



Chris Vallillo **"Abraham Lincoln In Song"** Gin Ridge Recordings

Abraham Lincoln came to office as the sixteenth president of the United States, and was the first [president] to be born outside the original Thirteen Colonies. He was also the first president to be assassinated, his death on 15th April 1865 coming less than a week after he announced the cessation of hostilities in the four-year long American Civil War. Abraham Lincoln was born on 12th February 1809, at Sinking Spring Farm in Hardin County, Kentucky and his parents subsequently moved to Indiana and then Illinois. It was the latter state that Lincoln represented in Congress, and in February this year Illinois began a twenty-four month celebration of the bi-centennial of his birth.

Lincoln's 'stove pipe' top hat and spectacles grace the front cover of this commemorative music release, and can be seen on display at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, a facility that opened its doors in April 2005. Vallillo's thirteen song recording **"Abraham Lincoln In Song"** has been endorsed by the Illinois Lincoln Bi-centennial Commission and by the fifteen-member National Abraham Lincoln Bi-centennial Commission which was established in D.C. during 2000 to oversee the celebration.

Two of the thirteen songs that appear on this disc were composed during the twentieth-century, the remainder date from the 1850's/1860's sufficient that Lincoln would have been familiar with a number of them. Performed on slide guitar "Battle Cry Of Freedom" opens the collection, and this 'recruiting song' was penned during 1862 by George F. Root. During the late 1820's Lincoln worked on cargo bearing flatboats and the traditional "Shawneetown" recalls the hardy souls who earned their living plying the waters of the Ohio River. With Swedish blood coursing through his veins, Illinois born Carl Sandberg [1878-1967] was a film critic, poet, historian, novelist, balladeer and folklorist. In the latter role, one of his major achievements was to collect and publish almost three hundred 'traditional' songs as **"The American Songbag"** [1927]. One of the latter featured here "El-A-Noy" mentions the Shawnee ferry and is a song that was much beloved by Win Stracke co-founder of Chicago's influential Old Town School of Folk Music. In 1926 Sandberg's biography **"Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years"** was published, and for the subsequent tome **"Abraham Lincoln: The War Years"** [1939] he won the Pulitzer Prize.

Vallillo's finger picked guitar playing on "Lorena" - a memory of love lost - 'flows like warm honey' and is a true aural delight. Penned, circa 1990, by folk/blues guitarist Norman Blake "Lincoln's Funeral Train" recalls the final 'almost a fortnight long' rail journey, some 1650 miles in length, taken by the late president's cortege from Washington D.C. to Springfield, Illinois. Where Sandberg was an admired 20th century folklorist, Stephen Foster [1826 - 1864] was probably America's greatest musical icons from the previous century. Originally a James S. Gibbons poem that appeared in the New York Evening Post during 1862, "We Are Coming Father Abra'am" - another stirring 'call to arms' - is supported here by a Foster melody. It's followed by one of Stephen's best known creations "Hard Times Come Again No More," and features more mellifluous guitar playing from Chris.

Though penned in NYC "Dixie's Land" references the South, and, ironically, was soon adopted by the Confederacy as an anthem. It's probably the most familiar tune that Vallillo performs here, and was certainly a song that Lincoln had heard. "Aura Lee" can be summed up as a rather sentimental profession of love. The traditional "Hoosen Johnny" - another tune Sandberg included in **"The American Songbag"** - features Chris accompanying his a cappella vocal with interludes played on a Jew's harp, while the up-tempo melody that graces "Darling Nelly Gray," written around 1856, belies the sad tale of a husband [+] whose wife was taken in chains from Kentucky to Georgia to *"work her life away in the cotton and the cane."* Presidential campaign songs, unofficial and official, have been around

forever and the self-explanatory "Lincoln And Liberty" dates from 1860. The lyric to the closing track "Let The Band Play Dixie" reflects upon how, even in the first flush of victory in the Civil War, Lincoln immediately held out a hand of reconciliation to the defeated South. The song penned during the 1980's by Bob Gibson and Dave North, appeared on the formers Hogeeye Records release "**Uptown Saturday Night**" – which recently made its debut on CD.

Given that the main purpose of this collection is to evoke the music of the era in which Lincoln served in Congress and as the nation's President, I have to say that, based on obvious and copious research, Vallillo has woven an eminently listenable musical tapestry.

Note.

[+] – Having travelled north on the Underground Railroad, the narrator, a slave, hoped to raise money there and buy his wife's freedom.

Folkwax score 8 out of 10.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 07/08.