



Carlene Carter “**Stronger**” Yep Roc Records

2003 was a difficult year for the Cash/Carter dynasty. A couple of years back Rosanne Cash, Carlene’s half-sister, faced her losses full on and found solace by celebrating life through song. The result “**Black Cadillac**” was a conceptual work of breathtaking beauty. Elements of “**Stronger**” chart Carlene’s reaction to those events. In addition to the passing of June, John and half-sister Rosey [Nix], at the outset of that year Carter lost long time partner in life and music, Howie Epstein – bassist in Tom Petty’s Heartbreakers for some two decades. Having left Epstein early in the new millennium, Carter entered rehab [via MusiCares] and although she stumbled for a short time at the close of her annus horribilis, the ensuing years have re-established clarity in her life. Her recovery process included, for a time, playing the part of June Carter in the Nashville production of the stage play “**Wildwood Flowers**.”

“**Stronger**” was recorded and produced at Cash Family Cabin Studio in Hendersonville, Tennessee by her half-brother John Carter Cash, and was sold initially via Carlene’s web site and at her public appearances. Production, engineering and mixing of the Yep Roc version of “**Stronger**” is credited to old friend, guitar whiz and sometime songwriting collaborator John McFee [Clover, The Doobie Brothers, Southern Pacific]. So here we either have new vocal tracks, or the originals with added instrumental support? “Bitter End,” the feisty up-tempo album opener, was penned by Carlene and Mark Winchester, upright bass player in the “**Wildwood Flowers**” band. In the past, Winchester has worked with Emmylou Harris and Brian Setzer. Subjectively it relates the life story of a southern girl and the men in her life, the major lyrical hinge being “*She followed her heart to the bitter end.*” It’s followed by the lightweight pop of “Why Be Blue,” the ‘call & reply’ folk styled “To Change Your Heart” and “Bring Love,” the latter chronicles Carlene’s Tennessee homecoming with new husband Joseph Breen. The tongue in cheek “I’m So Cool” which appeared on Carter’s 1980, Nick Lowe produced, outing “**Musical Shapes**” is given a reckless and rowdy reprise, while the dreamy and gently-paced ballad “Spider Lace” finds the narrator, with a deal of grace, recall how she found new love.

A blues harp launches “On To You,” while “Judgement Day” touches upon Carter’s decision to leave Epstein and seek help for her addictions. Four decades back, “Break My Little Heart In Two,” a hook-laden piece of country pop, could have been a chart contender, while “It Takes One to Know Me,” which follows, features a Breen bass vocal. At the age of nineteen [circa early 1975], Carlene wrote the song as a birthday present for Johnny Cash. Recorded by John a couple of years later, then lost for almost three decades, in recent times that rendition closed Disc 4 of the box set “**John Cash: The Legend**” [2005] and also appeared on the June n’ John collections “**Duets**” [2006] and the Australian release “**16 Biggest Hits**” [2007]. “Light Of Your Love” is a run of the mill reflection on l-o-v-e, while the closing “Stronger” finds Carlene recalls step-sister Rosey in the repeated refrain “*What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.*” It would have been neat if Carlene had expanded lyrically on the latter concept.

Folkwax Score 7 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 02/08.