

Currents

the contemporary roots scene with
Arthur Wood



KIMMIE RHODES

There's been a six-year hiatus between albums from the sweet-voiced singer, during which time she's been busying herself with film work and stage musicals.

Kimmie Rhodes was last featured in the pages of CMP in 1989. In April that year, she performed on the final day of the Wembley Country Music Festival on a bill that was headlined by her mentor, Willie Nelson. As you'll discover, the Red Headed Stranger maintains that role to this day. During the ensuing decade, Kimmie only released one album of original material - this may give the impression that, creatively, she was taking things easy, but nothing could be further from the truth.

In his February 1990 review of Kimmie's second Heartland Records album, *Angels Get The Blues*, John Tobler expressed a wish that Rhodes' next album feature a greater proportion of her own compositions. Four years elapsed before *West Texas Heaven*

appeared. Apart from a cover of Jimmy Day's *Home John*, Tobler's wish had come true.

Keeping faith with her loyal band of European fans, the recording first appeared on the now defunct French imprint New Rose and featured 11 Rhodes compositions. Two years passed before the album saw a domestic release Stateside. Garnering universal acclaim, in my opinion it elevated her to the college of "all time great Texas songwriters".

Co-produced by Rhodes and her husband Joe Gracey and recorded variously at Willie Nelson's Pedernales Studio, Arlyn Studio in Austin, and Jack Clement's Nashville Recording Spa, the list of supporting pickers read like a Who's Who of talent: Willie, Waylon Jennings and the late Townes Van Zandt

shared the vocal duet chores with Kimmie, while Joe Ely, Beth Nielsen Chapman, Jack Clement and Jesse Taylor contributed to the sessions. Kimmie subsequently toured Europe with Willie Nelson, a trip that culminated in a concert at London's Royal Albert Hall.

The American version of *West Texas Heaven* appeared on another now defunct label, Justice Records, which was based in Houston. At the time, the USA Today record review claimed that "listening to *West Texas Heaven* is like a sweet unhurried ramble through bluebonnets", and nominated the album for their "Best Bets" section. In December, the same newspaper picked the CD as one of the Top Ten Country Records of 1996. *West Texas Heaven* is now due for another lease of life in the near future via the BMG reissue imprint, Buddha.

Throughout the decade just gone, Rhodes succeeded in placing her songs in a series of movies that brought progressively greater financial rewards and wider public exposure. The 1990 black comedy, *Daddy's Dyin', Who's Got The Will*, filmed in Irving and Denton, Texas, starred Beau Bridges, Tess Harper and Beverly D'Angelo; *What's A Love Supposed To Be*, which first appeared on Kimmie's 1988 Heartland album, *Man In The Moon*, was featured on the soundtrack. As for the movie plot it's worth noting that Evalita, played by D'Angelo, is a wannabe country singer who performs a song composed by the late Frank Zappa as well as Lucinda Williams' *Dark Side Of Life*.

The 1997 soundtrack to *Mrs. Winterbourne*, which starred Shirley MacLaine and Ricki Lake, featured Kimmie's *I'm Not An Angel. A Heart That's True*, performed by E.G. Daily (the voice of Babe), was included on the soundtrack of the sequel, *Babe: A Pig In The City*. Production of the track is credited to Bob Ezrin and Kimmie's son, Gabe. (Rhodes has been astute in not including the latter pair of songs on her most recent studio recording.)

Last year, *Ordinary Heart*, co-written with Emmylou Harris, appeared on the soundtrack of *Happy, Texas*. Emmylou's performance of the song was subsequently nominated for a Grammy.

Rhodes' foray into the world of internationally screened films has been balanced, mainly at home in Texas, with an interest in the writing and production of stage musicals. The birth of this interest can be traced back to 1994 when Kimmie sang backing vocals on the Butch Hancock tune, *Roll Around*. The song was featured in the *Songs From Chippy* stage show, and on the subsequent soundtrack recording, the project being the brainchild of Jo Harvey and Terry Allen.

In September 1998 three workshop productions of Kimmie's musical, *Small Town Girl*, were presented at Willie Nelson's Briarcliff property, west of Austin. Directed by and starring Joe Sears of *Greater Tuna* fame, the play was staged in the western town set of Luck, Texas which Nelson has used for *Red-Headed Stranger* and a number of other movies.

Jole Gracey, Kimmie's daughter, starred as Rose Jackson, the small town girl; Joe Ely played her father, a down-and-out tie salesman. In his role as a grandfatherly angel, Sears sends Rose to Earth and then comes to her rescue when the Jackson family endure some hard times. Rose and her father end up

travelling with a circus, a role that reflects Ely's real-life adventures of a quarter century ago. Sharon Ely played Joe's wife, and the cast included their daughter, Marie. Willie's daughter, Lana Nelson, was the set dresser, and his nephew, Freddy Fletcher, was a member of the support band. Even Sears' chihuahua took a role in the production. The latter makes this writer curious as to whether it inspired the Ely, Kimmie and Gabe Rhodes co-write, *If I Could Teach My Chihuahua To Sing*, which appeared on Joe's 1998 MCA album, *Twistin' In The Wind*.

During her appearance at Austin's Cactus Café a month later, Kimmie performed some of the music from *Small Town Girl*. February last year saw the premiere, once more at Luck, of *Hillbilly Heaven*, co-written with Sears. Further performances of that show took place last summer at a theatre in Cody, Wyoming.

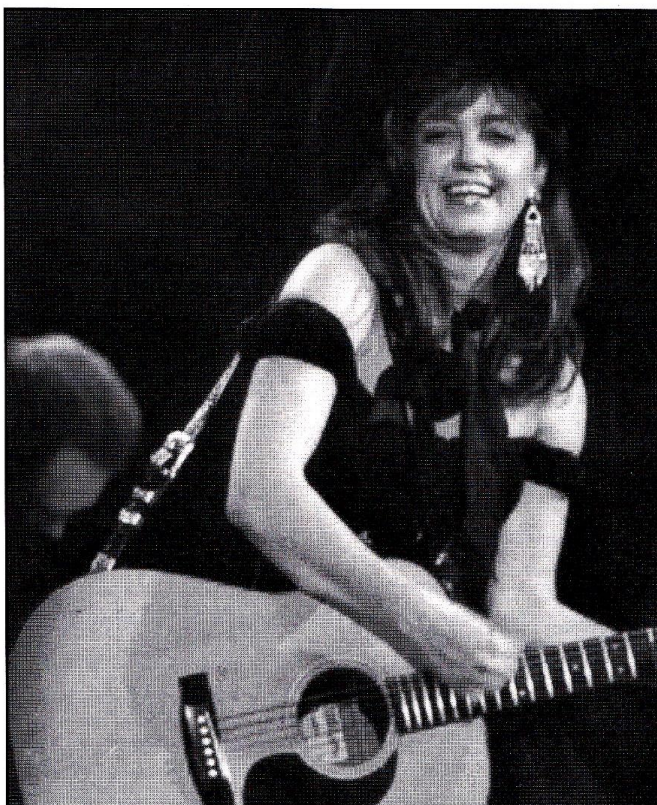
The maxim, with a little help from my friends, is a two-way street as far as Kimmie is concerned. That she had chosen, during her early recording career, to cut classic songs such as *Love Letters In The Sand* and *Just Someone I Used To Know* confirms her deep affection for the country genre. It

appears to matter little to Rhodes whether she is providing a vocal track for a tribute collection or working on the latest studio album by one of her multitude of musician friends.

The Wes McGhee compilation albums, *Neon & Dust* (1990) and *Heartache Avenue* (1996), and the 1996 studio set, *Border Guitars*, cut in Texas, prominently featured her vocals. Her voice can be heard on *Livin' For You*, a cut on Jesse Taylor's 1998 second solo album, *Texas Tattoo*. That year, *Edges From The Postcard 2*, a compilation released in conjunction with the St. Louis-based annual alt. country Twangfest celebration, included her performance of *Lines*, a song co-written with Waylon Jennings. Kimmie played the festival that year and Joe Gracey was credited with production of the 2CD set. *Lines* originally appeared on Waylon's 1996 album for Justice Records, *Right For The Time*.

Last year, two volumes of *Blaze Foley - In Tribute & Loving Memory* were released locally in Austin by Deep South Productions. Volume 1 featured Kimmie performing Blaze's *If I Could Only Fly*, previously a 1987 country chart success for Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard.

As for the medium of television,



ANTHONY

during the 1997 season of Austin City Limits Kimmie appeared on a songwriter special with Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson and Billy Joe Shaver. Two episodes of The Nashville Network's Legend Series followed, one hosted by Nelson, the other by Jennings.

According to Waylon, "When I hear Kimmie sing it makes me know what the phrase 'pulling on your heartstrings' means". In late March this year, Rhodes appeared on The Late Show at the behest of the host and self-confessed fan, David Letterman. This timely appearance on national television helped promote her latest release, *Rich From The Journey*. It was also something of a coup, considering that the album is an independent release (on Sunbird Records).

Kimmie's songs, covered by many country performers, have enjoyed album chart success. Wynonna included *I Just Drove By* on her 1993 platinum release, *Tell Me Why*. The same year, Trisha Yearwood's version of *Hard Promises To Keep* appeared on the *Song Remembers When* collection, while her latest album, *Real Live Woman*, features Kimmie's *One Love*. Co-written with Nashville-based hit writers, Gary Nicholson and Al Anderson, the track has already been certified gold.

Rhodes composed the title cut of Willie Nelson's 1995 recording, *Just One Love*. Originally on the Justice imprint, it also featured *I Just Drove By* and was recently reissued by Buddha. Both cuts were duets featuring Kimmie. Signed to a songwriting deal with Almo-Irving/Rondor Music, apart from the foregoing performers Kimmie scored cuts by Amy Grant, CeCe Winans and John Farnham during the Nineties.

Rhodes' tentative, mid Eighties beginnings as a recording artist with the Jackalope Brothers, aka Joe Gracey and Bobby Earl Smith, were followed by a couple of fine, late Eighties folk-country albums issued by the long gone UK imprint, Heartland Records. That trio of previously vinyl-only recordings were reprised in 1998 by a self released compilation CD, *Jackalopes, Moon And Angels*.

The creativity of the male musical mafia in Lubbock, Texas where Kimmie Rhodes was raised - Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, David Halley and Terry Allen, and let's not forget its genesis with Buddy Holly - has far outweighed contributions made by the female gender. Kimmie and Jo Carol Pierce count among the handful of worthy contenders that come to mind. While Rhodes' solo

recordings to date have been produced by or co-produced with Joe Gracey, her son Gabe produced her latest effort, *Rich From The Journey*. Based on evidence gleaned during Kimmie's appearance at last year's Kerrville Folk Festival, young Gabe Rhodes is a stunning acoustic guitar picker, without doubt the tip of another generation of phenomenal Texas musicians.

Rich From The Journey, a 12-track release on Sunbird, opens with the title track, one of a quartet of Rhodes-only composed originals, the others having been written with Gabe, Kevin Savigar (Rod Stewart's guitarist), Beth Nielsen Chapman, Bob Reagan, Walt Wilkins, John Keller and Kevin McCormick.


If the only keeper of the flame on this collection were the title song, a stunningly spiritual and positive paean to living a full life, the recording would remain a thoroughly worthwhile investment. As it stands, it is only the opening opus in a magical song odyssey, although admittedly the journey peaks on those tracks that are entirely Rhodes' vision. That is, unless your co-conspirator is an equally spiritual wordsmith named Chapman.

Much of the material on *Rich From The Journey* praises the gift of life, *Thank You For Another Day* and *Shine All Your Light* being prime examples. No self-respecting Texas artist would dare cut an album without including a train song, hence *Big Ol' Train*, or fail to acknowledge the rich musical culture that percolates from south of the border, as in *Espiritu Santo Bay*.

The six year-long sound of silence between new solo albums pales into insignificance when the end result is as truly special as this new collection. (For those fans who have mastered the internet there will soon be an opportunity to download the video of a 13th song, *Heart Of A Believer*.) Without a doubt, *Rich From The Journey* is a place to revisit on all the tomorrows that are to come and I didn't even mention that Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings contribute to *God's Acre*.

Kimmie Rhodes has been credited as saying, "The reason I think Townes (Van Zandt) was such a great songwriter is because he trusted people. When I listen to one of Townes' songs I feel like he befriended me and trusted me to get it. They communicate what it feels like to be a human being and that's all a song really has to do."

It seems to me that you could also claim the same accolade for Kimmie's canon. CMP



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