



John Stewart & Buffy Ford “**Signals Through The Glass**” Folk Era Records

This ten song collection first saw the light of day in 1968 on Capitol Records, and Stewart went on to cut two solo recordings for the imprint – “**California Bloodlines**” and “**Willard**” – before moving on to RCA Victor. As for further duo recordings by Stewart with his wife, Buffy Ford, over a quarter of a century elapsed before they paired up again.

“**Signals Through The Glass**” was helmed by long-time Kingston Trio producer, Voyle Gilmore, and marked Stewart’s first musical utterance following six year’s service as a member of that legendary Trio. It’s one of those curious, prophetic quirks of history that this album includes “Lincoln’s Train” – the opening track - a song that focuses, principally, upon a child’s recollection [Jamie] as the train carrying the president’s body for burial in Springfield, Illinois, passes through the youngster’s hometown. In 1968 Stewart [and Ford] campaigned on behalf Robert Kennedy. Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles on 5th July that year. “Holly On My Mind” is a gentle, lyrically repetitious love ballad on which Buffy takes the lead, and she also opens *the social commentary* “Mucky Truckee River.” When Stewart joins the fray he comments that no one is reading newspapers anymore, and adds “*They’re nothing more than lectures on the war*” [a reference to Vietnam] and “*Those who hold the hope, they just sit and smoke their dope.*” Later, there’s reference to “*Fighting in the streets*” [Watts 1965, Detroit 1967 etc.]. And let’s not forget the almost *before it’s time*, opening and closing [environmental] comment, “*I guess we just waited too long with our euphemistic songs, For the green grass of home is all concrete and stone, And there’s nothing for the wind to gather where it’s blown.*”

According to Stewart “Nebraska Widow” – the portrait of a young woman, who has already lost her husband - was inspired Andrew Wyeth’s painting “Christina World.” Truth to tell, Wyeth’s work informs a number of songs on this recording. The trumpet interlude partway through “July, You’re A Woman” is high pitched and sounds out of context, and Stewart certainly provided the tune with a grittier, more urgent reading when it resurfaced the following year on “**California Bloodlines.**” In overview “July” is a song that paints a portrait of the ultimate, roadside, [fantasy] female hitchhiker.

Of all the numbers on this album, “Dark Prairie” is a stark, dour outing - “*This old earth tortures me with seasons, This old earth ain’t going anywhere.*” Later, referring to his/her mother, the narrator intones “*This old earth will see she don’t get old.*” Thankfully “Santa Barbara,” which follows, is a love song that finds one of the protagonists moving from California to Dakota, and is a considerable more light-hearted affair [unintended pun!]. With a line that runs to “*Cody starts to tell how he led the wagons to the sea,*” “Cody” could very well be a portrait of the latter years of one of America’s western heroes. Like a series of flash cards – supposedly, it’s a love song written for Buffy - “Signals To Ludi” finds the writer reference the burning of black widow spider nests, children shooting at woodpecker with an airgun, and even the shooting of six people in Texas and more. The closing cut, “Draft Age,” addresses an issue that was very much in the forefront of the minds of American teenagers and their parents during the late sixties.

Finally, I must congratulate Folk Era for including Bill Bush’s insightful liner notes. For one, I learned that following the departure of Signe Tole Anderson from Jefferson Airplane, the band unsuccessfully pursued Stephanie “Buffy” Ford before settling for Grace Slick. Just think, a world with that “White Rabbit”! What is however, a personal joy, one that links some [more] of my *historical musical dots*, is the Stewart insight, “*I was such an Aaron Copeland fan that I wanted these songs to be set in a Copeland-like symphony.*” The latter is a reference to the John Andrew Tartaglia orchestrations featured on this

collection. I first heard “**Signals Through The Glass**” in late seventies when Capitol reissued it. A few years later I fell helplessly and headlong in love with the inspirational “Appalachian Spring.” Some days your vision clears a little more, so with apologies to Bill Kahler I’ll merely add, “*Music is like breathing, I couldn’t live one day without it*”.....

This recording is considered by some to be a period piece, but it is also a precious, contemporary folk flavoured, “*Lest you not forget*” snapshot of America as she was in the late sixties.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

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