

Artist: Heavy Trash

Album: Midnight Soul Serenade

Label: [Big Legal Mess](#)

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Heavy Trash - "Gee, I Really Love You" (Midnight Soul Serenade)

Heavy Trash began three albums ago in 2005 out of Jon Spencer and Matt Verta-Ray's shared affection for rockabilly – and particularly Charlie Feathers. Though never straitjacketed into the genre, their first, self-titled album echoed the form's hiccupping, gulping vocalizations, its minimalist rhythms, its confounding balance of tradition and deep-seated weirdness. A second effort, recorded with the Sadies, sported a more full-blooded, conventionally country rock sound, slipping toward the end into hallucinatory, swamp-gassed blues. With this third album, *Midnight Soul Serenade* Spencer and Verta-Ray heat-warp all kinds of hoary traditions, their old-time rockabilly sincerity twisted with the green gleam of madness, their shout-along soul choruses redolent with sexual violence. The music is vastly entertaining, devilish, solder trickles of white-hot intensity running through cracks in its nailed-down façade. It's contained, but at the same time, so over the top that you never know whether the record – and, by extension, the whole Heavy Trash project – is some kind of baroque kind of practical joke.

You have to start with Spencer, even though he is, admittedly, not the whole of Heavy Trash. Verta-Ray's concise, inflammatory guitar work, the brittle clickety clack of drum sticks (Sam Baker from Lambchop this time), the mad head-long plunking of acoustic bass (Simon Chardiet) are all parts of the formula. Still, the theatricality, the menace, the outsized rant or emphatic gesture – all of the elements that may or may not make Heavy Trash into an elaborate put on – those come from Spencer. With *Midnight Soul Serenade* he is in particularly "out there" form. When he is trying to be good, as on the opener, "Gee, I Really Love You," Spencer holds a supplicant's bouquet of faded flowers behind his back, ill-toothed ingratiation in his smile. Shoehorned into the most straight-laced of old-time sentiment and rickety wire frame percussion, he is only vaguely disturbing. But when he is letting the freak flag fly, as on the evil vamping, Daddy-Rolling-Stoning "Good Man," no cartoon is scarier. (No one, certainly, could pull off a chorus like this, with Tennessee's Those Darlins' making sex noises in the background.) And as for "The Pill," a fever dream of blues and substance-alteration and erotic deviance, it would be a parody if anyone else tried it. It's almost a parody as it is, especially when Spencer brings Dorothy and the ruby slippers in out of nowhere.

"The Pill" is the most overtly strange song on the disc, but weirdness run through even the accessible cuts. "(Sometimes You Got to Be) Gentle" is, in essence, another of those soul-shouting anthems that Spencer has been making since his Blues Explosion days. "*It's youuuuuu,*" Spencer croons, in tight, falsetto harmony with Verta-Ray, a bit of a romantic break between bouts of outsized libido. (The main chorus is built around the line "*Stick it up inside.*") There's a speaking break, where the song spirals out of the known universe, as Spencer intones, "*Join me / Step into this sphere. / And feel the hair. / Fe-ee-el the hai-ai-air*" (presumably not the kind on your head).

The album is bookended by two of its most rockabilly-inspired cuts, "Gee I Really Love You," at the front end, and the 12/8 Elvis-esque "In My Heart" at the rear. Here, Verta-Ray's guitar slouches through blues progressions, the stand-up bass bobs, the drum sticks dance unsteadily along the rims,

and Spencer sings his best approximation of a sentimental love song. “*Without love you can’t never forget ... without love, you’re soaking wet,*” he observes near the end, making a rhyme, if not exactly sense. The craziness, for an instant, stands in perfect balance with the sincerity, and the two elements make each other way more interesting than either could be by itself.

When you listen to *Midnight Soul Serenade*, it’s hard to shake the feeling that you’re being had, somehow, that this is some sort of staged play where Spencer *plays* a country-rock-soul singer, and Verta-Ray impersonates his guitar-slinging sidekick. But what the hell, all music is theater, and this is a twisted yet entertaining show.

By Jennifer Kelly