



35TH PARALLEL, *THE GREEN VINE*

(Self-released, CD)

Listening to the 35th Parallel's debut disc transports you not to Middlesex, Vermont, but the Middle East. And the Mediterranean. North Africa. Asia. India. And back again to Appalachia. In other words, *The Green Vine* is a musical journey around the globe following a sinuous path, yes, 35 degrees north of the equator.

And the journey is not a linear one: both Gabe Halberg (of Middlesex) and Mac Ritchey (of Hampton Falls, N.H.) are multi-instrumentalists who incorporate a full arsenal of traditional sound-producing devices in their gorgeous compositions. Each of the 14 instrumental tunes here — 10 of them original — is a thing of breathtaking beauty, yet despite the wiggly time signatures and exotic tones, the music is accessible. In part that may be because Ravi Shankar introduced the East to the West, musically speaking, a generation ago. But mostly it's because of the 35th Parallel's exquisite, seemingly effortless playing.

Only occasionally does the familiar sound of Ritchey's acoustic guitar appear; he also contributes oud (acoustic and electric), bouzouki, didjeridoo, gongs and something he calls "ambiosmic soundscapes." The owner of and producer for Possum Hall Studios in Hampton Falls, Ritchey is also a master of the digital widgets of electronica — though his use of such effects is discreet on *The Green Vine* until the hidden track way, way at the end. Halberg, who graduated from Goddard College with a self-designed major in tabla composition — plays that hourglass-shaped drum as well as other percussion and the tar and tamboura (both variations on the lute) and the jaw harp. Both players continue to study with masters on the oud and tabla, respectively.

The Green Vine is not your garden-variety "world music," nor is there the slightest capitulation to "jamming." The compositions are lovely, if hard to describe. The dynamic variation is just right — some tunes slow and meditative, others filled with that kind of hypnotic percolation that makes you consider Sufi dancing in the privacy of your living room. Every tune is based on a group marriage of plucked things and beaten things, yet the spacious arrangements grant each instrument sonic independence, as it were — a sign of both good songwriting and crystalline production. If I had to choose favorites they would be the tapestry-of-sound title track, the sunny "Crabwalk Often?" and the spacey nine-minute closer "And the Sky Was," but in truth this collection is seductive from the first note to the last.

PAMELA POLSTON