

BY JOHN SCHACHT

It's 800 miles and 12 hours from Wichita to Laredo, a straight shot down I-35 through the big sky plains of Kansas and Oklahoma, through north Texas ranchland and the scrub-brush south of San Antonio.

We don't know for sure whether that's the route SUSS had in mind for their excellent instrumental debut LP, *Ghost Box*, but the seven song titles — among them, “Wichita,” “Laredo” and “Canyonlands (Return to Wichita)” — certainly suggest as much. Far more important than mere place names, though, is this New York City-based quintet's ability to conjure those places psychically for us in a sublime 35-minute joyride that hints equally at Ennio Morricone, Brian Eno, and *Paris*, Texas Ry Cooder.

SUSS features Grammy-nominated multi-instrumentalist and cowpunk pioneer Bob Holmes on mandolin and guitar, guitarist/keyboardist Pat Irwin, pedal steel player Jonathan Gregg, synth looper Gary Leib, and William Garrett, architect of the “high lonesome” quality in the album's mixing stage. Together they've created a suite of songs that drift into and out of each other much as the hours blend together on a cross-country jaunt. Set primarily to languid but hypnotic tempos, and accented with drifting pedal steel lines and droning synth whorls, this is music to accompany the hum of car wheels over concrete, warm wind riffing through open windows, the patter of rainsqualls on windshields.

Over the heart-beat pulse of opener “Wichita,” for instance, Gregg's pedal steel advances and recedes like the headlights of opposite-lane traffic. “Late Night Call,” with its acoustic strums and disembodied whistling, recalls the desert noir instrumentals of early Calexico as much as it does Sergio Leone. Over the five-and-a-half-minutes of “Big Sky,” surges of fuzzy e-bow counterpoint the crystalline lines of pedal steel until a baritone guitar figure manifests like a butte on the horizon. “Gunfighter” adds a surreal quality with snippets of TV dialogue looped over the oscillating synth textures, a slightly sinister tableau onto which they add harmonica bursts reminiscent of *Laughing Stock*-era Talk Talk.

If that last comparison initially reads like a stretch, you're over-thinking it. The common denominator between this band's stated admiration for Eno and Boards of Canada and this LP's high-lonesome forebears is plain: creating an enveloping atmosphere where the imagination is free to take its own voyage. For connoisseurs of instrumental landscape sculpting, SUSS has created a concise masterwork of the form.

SCHOOLKIDS RECORDS



SUSS – Ghost Box

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<https://suss.bandcamp.com/releases>