



Tift Merritt "**Bramble Rose**" Lost Highway Records

This disc was recorded in Los Angeles and produced by the currently, *white hot*, Ethan Johns [Ryan Adams, Rufus Wainwright, Emmylou Harris] and the eleven songs featured were composed by Merritt. Supporting her on the sessions are Johns, Benmont Tench [Tom Petty's keyboard guru] and the second incarnation of Merritt's band, The Carbones – Zeke Hutchins [drums, also Tift's boyfriend], Greg Readling [pedal steel, dobro] and Jay Brown [bass]. Prior to "**Bramble Rose**," Tift's only other flirtations with the recording industry appeared last century. The Carbones' 7" single "Juke Joint Girl" / "Cowboy" was followed later in 1999 by her collaboration - a set of seven country covers and originals - with John Howie Jr's band Two Dollar Pistols. None of the foregoing material resurfaces on this *retro* sounding collection. I use the word *retro*, since this disc could quite easily have been made during the 70's or 80's. In the press blurb, Merritt admits to "*trying to make an album in the early career style*" of Bonnie Raitt, Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris [second mention]. If that was truly Tift's intended aim, then I'd say she succeeded and more. At times her voice is reminiscent of Emmylou Harris [third mention], particularly so when delivering the final line of verse one, and elsewhere on the cut, "Bird Of Freedom." In fact there are vocal shades of Ronstadt [second mention], Lynn Miles and other similar *genre* vocalists throughout this set.

There's a Rolling Stones swagger to Merritt's delivery of the rhythmically upbeat "Neighbourhood," while the "*my man's cheatin' on me*" theme closes out with the punch line "*and if that's your chosen path, there's the door [and it's wide open].*" A mandolin and chamberlain [??] – the picker almost makes it sound like a hammered dulcimer – provide the fills between the verses of the title cut, a heartbreaking tale of one woman's unrequited passion. The latter, waltz paced cut, is atypical of how Merritt successfully rings the musical changes throughout this set. The slow burning lyric to "Sunday" is equally potent in the heartache stakes – "*my grandma's up there on the hill, she's drinking sherry with all the angels*" and "*I don't care if lonely is coming, I've been practising.*" Regarding the latter cut, the question arises, are these simply the narrator's words or is the song autobiographical? According to the liner booklet the effervescent joy of "Diamond Shoes" was inspired by Mexican/American film director Natalia Almada's documentary, "**Put On Your Diamond Shoes.**" The latter is one of a number of songs in this collection that employ a *rite of passage* theme, and the solution for this song arrives in the line "*You don't have to doubt no more, they'll always shine like new.*" The desperation and heartbreak that often accompanies the act of departing [*relative*] *security* to go in search of a *new path* in life bubbles to surface in the closing cut "When I Cross Over." The song's message is underpinned by lines "*Suitcase gonna get a little lighter*" and "*Not even gonna take my Pontiac, What do I need it for?*" While there's nothing here that flattened me emotionally – ala Griffin's "**1000 Kisses**," this debut collection by Merritt clearly indicates that she is going to be around for a *long, long time*. Hey, didn't Linda Ronstadt [third mention] once record a Gary White tune with the latter three word title?

P.S. OK, I know she did. It appeared on her 1970 sophomore solo set, "**Silk Purse.**"

Folkwax Rating 7 out of 10

Arthur Wood

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