

**Kelly Willis &
Bruce Robison
CHEATER'S GAME**

Premium Records

★★★★☆

The fan-funded
CHEATER'S GAME
glistens with the expected and unexpected

Married for 17 years and parents to a quartet of teenage kids—ignoring their early noughties Christmas collections—this Austin, Texas-based couple finally debut with CHEATER'S GAME, eloquently wedding seven new Robison compositions to six covers. In terms of vocal approach they cleverly sidestep the pursuit of conventional male/female country duets—a la George and Tammy etc.—employing, for the most part, one voice as lead with support to a greater/lesser extent from the other. As for their choice of covers that's where a smidgen of the unconventional enters the arena, yet nothing feels out of place. Produced and mixed in Nashville by Brad Jones (Hayes Carll, Chuck Prophet), Kelly (vocals) and Bruce (vocals, acoustic guitar) are supported mostly by the rock solid



back-line of Fred Eltringham (drums) and Lex Price (bass) plus Jones' acoustic guitar, while Pete Finney (steel, banjo) and Eamon McLaughlin (fiddle, mando, cello), the latter from The Greencards, shine throughout.

Penned by Bruce with Liz Foster and Kevin Welch's daughter Savannah (both of The Trishas), Kelly takes the vocal lead on the title song and album opener. A tale of love involving a 'little heartache, little pain,' for its narrator, a musical antidote is offered in the ensuing and unconventional inclusion, Dave Alvin's up-tempo Border Radio. Lyrically it doubles as a fond recollection of the music beamed from Northern Mexico's 'X' stations that Dave heard as a youngster in Downey, California, and as a love song wherein the female narrator requests their song in the hope her ex-lover is listening.

Relative newcomer Hayes Carll's Long Way Home, on which Kelly takes the lead, is wedged between the decades old Don Williams' We're All The Way and the Razzy Bailey-penned tongue twister 9,999,999 Tears (a 1976 number three country hit for Dickey Lee). 'The girls all look the same

when they're leavin'" is the repeating hook on which Bruce constructed the potential hit Leavin', and it's followed by the energetic hoedown But I Do, co-written with Australian Jedd Hughes. A part tribute to Texas' historic dance halls, Bruce performs Robert Earl Keen's waltz paced No Kinda Dancer.

At a tad over four minutes Robison's Lifeline, the album's longest selection, features the reflections of an optimist narrator. A melodic and, at times, vocally intimate ballad, Kelly leads on her husband's Ordinary Fool. The trucker anthem to end all trucker anthems, the lyrically sly, rhythmically rollicking barnstormer Born To Roll, written by Lawrence Shoberg aka album cover artist and musician Lore 'Coyote' Orion, features Bruce's lead. The closing tunes are performed as conventional duets, with Bruce's ballad Waterfall relating a tale of love lost, while country-pop album closer Dreamin', penned with Miles Zuniga of Austin combo Fastball, stylistically draws inspiration from the Everly Brothers. Arthur Wood

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