



Grey DeLisle **"Iron Flowers"** Sugar Hill Records

Musically speaking this recording succeeds in encompassing a multitude of stylistic bases, in fact track-by-track you're never sure what form *this chameleon* is going to take next, employs sounds both high and low fi, yet, all in all, not a single fragment is out of place. Complimenting that backdrop DeLisle's vocal delivery ranges from ghostly whisper to one that is rich and full-throated, and she consistently succeeds in capturing the emotional thrust of the lyric, be it desperation, anger, joy....whatever. Music business scribes, given to such frivolities, will have to invent a new genre for this diverse musical tapestry. Personally speaking, this is quite simply one of the finest selections of music to surface in 2005. Album producer Marvin Etzioni allows amplifier hum to leak into a couple of cuts, utilizes radio static on another, and has added the sound of unconventional instruments to the mix [sleigh bells, marxophone, industrial pedal steel, thunder piano]. Snippets of old recordings float in and out of a couple of tracks. All play their part in the staggering musical beauty that is **"Iron Flowers."**

Marvin's own multi-instrument contribution to DeLisle's sound is pivotal, as is his input as co-composer of four of the ten tracks. The cast of main support players includes Etzioni's former Lone Justice band mate and stickman Don Heffington, drummer Dave Mattacks [Fairport Convention], on stand-up bass Sheldon Gomberg the L.A. bass player who never sleeps, and Grey's husband and electric bassist Murry Hammond [Old 97's]. In addition album producer/sideman extraordinaire and pedal steel virtuoso Greg Leisz appears on a couple cuts, and one of the latter also features The Amazements – a trio of L.A. teenagers that includes Marvin's bass playing son, Elon.

DeLisle is a self-confessed Queen fan, and opens her second album for Sugar Hill Records with probably that band's best known song, "Bomehian Rhapsody." Here in the UK it consistently tops readers polls for all time most popular song, plus this Queen single holds the record for longest run at # 1 in the UK Pop Chart – 9 weeks, a mere thirty years ago. What folks haven't realised over the decades is that the late Freddie Mercury's ultimate stage strutting pomp rock creation was really a [closet] ballad. While Leisz's pedal steel adds that sweet melodic country edge, the twin back line of Heffington/Mattocks and Hammond/Gomberg hold down the backbeat, and Marvin pitches in on mandolin and guitar. As for Grey, sometimes spoken, mostly sung, she glides gracefully through this murder ballad – *"Mama, just killed a man, Put a gun against his head, Pulled my trigger, now he's dead."* Present throughout the cut [but not always audible], as Grey's voice fades after holding a long note on the closing words *"to me,"* amplifier hum provides a perfect counterpoint. The second cut "Joanna" is one of two songs on **"Iron Flowers"** that Grey wrote entirely on her own, and it's founded on a melody that displays shades of a Marty Robbins gunfighter ballad, while castanets and what sound like trumpets [they're not credited in the liner] imbue it with a hint of Tex-Mex. "Joanna" is a portrait of Grey's mother, the focus being on that woman's missing years – *"A wild rose that went searching for some water, And the kind of light the shadows never see."* In case you were wondering Grey was raised by her maternal grandmother Eva.

There are three DeLisle/Etzioni co-writes on **"Iron Flowers,"** and in order of appearance "Right Now" is the first. Melodically the song kicks off at a gentle jog, and Grey, in the role of a dope dealer who has passed out on the floor of a concert venue – *an overdose?*, captures by intonation the desperate nature of the situation. *"The ceiling's turning, And my lips are set to burn right to the bottom of the glass I'm staring through."* As Marvin's fuzzed lead guitar fades you figure that the track has ended, but within a couple of seconds the drums kick in again and the sound of the guitar rises to a crescendo as Grey, on each occasion more desperate than the last, cries *"Right now."* The rockabilly sounding "Who Made You

King?" was co-penned by Marvin and Nashville based hit songwriter, Sam Lorber, while Grey discovered the Rev. Charlie Jackson's "God's Got It" [#] when Murry brought home a copy of the 1970 recordings by this, at the time, Baton Rouge based Baptist preacher and guitarist. On Grey's version of "God's Got It," supported by a solid drum beat Etzioni delivers choppy and scratchy sounding 50's rock'n'roll guitar licks, while there's real urgency in Grey's voice as she repeats and repeats "*If you need it God's got it*" and "*He got every, everything a poor man needs.*" Having been raised during the 80's in a Christian household, on her web site DeLisle comments "*I always gravitated more toward Mahalia Jackson than Amy Grant.*" Without going all the way back to *the garden*, I wonder if Charlie and Mahalia were related by blood? Whatever, the track certainly possesses a primal sound.

I saw Messrs. DeLisle, Hammond and Etzioni perform on the second night of the 2004 Kerrville Wine & Music Festival last Fall, and they opened their set with the Grey'n'Marvin co-write "The Bloody Bucket." Musically speaking it was one of those magical moments that will remain imprinted on my memory forever. At the outset Etzioni, sat on a low stool, played an odd looking instrument that sounded like a hammered dulcimer – it was a marxophone [*]. A couple of verse in, he switched to amplified mandolin and by the end of the number had delivered a long blistering solo. As for the song's story line "The Bloody Bucket" is the name of a bar, the sole occupants being "*Just a barmaid, me and you.*" The narrator, a woman, has "*a dog eared plan*" to pick up a man and deliberately have her heart broken once again, with one more one-night stand. The opening three verses are delivered at ballad pace, but once *the seduction* is underway there's a significant change of pace as the couple and the melody accelerate into "two step" ecstasy.

Co-written with Murry, "Iron Flowers" appears, on the surface, to be a road song. The lyric employs a flash card style of delivery, for instance, the opening verse runs to "*Iron flowers, And water mills, And lonesome stretches of black.*" Based on the foregoing "*iron flowers*" would appear to be windmills, but if you look at the words *iron* and *flowers* individually, the former is man made, rigid, dense and heavy, while the latter, is light in weight, a thing of organic beauty, that can easily be picked and crushed by the human hand, but can also reproduce itself. Iron is also used to describe the will of a strong human being.....hell, we could go on and on with these practical and poetic definitions. Combined, the words could describe a group of strong woman, and it hasn't gone unnoticed that the lead characters in many of DeLisle's songs could be female. "Iron Flowers" could however, also, be interpreted as a song about a departure, since, in closing the middle of five verses, the narrator offers "*The clay turns to asphalt as the dark sky turns to blue, This highway runs away from you.*"

Having described "God's Got It" as primal sounding, the same could be said of "Blue Heart" although the musical backdrop sounds radically different. A musical collaboration between DeLisle and the garage rock band, The Amazements, the sound of Elon Etzioni's fuzz bass is the most prominent sonic feature of this love song. In the opening verse a blue-hearted man pledges his love to a girl dressed in yellow gingham, and in the "*Black, black night*" that ensues, with "*Hellfire burning red*" but no ring on her finger, he beds her. In the closing verse the same woman, now sounding demented, "*Green, green with envy*" and "*Ready for a fight*" observes his marriage to "*that woman dressed in white.*"

In the third line of the opening verse of "Sweet Little Bird" the narrator comments "*My hands are chained together in the penitentiary,*" but by the closing verse the situation is terminal "*They're leading me to slaughter, There is no sympathy.*" In spite of the imminence of death, this, the final DeLisle/Etzioni collaboration on "**Iron Flowers**" is inspirational in content, particularly the inmate's second verse invocation to the bluebird to "*Sail the skies for me, Your wings will surely show you places I shall never see.*" On first hearing "Inside Texas" my thought ran to "*The gal has written a love song for her guy, but also made it a tribute to the state where he was born and raised.*" It appears that the song was written as a Christmas present, before the Grey and Murry officially became "*a couple*" – they're now married - and if you listen carefully at no point does DeLisle use the four letter word "*love*," but neither is her meaning in doubt throughout this subjectively tender creation.

At a point where we're nearly halfway through 2005, "**Iron Flowers**" has got to be a strong contender for Album of the Year. Grey was involved in writing seven songs on the album, but in all those instances the lyrics are hers, and in the case of the five cuts that are co-writes she collaborated on the music with others.

Note.

[*] – You can see and hear one at this link <http://www2.netdoor.com/~rlang/marxo/marxop.htm>
[#] – The Rev. Charlie Jackson's recording is available via AUM Fidelity at <http://www.aumfidelity.com/home.htm>

Folkwax Rating 10 out of 10

Arthur Wood Kerrville Kronikles 05/05