

Gail Kelley

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## ARTS & PEOPLE

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Guitarist don't get any better than Ed Gerhard. Sure, there are great classical and flamenco guitarists and lightning-fast fingerpickers and jazz improvisers who can take you through a set of variations so complex they make your head spin.

But, Gerhard can do it all, not only with technical perfection but with the ability to illuminate the emotional core of whatever he is playing. Clear and uncluttered, yet containing enough harmonic layers to make you forget you're listening to only a solo instrument, Gerhard's arrangements are so delicate, so melodically gorgeous that if they were three-dimensional objects, they would be made of spun glass.

His new CD, titled simply "**The Live Album,**" is his best yet. He calls it his "own private bootleg" CD, made with a digital recorder he carried around with him on tour, plugging in directly into his audio mixer on stage. Some of what ended up on the album was recorded in Japan, some in New Hampshire- two in a concert in Derry, one from a performance in his home town of Strafford, and two from his annual Christmas concert in Portsmouth last year.

Gerhard says he feels more relaxed on stage in front of an audience than in a studio and more inclined to try new things. The result is an album that captures that special charge that can exist between performer and listeners.

Among the new things that Gerhard tries in live performances are different kinds of guitars. On the recording, the tune "Malaika" is played twice- first on a 12-string guitar modified to deepen the tone so that it sounds like an instrument twice its size, or, as Gerhard puts it, "like a bouzouki on steroids," and then on a hybrid instrument, an electric mandotar, that has the sparkly sound of a Russian balalaika but pitched lower, as if the body of the instrument were the size of a cello.

Anyone who can play a Hawaiian lap steel guitar without producing a single twangy note has to be gifted. Gerhard goes further with it than that. Out of an instrument usually associated with tackiness and kitsch, he coaxes the dreamy, mysterious melody "Homage," floating it on nearly sub-audible bass notes that reverberate in your sternum

In "Slide-Impro," he gives his audience a dose of deep-in-the-gut blues, one note at a time, taking it slowly, letting each sliced and bent steel tone completely fade before playing the next. When it's over you hope you'll never feel that low.

One comes away from this recording feeling the auditory equivalent of having eaten a gourmet meal, with all its ingredients at the peak of freshness, served in the proper proportions and with just the right wine.