



Ollabelle “**Ollabelle**” DMZ/Columbia Records

I recall noticing the name Ollabelle in a “No Depression” feature earlier this year, but it wasn’t till I saw them *in the flesh* performing at The Backyard in Austin, Texas in mid-June that I sat up and began to pay attention. Continuing the exploration of early American roots music that began with his work on the “**Oh Brother, Where Art Thou**” soundtrack, and more recently the music that provided the backdrop to the Civil War movie “**Cold Mountain**,” Texan T-Bone Burnett’s *in concert* roots music touring extravaganza, circa 2004, bore the title “**The Great High Mountain Tour**.” The evening began with a few numbers by Tim Eriksen and a group of local shape-note singers, and moved on through folk, blues, bluegrass and gospel music performed by aggregations of the ten billed acts - hell, they even threw in a little traditional clogging. Somehow it all worked and, the contributions by headliners Alison Krauss and Dr. Ralph Stanley apart, it was Ollabelle that left the lasting impression.

In mid August 2002, Maryland based country singer/songwriter Ola Belle Reed [b. 1916] passed away, just as the six musicians who were destined to become Ollabelle [*] got together, at the East Village Manhattan bar 9C for a series of Sunday night gospel song sessions. Some twenty months later their self-titled debut album, produced by Steve Rosenthal was released on T-Bone’s Sony distributed label DMZ. The fourteen songs on the album, in terms of their source, were inspired by those 9C sessions, boil down to seven traditional numbers, cover songs by *folks* like the Carter Family and Jagger/Richards [Rolling Stones], and a trio of band compositions.

Pioneer American music folklorist Alan Lomax is credited as the writer, along with Bessie Jones, of the percussion rich, up-beat *call and response* opener “Before This Time.” Though Jones was born in Smithville, Georgia, circa 1902, she went on to found the Georgia Sea Island Singers, and it was on St. Simons Island that Lomax discovered her during the 1940’s. Having gained your attention with the first cut, Amy Helm, Fiona McBain, Glenn Patscha, Jimi Zhivago, Byron Isaacs and Tony Leone continue their gospel/soul n’ more, quasi-religious journey through electric as well as acoustic instrument based renditions of traditional songs such as “Soul Of A Man” – with Amy’s dad Levon on drums, “Elijah Rock” – which delivers the first lyrical mention of “*the seventh seal*,” and “Jesus On The Mainline.” One of a pair of Patscha originals featured on this collection, “Get Back Temptation” another percussion heavy number contains the second lyrical reference - “*I have seen the seventh sign*.” The Mick Jagger and Keith Richard collaboration, “I Am Waiting” dates from the Rolling Stones album “**Aftermath**” [1966] and here Ollabelle give the song a laid back, shuffle beat reading.

“Two Steps” is credited to Helm/McBain/Isaacs/Leone/Zhivago and Liz Tormes. The Tormes connection? – Liz played rhythm guitar for a time in the NYC honky-tonk band, Alphabet City Opry, who performed regularly at 9C. Tormes adds her voice to the cut and Ollabelle give the tune a low key, almost folk, treatment – “*Two steps away from my Lord, I can almost hear my name*” and “*Oh Lord, take me I’m yours*.” Using the Alan Lomax arrangement of the traditional “No More My Lawd” Ollabelle turn the tune into a soulful anthem, and do much the same with “Can’t Nobody Do Me Like Jesus” penned by contemporary gospel musician Andrae Crouch. Contrary to its title, the Carter Family’s “The Storms Are On The Ocean,” featuring a lead vocal by Australian Fiona McBain, amounts to a calm and peaceful ballad on which she’s supported by Zhivago’s high-strung acoustic guitars and Isaac’s acoustic bass. Patscha’s lead vocal on Ollabelle’s bluesy reading of the traditional “John The Revelator” is [deliberately] distorted, and the lyric once more refers to the apostle John’s Book Of Revelation and there’s [the third] mention therein to the *apocalyptic seven seals*. Featuring a Glenn Patscha vocal, his original

composition “I Don’t Want To Be That Man” is a slow blues on which he’s supported by Sean Costello’s national steel and Zhivago’s slide guitar. The gentle album closer, the traditional “All Is Well,” dates from the mid-nineteenth century and finds Helm and McBain harmonising with Patscha, as, lyrically, the narrator welcomes the approach of death.

Although the subject matter of the songs is consistently dark [and consistently features references to religion and Biblical characters], the wealth of musical talent possessed by the six members of Ollabelle is in evidence throughout the fourteen cuts. It’s little wonder that in a matter of two and a half years the band has created a growing reputation as *must* see live act.

Note.

[*] – The group added an extra “l” to Reed’s Christian names “Ola Belle” to become “Ollabelle.”

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 11/04