

No

Depression

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Review of The Baseball Ballads

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Could there be a less likely time for an album of baseball songs? What with strike threats, an aborted all-star game, and endless talk of steroid cocktails, the national pastime circa 2002 hardly inspires faith and devotion. Unless you're amiable troubadour Chuck Brodsky, whose new album (a compilation of new and old material) displays a true fan's appreciation of the game's history and abundant absurdities.

Brodsky, who's best known for the road-rage anthem "Blow 'em Away", lives in North Carolina, but he grew up in Philadelphia, and his father was a fierce Phillies fan at a time when that meant always cheering for the losers. The experience probably shaped Brodsky's interest in the game's quirks and foibles.

The Baseball Ballads is full of songs about misfits and faded glories. Instead of Ruth or Cobb or DiMaggio, Brodsky turns his attention to Eddie Klepp (the first white player in the Negro Leagues), Moe Berg (the Princeton graduate who served as a Cold War spy while catching for the Red Sox), and Fred Merkle (whose baserunning error in a 1908 game cost the New York Giants a pennant). Like any good hometown boy, he dedicates two songs to Phillies legends: pioneering black player Dick Allen and longtime broadcaster Whitey Ashburn.

Brodsky's clean fingerpicking, shaggy-dog twang and gentle melodies give the album an easy coherence, but the stories and characters are what count. These tales, obsessively researched and rendered with off-beat affection, put some skewed humanity back in a game that needs it."