

Erik Friedlander

Block Ice &

Propane

SKIPSTONE

★★★★

The central conceptual conceit of *Block Ice & Propane* resonates strongly with a particular experience of youth: a kid on the road with his family, looking out at the expanse of the landscape, half-bored/half-ecstatic, floating on asphalt somewhere in America. Where one might normally file Erik Friedlander's CD with other releases of creative music or improvisation, this one seems to want to congregate with the greats of traditional American string music, maybe somewhere triangulated between Bukka White, Leo Kottke and Gillian Welch, where its evocative and bittersweet tracks would find suitable bedfellows.

Excursions for solo cello constitute a well-excavated shaft, from J.S. Bach to Fred Longberg-Holm. But there's plenty of ore left down in the mine, and Friedlander has hit a rich vein. His pieces are very much wordless songs, each with a core melodic identity. Some have overt Americana in them, like the Aaron Copland-esque hoedown "Airstream Envy," the folksiness of "Yakima" and the strummed chords of the title track. A focus on pizzicato over arco—together with a propensity to lay pedal notes under melody lines—perhaps helps connect the outing with guitar, mandolin and banjo music. However, a dissonant, gooey, tar-like bowed track like "A Thousand Unpieced Suns" introduces another element altogether.

"Dream Song" augments the cello with a delicate chorus of shimmering tuning forks by some means not readily discernible, either using multitracking or prestidigitation. On the textural "Rusting In Honeysuckle," the tuning fork is a more direct implement, opening the track with a haunting note, later joined by dog whistles and crisp harmonics. The songs ground such open improvisation, like a night camping by the side of the highway, unsure, each mysterious sound amplified tenfold, the wonder yielding to the familiarity of another day of driving. If there's a venerable tradition of American road films, *Block Ice & Propane* belongs in the associated list of great road albums.

--John Corbett (from **DOWNBEAT**, December 2007, pg. 74)