



Caroline Herring “**Lantana**” Signature Sounds Recordings

Following a five-year solo recording hiatus Herring returns with the ten-song “**Lantana**” a collection that, like its predecessor “**Twilight**,” she co-produced with long-time Robert Earl Keen sideman Rich Brotherton. Although Caroline resides in Georgia these days, the album was recorded in her old stomping ground of Austin, Texas. Herring and Brotherton apart, the session players include bassist Glenn Fukunaga [Terri Hendrix], banjoist Danny Barnes [Bad Livers], fiddler Warren Hood [the late great Champ Hood’s son] and pedal steel player Marty Muse [Robert Earl Keen]. There are also minor contributions on percussion from Tom Van Schaik [Robert Earl Keen] and the inimitable Mr. Paul Percy [Lost Gonzo Band, Terri Hendrix]. While Herring’s earlier recordings appeared on the Texas based imprint, Blue Corn, “**Lantana**” has been released by Massachusetts based Signature Sounds Recordings.

Born in Mississippi, Herring has spent time residing in Texas, D.C. and Georgia. Where snapshots of home state informed the lyrics on Herring’s debut album, reflections about Texas took pride of place on her sophomore outing. In the ensuing years Caroline lived for a short time in D.C., then moved to Georgia, and in addition motherhood came calling – twice, one of each - so let’s see what reflections surface here.

Herring penned eight of the ten “**Lantana**” songs and launches this collection with the revelation “*I’m a selfish girl, In a selfish world.*” The opening song “Stone Cold World” proceeds to paint a portrait of the cold, nay frozen, northern area we know as Newfoundland, while the dark shadow of the Grim Reaper stalks the lines of the ensuing “Lay My Burden Down.” During late October 1994 in Union, South Carolina a twenty-three year old housewife drowned her 3 year and 14 month old sons. The truth about this dark deed came to light nine days later, Susan Smith having claimed, initially, that a coloured man abducted her offspring. Focusing on the tragedy from the perspective of Susan’s estranged husband Michael, the following year Canadian songwriter Hayden penned and recorded “When This Is Over” while American rock band Blind Melon’s effort was titled “Car Seat.” Herring’s “Paper Gown” references Smith’s prison garb – once imprisoned, she was placed on suicide watch. Written in the first person, Caroline’s lyric subtly employs words and phrases attributed to Smith in her confession and subsequent trial.

In “Heartbreak Tonight” the female narrator reflects on a marriage that has stagnated - steamy teenage passion [in the backseat], gave way to twenties that were “*damn depressing.*” While “*You change your name, You don’t stay the same*” appears to be a thoughtful and level-headed conclusion, in the penultimate verse the narrator intimates her withdrawal from society - “*But living in the back room, You begin to disappear.*” “Midnight On The Water” is a song that focuses on memories of young love and was much admired by the late Kate Wolf [d. 1986] [+]. The melody is traditional, Texan according to the “**Lantana**” liner booklet, while the words were penned by John Croizat.

Intentional sequencing? “States Of Grace” is book-ended by the aforementioned song and followed by the traditional lullaby “All The Pretty Horses.” In the liner booklet the “Fair And Tender Ladies” lyric is preceded by the dedication ‘For Natasha Trethewey, Thea Bowman and Montie Greer.’ Respectively a poet, a nun, and an anti-lynching activist, they hail from Herring’s native Mississippi. Compared with the ‘fragile’ traditional song [of the same name], there’s not a shadow of doubt in my mind that Herring deliberately [and slyly] employed that song title to accentuate her portrait of these publicly acknowledged ‘strong’ women. Lantana is a term used to describe a family of perennial flowering plants, and the word surfaces in the lyric to “Lover Girl” a mother’s song for her beloved first born – “*Longing for a place to know, Where branches reach, lantana grow, And butterflies take their poses.*” “Song For Fay” closes this

collection and appeared on last year's Bloodshot Records tribute release "**Just One More, A Musical Tribute to Larry Brown, A Great American Author.**" "**Fay,**" the title of the Y2K novel by Brown, was Herring's inspiration. The novel, set in Northern Mississippi, traces the flight of a sharecroppers teenage daughter who leaves home with little more than the clothes she is wearing.

"**Lantana**" can be summed up as a collection of gothic and melancholic portraits that draw inspiration from actual events as well as the literary word - a marriage of fact and fiction.

Note.

[+] – Kate included the song on her 1977 album "**Lines On The Paper.**"

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

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