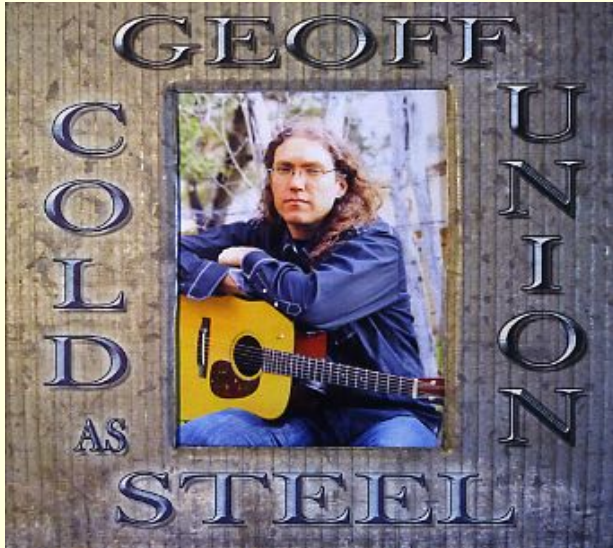


FAME Review: Geoff Union - Cold As Steel



Cold As Steel

[Geoff Union](#)

Shining Castle Music - 1201

Available from [CD Baby](#).

A review written for the Folk and Acoustic Music Exchange
by **Frank Gutch Jr.**
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It is hard not to love an album which starts off like a cross between Hot Rize and the Tony Rice Unit with music straight out of the best of the best of the modern bluegrass players over the past three or four decades. I fell in love with bluegrass when I was a kid, when Jimmy Martin swept across my radar, and that love journeyed through groups like The Seldom Scene, Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, the aforementioned Hot Rize and a string of groups including the venerable Bluegrass Album Band of which Tony Rice was a founder (along with J.D. Crowe). Man, you had to be able to pick to be in those bands and the picking on the opening track of Geoff Union's **Cold As Steel** album, *Devil's Card*, brought back the rush I feel each and every time I hear something far above the norm.

In my mind, there are various kinds of bluegrass. There is the flat-out pickin' bluegrass made famous by Flatt & Scruggs. There is the old-style mixture of voices and picking a la Bill Monroe. There is the beautiful and harmonious gospel-influenced bluegrass you hear when groups like Seldom Scene turn their eyes to the church (while I am a dyed-in-the-wool heathen, I definitely appreciate the inspiration of religion when it comes to music), and there is modern bluegrass which infuses all of the above and more. Union fits well within that last category, also inhabited by all of the groups in paragraph one.

I am old enough to remember the days that modern bluegrass was called "Newgrass". I remember a very young Tony Rice and Tim O'Brien (Hot Rize) and so many others. The music was a bit rougher back then, but over the years players and the technical guys have honed the edges. That smoothing of sound has brought a huge amount of listeners to the genre and now that Americana has gained a strong foothold amongst those who might not have found the music as palatable, this bluegrass hybrid is making waves.

Like I said, there is a lot of Tony Rice in Geoff Union, but there is a bit of David Grisman, also. He proves it with *Half Past Zero*, a bit of what they used to call "dawg grass" or "dawg music"—a combination of jazz and bluegrass which thrills. While it is basically jazz played on bluegrass instruments, it has a sound all its own and makes me smile. Beware, bluegrass fans, especially those who consider jazz honking geese music. Like bluegrass, there are many styles of jazz and if this isn't a gateway to jazz, I don't know what is.

Comparisons seem to be the only thing many readers can latch onto these days and I am reluctant to compare, but if it takes comparing to get some people to listen, let's list a few besides the ones above: John Reischman & the Jaybirds, Buck White & the Down Home Folks (also known as The Whites), Alison Krauss & Union Station, Carrie Hassler & Hard Rain, Steep Canyon Rangers, and The Infamous Stringdusters. And I barely scratched the surface. Still, that should give those of you who don't know bluegrass well a small indication of the company Geoff Union keeps, musically.

When I first heard this CD, I fully expected Union to be from Virginia or thereabouts. Turns out he is based in Texas. More proof that Texas absorbs more musical styles than just about anywhere else in the world. If I could stand the weather and the mere idea of a state voting in some of the biggest bastards to go political, I would consider moving there. They owe the rest of the country one hell of a lot for giving us the Bush's. It will take more than Geoff Union to make up for it. Then again, you throw him in with the seeming few millions of great Texas musicians, we're now a whole lot closer.

That's **Cold As Steel**, friends. Think Virginia. Hear Texas.

Track List:

- Devil's Card
- 40 Years
- Half Past Zero
- Lewis Redmond
- Fannie at the Front Door
- Spirit of '94

- Cold As Steel
- Water In the Well

All songs by Geoff Union except *Devil's Card* (Lyrics by Jim Harris, Music by Geoff Union) and *Water In the Well* (Lyrics by Jim Harris and Geoff Union, Music by Geoff Union). Songs published by Shining Castle Music (ASCAP).

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