

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Best of 2018

By Washington Post Staff

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Best music

By Chris Richards, Pop music critic

9. "Life Of" by Steve Tibbetts

On his most sublime and sedate album, this underrated Minneapolis truth-seeker manipulates the strings of his guitar in gorgeous drips and drizzles. Does the music sound like rain? Or is Tibbetts simply doing what rain does? If there's a difference, it's in here.



RECORDING OF THE MONTH

July 2018 Recording of the Month: *Life Of*

Jon Iverson | Jun 12, 2018

Steve Tibbetts: *Life Of*

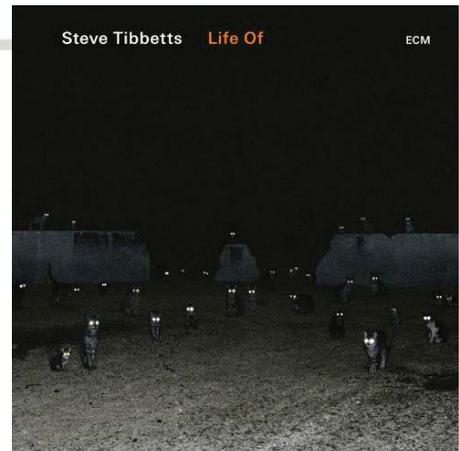
Steve Tibbetts, 12-string guitar, piano; Michelle Kinney, cello, drones; Marc Anderson, percussion, handpan

ECM 2599 (CD). 2018. An ECM production; Steve Tibbetts, eng.; Greg Reiersen, eng., mastering.

DDD. TT: 50:40

Performance *****

Sonics *****



The sound of Steve Tibbetts's guitar music is unique—one need hear only a measure or two of his new album to identify the distinct tang of his playing. Common wisdom is that a guitarist's sound is in the hands and fingers, but Tibbetts has another trick: his weathered, 50-year-old Martin D12-20 12-string acoustic guitar.

The compositions are modest in length, each named for a friend or family member. Not songs per se, they pour forth slowly like careful meditations, or a deep fog moving over a range of tree-shaded mountains. That last sentence might suggest new-agey syrup, but Tibbetts's approach is too intelligent, textured, and idiosyncratic for that characterization. There are no repeating patterns or gratuitous dynamic builds—instead, you feel Tibbetts trying to gently reach inside the guitar to pull out every ounce of detail and meaning as a piece develops. He later flavors and spices the tracks with his confederates' contributions, to further bring out the embedded intent. Those confederates are Tibbetts's longtime companion Marc Anderson, on percussion and handpan, and new collaborator Michelle Kinney, who provides sparse cello and, per her liner-note credit, drones." Kinney has performed with many jazz legends, including Henry Threadgill and John Zorn; here she provides deep backdrops for Tibbetts's sinewy, sweet-and-sour guitar lines. (*excerpt*)

Fricke's Picks: Guitar Wonders From Circles Around the Sun, Howlin' Rain and More

Four new albums feature different shades of psychedelia

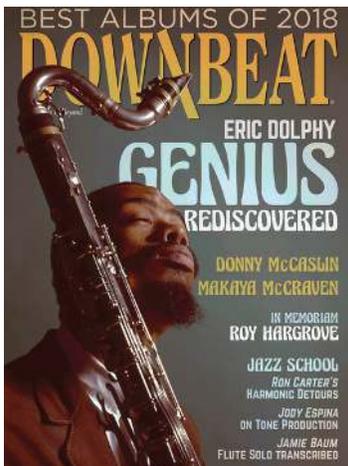
By **DAVID FRICKE** 



Steve Tibbetts – *Life Of* (ECM)

In a 1994 *Rolling Stone* review, I described this Wisconsin-born guitarist's fifth ECM album and seventh overall, *The Fall of Us All*, as "a dynamic study of Eastern modality and universal spiritualism driven by rock & roll ambition." While many of his records reflect his travels and collaborations in Bali and Nepal, *Life Of*, Tibbetts' first record in eight years, is a series of portraits rooted in home and memory, named after family members and friends ("Life of Emily," "Life of Joel," "Life of Carol") and performed on 12-string acoustic guitar with percussion and cello drones embedded at near-subliminal volume. The effect is a seductive impressionism of fluid melodic figures and rippling arpeggios with a quietly firm, emotional undertow. For the more searing, electric side of Tibbetts' exploration, start with *Yr*, his second album, originally self-released in 1980 and musically located at a turbulent, futurist intersection of Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* and John McLaughlin's 1971 acoustic Indo-jazz classic *My Goal's Beyond*. *Life Of*, in turn, proves great psychedelia also comes in whispers.

BEST ALBUMS OF 2018 MASTERPIECES



Best Albums of 2018

5-, 4½- and 4-star albums from the past year.

By DownBeat critics

STEVE TIBBETTS ★★★★★

Life Of

ECMSept.

Because there's so much atmosphere in music—the reverb-laden guitar, ghostly piano chords, quiet washes of percussion—it can be easy to assume that atmosphere is all he's got. After all, the guitarist is not one for big, brass melodies or deeply funky grooves, nor do his tunes offer anything like the easily decoded structure of pop songcraft. And when the narrative is hard to follow, it's all too tempting to assume there isn't one at all. Pay close

attention, though, and *Life Of* reveals a world of sonic surprises. With "Life Of Mir," it's relentlessly shifting harmony and splashes of Michelle Kinney's cello; with "Life Of Dot," it's harmonics pulled from bent strings to give each note unique flavor; with "Life Of Alice," it's the intertwining rhythms of finger-picked guitar, sampled gamelan and piano. It might be less than an hour long, but *Life Of* will provide years of deep and rewarding listening. --J.D. Considine