



Mary McCaslin **"Better Late Than Never"** Mary McCaslin Music

A Folkwax feature that surveyed Mary McCaslin's recording career appeared in the Spring of 2004. Toward the close I referred to this California based musician's two most recent studio recordings - *"Thirteen years on from "A Life And A Time" [1981] I never gave up hope that Mary would record another solo album. Now, almost a decade after "Broken Promises" [1994] that dream still burns strong and true."* According to Mary's liner notes the initial **"Better Late Than Never"** sessions took place during 2004, and while she confirms that the album title acknowledges the span of years it took to complete the project, for me **"Better Late Than Never"** could equally apply to the dozen years that elapsed since the appearance of **"Broken Promises."** The new collection features a handful of McCaslin originals, some co-written with others, plus her arrangement of the traditional "California Joe" [+], added to which there's half a dozen cover songs. When compared with the content of Mary's previous releases, that mix pretty much amounts to 'situation normal.' In terms of subject matter Mary has always dreamed of long gone simpler times, and that theme also pervades segments of this recording. Those familiar old feelings can be so comforting.....

In her liner notes Mary recalls a recent visit to North Ferrisburg in Vermont, one that subsequently informed her "Acres Of Houses" lyric. Therein, McCaslin compares the current 'little boxes' landscape she witnessed with the wide-open rural countryside that existed back in 1973 when she recorded her sophomore solo album **"Way Out West"** for the original incarnation of Philo Records. The late Walter Hyatt was born circa 1949 and raised in Spartanburg, South Carolina, a town that has, long, been a magnet for folk/country musicians according to Peter Cooper's **"Hub City Music Makers – One Southern Town's Popular Music Legact"** [1997, ISBN 0-9638731-9-9]. While travelling home after a gig, it would appear that the well-known duo, Robin and Linda Williams, passed Hyatt's birthplace on the late May 1996 night that the ValuJet DC-9 on which Walter was travelling crashed in the Florida Everglades. Sadly Hyatt perished, but countless musical acquaintances have kept his music and memory alive, and Mary's song is based on the story that Williams' related to her.

Career long, Mary has displayed a penchant for covering pop and soul songs, particularly those penned during the nineteen-sixties. In the process Mary imbued them with her unique acoustic folk/country style. In that regard, towards the close of this collection you'll find Neil Young's "Losing End" from his sophomore outing **"Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere"** [1969] - the Canadian resurrected the song for his recent **"Greendale"** tour. Jackson Browne has never officially released his early career composition "You've Forgotten," which is credited here to the publisher Open Window Music. This song, on the subject of lost love, is set to a loping rhythm, and appeared on the renowned 1967, 2lp demo that Browne recorded for Nina Music. It's followed here by the late Hoyt Axton's anti-war number "To Some Cool Blue-Iced Shore," which Mary previously covered on **"Goodnight Everybody"** [1969] and **"Rain – The Lost Album"** [1999]. The latter album was recorded during 1967/68 when the Vietnam War was still raging. Time passes - almost four decades – yet little changes, as Mary once again comments on America's latest military adventures.

While the latter trio of covers appears towards the close of **"Better Late Than Never,"** earlier on, there's a pair of pre-WWII compositions. The lyric to "Unchained Melody" was penned Hy Zaret [aka William Stirrat] in 1936, at which time film composer Alex North added music. Dormant for almost two decades it finally appeared in the public domain on the soundtrack to the [long forgotten] prison movie **"Unchained"** [1955]. Four versions featured in the U.K. Pop singles chart in the summer of that year, and to date it has been recorded some five hundred times, but it's the 1965 Phil Spector produced version, performed by the Righteous Brothers, that is best remembered. Here Mary's stripped down

acoustic rendition perfectly captures the misfortune of lovers separated by time and the walls of prison. "Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen" [the title translates as "To Me You Are Beautiful"] was composed by Sholom Secunda and lyricist Jacob Jacobs for a short-lived 1932 Yiddish musical. Five years later Sammy Cahn heard the song performed by a duo at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem and persuaded Warner Brothers to buy the song. This they did, Cahn penned English lyrics and The Andrews Sisters' took it to # 1 in the States [for five weeks]. On the latter cut, Mary underpins her vocal with a driving banjo rhythm.

By trade, Mike Beck, the composer of the contemporary "Oildale," is a working cowboy, and his participation in "an olde worlde" profession undoubtedly led him to hanker for simpler times as evidenced by *"He laboured in the fields by day, And he honky tonked at night."* Oildale is obviously a blue-collar town evidenced by Beck's amusing [and biting ecological] contention *"There ain't no yuppies in Oildale, it's damned near yuppie free, And you won't find no soccer moms riding around in SUV's."* Furthermore, it's located close to Bakersfield, hence the reference to California's 1950's country music answer to Nashville in the first quote. It appears that the late Jim Ringer, Mary's first husband, composed the Civil War themed "Sabres And Guns" but never got around to recording it. The writing credit here states Ringer/McCaslin, as Mary decided that the song required an additional, closing verse. The phrase 'there but for the grace of God go I,' underpins the mindset of the principle character in "Standing In The Doorway," as an old lady down on her luck recalls better days now long gone. I'd suggest the line *"hums a tune from some old song she learned when it was new"* was intentional, since word-for-word it mirrors the phraseology present in Michael Smith's classic "The Dutchman." On the latter number Mary's lyric is supported by a melody penned by Rounder Records alumni Steve Netsky. Towards the close of the album "Missing" finds McCaslin focus on an ever-present day social ill, as, a young girl is kidnapped by a man – only to be 'found' seven months later, where he had dumped her [that day], half a mile from her home. Between those two events McCaslin perfectly captures the initial, yet fruitless, search by friends, neighbours and the authority's, and the month's of utter anguish – *"faith becomes insanity, hope becomes despair, night becomes eternity, a curse becomes a prayer"* - endured by the young girl's parents.

As I stated at the outset, the contents of **"Better Late Than Never"** amount to 'situation normal.' Just let me say how great it is to see the release of a new Mary McCaslin album. Always a true listening pleasure.

Folkwax Score 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 01/07.