



The Unseen Guest – Checkpoint

Declan Murray: Lead vocals, guitars, slide guitar, bass guitar, piano and bongos
Amith Narayan: Harmony vocals, guitars, mandolin, veena and bass guitar

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The concept of "two" is an interesting starting point to describe *Checkpoint*, the second album by the singer/songwriter duo, the Unseen Guest.

Declan Murray and Amith Narayan, the leaders of the Unseen Guest, come from two very different backgrounds. Amith was born and raised in Kerala, India and, as the lead guitarist of a rock band, played before thousands while still in college. Declan grew up in Bray, Ireland and spent time playing in several bands as well as composing soundtracks for a few independent films.

The two met while Declan was traveling across India with little more than his beat up acoustic guitar. The Irishman and the Indian clicked musically and after a few beers led to a few more, drunken promises of musical partnership were made. One year later, the struggling musicians from opposite sides of the world got their act together. *Out There*, the Unseen Guest's debut album was released to rave reviews and the song *Listen my son* even found its way onto a compilation CD, *Blues around the world* by Putumayo World Music, along with blues legends Taj Mahal, Bonnie Raitt and Otis Spann.

Checkpoint, like their first album, beautifully weaves two influences into a seamless whole. The instrumentation combines bluesy melodies (check out the harmonica work of Curtis King on *Miracle Mile*) with elements from pop, folk, rock and free jazz. To describe the album as a combination of the best of eastern and western musical styles would not be an exaggeration. The album closes with an excellent rendition of Leonard Cohen's *Everybody Knows*, which is familiar yet new, with a beautiful string arrangement.

It is only on a second listening that the listener realizes that some of the album's sounds are distinctively Indian - percussion instruments like the dholaks on *Ancient Greek*, and the ganjra on *the Whitest Lie*. The tablas pop nicely, the sax is rich and one can feel the dusty roads of India in Declan's voice. The listener gets a continual variety of pleasant surprises throughout!

Imagine a jailhouse where you're always free...

At times world weary, at times full of joy, *Checkpoint* is a traveller's diary, full of witnessed dualities and memories recorded on the spur of the moment. Not the clichés of East and West, but the stuff of novels and good movies: wanderlust versus security, love versus cynicism, the wildness of Saturday night and the regrets of Sunday morning.

Checkpoint is an apt title for the Unseen Guest's second album. With it, Declan and Amith acknowledge the successful musical territory of their first album - but they keep moving forward. A solid collection of eleven songs, *Checkpoint* combines the best of two (or more) worlds. The Unseen Guest have produced yet another beautiful dusty snapshot of life on the road, one you can sing and dance to!

Checkpoint by the Unseen Guest: Two men, two countries, one fine album!

Chiaki Williams

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