



Judy Collins “**Portrait Of An American Girl**” Wildflower Records

Collins has been prolific in terms of the number of albums released, and compilations apart, there have been nearly three-dozen of them in a career spanning close to four and a half decades. Her output as the writer of original songs has been more sporadic, but when her muse visits, the result has never been less than fruitful. Her latest release “**Portrait Of An American Girl**” goes some way to redressing the foregoing imbalance, with Judy penning five cuts and arranging the melody to the closing, thirteenth track.

“Singing Lessons,” the opening number, and the later “Wedding Song [Song For Louis]” were previously available on the four song CD that accompanied Collins’ autobiographical “**Singing Lessons**” [Atria, 1998, ISBN: 0671003976]. The “**Portrait Of An American Girl**” versions are new, shorter renditions. In the aforementioned book, Chapter 14 is titled Singing Lessons, and mostly given over to recollections of Collins’ music teacher for over three decades, Max Margulis [1907 - 1996]. As for “Singing Lessons,” the song, it is one of a number of spiritually suffused Collins originals in this collection. While not referenced by name in the lyric, the bittersweet pairing “Singing Lessons” and “Checkmate” were undoubtedly written in memory of her only child, Clark Taylor [1959-1992]. Collins’ 1996 composition “Wedding Song [Song For Louis]” explores commitment and faith, and was written just prior to marrying the designer Louis Nelson her partner for nearly two decades.

On the “**Portrait Of An American Girl**” liner, Judy Collins name is picked out in the same font that graced her still classic 1968 collection “**Who Knows Where The Time Goes.**” Through the latter half of the sixties Judy championed the work of contemporary folk songwriters such as Dylan, Paxton and Neil, as well as those now famous Canadians, Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell. Taken from Mitchell’s May 1969 sophomore release “**Clouds,**” here, Collins covers the travelling carnival themed “That Song About The Midway.” “I Can’t Cry Hard Enough” first appeared on “**The Mandolin Man**” the 1992 solo debut set by former Lone Justice alumni Marvin Etzioni. Co-written by David Williams and Etzioni, in Collins’ hands the song has become the large, bright shining diamond on this collection. The melody allows Judy’s still crystal clear, multi-tracked contralto to explore its extensive range – her voice, layered, rises, swoops and crosses over thereby further adding intensity to the melancholic Williams/Etzioni lyric – furthermore their words fit *like a glove* the spirit that Collins wove into the words of “Singing Lessons” and “Checkmate.” It’s a relief that Collins didn’t emulate Marvin’s 5mins plus rendition, and with her version running out at 3mins 20secs thank heavens for double strength Kleenex King Size. “Sally Go ‘Round The Roses” amounts to one of the lighter more upbeat moments on this sombre collection, and was a # 2 American Pop single for The Jaynetts back in 1963. No one is certain whether the enigmatic lyric possesses some deep meaning, or is simply based on the children’s nursery rhyme. Collins remaining originals are “Voyager” replete with a rippling piano led melody and the up-tempo “You Can’t Buy Love.” As for other further cover songs there’s Canadian Bruce Cockburn’s “Pacing The Cage,” and “Drops Of Jupiter [Tell Me]” penned by the five-man San Francisco based band Train, and the title track of their 2001 sophomore recording.

Set initially to a martial beat “Liberte” penned by Steve Dorff and John Bettis, the latter collaborated with Richard Carpenter on many of The Carpenters chart hits through the 1970’s and into the following decade, is taken from a projected Broadway musical about the life of singer Josephine Baker [1906 - 1975]. While best remembered as a versatile entertainer/singer, during World War II Baker was an agent for the French Resistance, and later in life became a civil rights activist. Considering Baker’s advocacy in

wartime and peacetime, it's totally appropriate that in this era of corporate backed politics "Liberte" is followed by Judy's narration of Aaron Copland's "Lincoln Portrait." The latter narrative includes the inspirational "*this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, and for the people, not perish from the earth.*" The foregoing may have been true 140 years ago. Robert Lowry published the original tune to "How Can I Keep From Singing" in his songbook "Bright Jewels for the Sunday School" [New York, 1869] and the lyric that Collins performs here is one that Pete Seeger altered, while Judy has penned her own arrangement of Lowry's tune. There's a profoundly spiritual edge to the material on "**Portrait Of An American Girl,**" particularly Collins' song lyrics. That being a given, what better way was there than to close this album with an uplifting, positively worded hymn?

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

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