *Bluegrass Headquarters* is straight ahead bluegrass brought to you from the world's happiest country. It made me happy just to listen.

Mississippi Chris Sharp

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