



Grey De Lisle **“The Graceful Ghost”** Sugar Hill Records

On her previous pair of studio outings, De Lisle's original songs stylistically flirted with folk and country music, hell, the lady even rocked out on a couple of occasions. **“The Graceful Ghost”** is quite simply an exquisite and mostly acoustic refinement of the former pairing. The concept, from the outset, was that **“The Graceful Ghost”** should sound like friends gathered on the front porch to make some old-time music, and in that regard this collection works extremely well. Even the packaging artwork reflects [or possibly mimics] a style prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century. Cut in the living room of De Lisle's Glendale, California home, she is supported throughout by album producer and mandolin maestro Marvin Etzioni, the acoustic guitar of Grey husband Murry Hammond, and on a trio of cuts Grey supports her vocal by playing autoharp. Sheldon Gomberg [stand-up bass] appears on nine of the twelve tracks, and Greg Leisz plays *“the final chord”* on the only cover song in this collection, *“This White Circle On My Finger.”* The song unfolds to reveal the story of a [newly] divorced woman who is still very much in love – *“This white circle on my finger shows I'm free, I'm not sure if that's the way I want to be.”* The song gave Kitty Wells a # 7 Country Single in early 1964.

Inside the rear page of **“The Graceful Ghost”** liner booklet you'll find the simple dedication, *“In loving memory of Johnny and June.”* Historically speaking, it's no stretch to link the Cash's to the Carter Family, and to recall that Sara pioneered the use of autoharp in folk music. That said, on **“The Graceful Ghost”** Grey sounds, to me anyway, like a contemporary version of Kentucky's finest, Jean Ritchie.

There are words of caution offered in the opening cut, regarding Esmeralda – *“Alabaster shoulders, And curls of river gold”* aka *“The Jewel Of Abilene,”* since, according to De Lisle the maiden is a serial heartbreaker, *“there never was a lady so lovely and so mean.”* Partway through the track Hammond interjects with some high lonesome yodelling. De Lisle was raised in the Pentecostal Church, and the gentle waltz/ballad *“Sweet Saviour's Arms”* was inspired by a recollection of the spiritual solace she sometimes felt in that place [of worship]. Back in 1991 Tricia Yearwood enjoyed her first Country Chart hit – a # 1, no less - with Jon Ims' *“She's In Love With The Boy.”* In the song, Katie loves Tommy, while her daddy has no time for him – *“he ain't worth a lick”* – and it takes his wife to remind him that, once upon a time, he was *“just a hay-seed plough boy, Who didn't have a row to hoe.”* Ims has a penchant for lacing his lyrics with wry, sometimes smart, humour. Grey's *“Sharecroppin' Man”* employs a similar, though straightforward storyline, wherein the young man comes to work on the farm owned by the girl's father, and it is her mother who initially disapproves - *“What yer young heart sees in him I'll never understand, 'Cause it's a sorry life to live, lovin' a sharecroppin' man.”* In time the young lovers elope, get married - and no doubt become parents themselves, only to observe history repeat itself. As for the rhythm that underpins the melody, there are definite indications of a solid Johnny Cash bass line.

In the opening verse of *“Walking In A Line”* you learn that a mother has succumbed to the fever, in the next that her [weeping] children need feeding, in the third that her husband is bereft at the loss, while the closing verse finds the family *walking in a line* toward the graveyard. Women that mourn men who die in battle has been used before, as a folk song theme. De Lisle's *“The Maple Tree,”* however, employs a neat and subtle twist, since the lover's death on the battlefield is reported in error. By the time he returns from the war, she has married his brother – *“Hangin' out the washin' of a boy I hardly knew, Heavy with a promise only dyin' can undo”* – following which the battle weary soldier hangs himself from a lone maple tree. Although the song opens with *“Poorbottom, Virginia in the spring of forty-three”* the lyric bears an old-time feel that hardly meshes with a World War II setting of 1943. Murry and Grey duet on the lover's ballad *“Tell Me True,”* and the cut includes a spoken narration by Grey. In the liner booklet, beside the

opening line of "Turtle Dove," are the words "*For A.P.*" – and I don't think I need to explain that one. Two verses long "Black Haired Boy" is an answer and response song that finds Grey deliver the opening verse and Murry reply in the second, albeit as the heaven-bound spirit of the black haired boy who "*toiled in the valley and drowned beneath the sea.*" There are a number of bona fide traditional sounding songs on this album, and "Katy Allen" is possibly the finest. Subjectively, it's the sad tale of a woman who perishes at sea, leaving her true love to mourn her passing.

The soundtrack to "Sawyer" features the sounds of a distant train [recorded by Murry in the East Texas town of Jefferson], while there's a blues style, work gang feel to the melody. In olden times a sawyer was employed to cut timber. The closing cut "Pretty Little Dreamer" is a lullaby, and according to the liner credit, Etzioni plays an 1800's out of tune piano, while the track features discernible, and continuous background hum having been cut on a fifty plus year old Silvertone Recorder. On her previous releases Grey has [always] included a Spanish song – she has Irish/Mexican blood in her veins – and "Pretty Little Dreamer" closes with the lines "*Que nada venga y te despierte, De tu dulce sueno*" which translates as "*May nothing come and wake you from, You pretty little dream.*"

"The Graceful Ghost" also contains an eight minute long video segment titled **"Making Of The Graceful Ghost"** and Grey, Murry and Marvin can be seen working on a handful of tracks including "The Jewel Of Abilene" [filmed in colour,] "Sharecroppin' Man" [filmed in sepia] and "Black Haired Boy." Religion, love and death are the main aspects of life that permeate the construction of **"The Graceful Ghost,"** in the process providing the listener with a dozen colourful shades of Grey.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

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