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THE NO SURF REVIEW

Carolann Ames: Laurel Canyon Road

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THE LOWDOWN:	
Artist:	Carolann Ames
Based In:	San Diego, CA
Website:	www.carolannames.com
Album:	Laurel Canyon Road
Release Date:	January 17, 2012
Label:	Independently released
Previous Releases:	<i>Out of the Blue</i> (1999), <i>Shakedown</i> (2002), <i>Shades of Indigo</i> (2005), <i>So Long Abilene</i> (2008)
Genres:	Americana, country, bluegrass, alt.country, roots rock



When you hear the words “Laurel Canyon” certain scenes come to mind. Graham Nash wandering up to a David Crosby/Stephen Stills jam session at Mama Cass’ house (or maybe it was Joni Mitchell’s... they were too high to remember), adding the top end to the harmonies, and instantly forming an earth-shattering band. Jack Nicholson and Dennis Hopper doing massive amounts of coke with anybody who wandered by. Don Henley sending a Lear jet across the country to pick up random women to add to his ever-rotating harem. All that cool late sixties/early seventies insanity.

Yeah, Carolann Ames’ Laurel Canyon Road ain’t about that. It’s about a different Laurel Canyon entirely.

It’s not exactly a bait-and-switch. I mean, the central thoroughfare through that Laurel Canyon is a “boulevard,” not a “road,” but still, for a singer/songwriter based in Southern California, it’s a little odd to be focusing instead on an obscure byway in North Carolina. In fact, earlier in her career, when Ames had a rock-based musical approach, a tribute to her SoCal forbearers would probably have been entirely appropriate. But given the acoustic Americana sound she has been perfecting over her last several albums, perhaps a backwoods stretch in the Carolina hill country is a much more appropriate topic, after all.

When you think of protest songs, the image in your mind is probably something like Phil Ochs standing before a coffee house crowd, a man and his guitar alone against the world. Well, that’s not the tact Ames

took with “Laurel Canyon Road,” a full-sounding piece in which the fiddle dances around her vocals like it doesn’t have a care in the world. It may be richer and more imagery-laced than your average environmental screed, but the song is nevertheless a protest piece, emotionally attacking the practice of mountaintop removal, a mining method currently popular in places like Kentucky and North Carolina where the entire mountain is decapitated to get at the coal beneath, leaving heaps of rocky waste that chokes nearby waterways and forever scars the landscape.

*In the deep velvet of the night
Too many tears were cried.
Dynamited mountains in the dim light
As the silver river lights the darkened sky.*

*Wind whispers a sad lullaby,
Silver blue bitter as a lie.
It rocks the treetops as it cries and moans
And the blue moon rises
On Laurel Canyon Road.*



Carolann Ames may look a bit like a sixties L.A. folk rocker in this picture, but she's actually based in San Diego and singing about an entirely different Laurel Canyon than the one you're thinking about.

There’s a particular anguish in Ames’ voice as she sings her part, as if she personally feels the pain of the land about which she writes and the people who have made it their home for generations. The minor-key instrumentation only augments the fretful tone, adding even more emotional resonance to her picturesque lamentation. This powerful pathos and the song’s striking imagery make it an undeniable standout.

Perhaps the best track on the album, however, is “Love is a Rose,” a catchy, bluegrass infused number that acts as the closer. Just topping two minutes in length, it’s a pithy but very fun dance tune with a carpe diem theme:

*I want to go to an old hoedown
Long ago in a Western town.
Pick me up when my feet are draggin’
Give me a lift and I’ll hail you a wagon.*

*Love is a rose but you’d better not pick it.
Only grows when it’s on the vine.
Handful of thorns and you know you’ve missed it.
Lose your love when you say the word “mine.”*

Like many of Ames' songs, it blends a bit of rock in with a more traditional country feel. For instance, while the bulk of the song would fit right in at a back porch sing-along with its lively banjo and sweet fiddle, the drum kickoff that feeds into it sounds as if it would be more at home in a high school rock show. Likewise, while the fiddle break between the two verses is pure country fun, the drum-heavy bridge at the end is more evocative of 70's California country rock. But hey, it works and this is a great little song.



Carolann Ames not only has roses on her blouse, but she seems to have them on her mind. The flower is featured in the title of no less than four songs on the album.

Another of the four florally named tracks (maybe Ames should have just called this The Rose Album and avoided the geographic confusion), the opener "Bed of Roses" leaves no doubt that Carolann has an arresting, compelling, and convincingly sultry voice. It breaks just slightly as she sings:

*You make me believe
Sometimes the soul can be so deep.
Hold me close as evening closes.
Lay me down in your bed of roses.*

You're just kinda left thinking, "Well, I'm a little short on roses at the moment... in fact I haven't even washed the sheets in at least a month, but you're sure welcome."

Country-flavored with an R&B-tinged bass line and organ, "Bed of Roses" is basically the kind of flowery love paean that makes most men sick, but which everyone wishes he'd hear directed his way at least once. Complimented by a winsome fiddle and twangy guitar break, it's definitely designed to make you surrender.

"Everybody's Somebody in a Honky Tonk" is a straight country tune focusing on a woman on the prowl, using a local watering hole as her hunting grounds. It's kind of a turnabout on the usually male-centered "just gimme someone to screw" anthem. At the same time it's tempered with the requisite amount of female sexual skepticism:

*Cowboys, rednecks, bikers, truckers,
What's a girl to do?
Better say a prayer
Before I have to chose.*

*Flattery, B.S., come ons, lies,
Now I've heard it all.
Well, you can't believe a thing you hear in a dancehall.*

It's a lively and entertaining song with nice little twangy guitar and fiddle breaks. It might be a little bit poppy for my tastes, but then that's why I don't spend too much time in honky tonks. That and drunk girls like Carolann are always hitting on me. It's an easy tune to get a kick out of, though.

“No Easy Way” is pretty intriguing, blending country sounds with a rock vibe. It opens with a strummed guitar, but then breaks into a pulse quickening beat that strikes a paranoid note with a picked lick that flows from ear to ear across the stereo speakers like something creeping up behind you. The lyrics don’t do much to calm you down, either:

*Through the curtain of my tears
Reasons fade and disappear.
It’s a mystery I can’t explain.
Sadness fell on me like rain.
I’m losing my unconscious grace.*

*There ain’t no easy way out.
There ain’t no easy way.
There ain’t no easy way out.*

Most fascinating is the section at the end where the drums break into a heavy kick, over which Ames sings a series repeating this last line, joined by a chorus of voices on the final iteration. The feel is quite unique, almost belonging to a classic rock song more than an Americana track.

“Back to Santa Rosa” is notable mainly for its light feel and engaging fiddle part, along with a bit of slickly picked mandolin. But it’s got some weird vocal phrasing that throws me. Some lines seem to be packed with way too many syllables and Ames struggles to fit them all in. Others are oddly short and she’s forced to try to stretch one or two words out into the same space.



Ames new album is a solid collection that deftly mixes her predominant acoustic Americana sounds with small remnants of her days on the rock scene to add a little bit of a twist to the usual country sound.

“Love Remains Unbroken” is kind of an alternative rock/country fusion, with a bopping bass line throbbing under a strummed guitar and dervish-like fiddle. With the early vocals in each verse delivered in a sly spoken-word style, it’s a little evocative of an Ani DiFranco tune. Lyrically, the most striking bit is Ames’ transformation of a color into a verb:

*Clouds drift over Manhattan.
The sky is purpling into dusk.
Hey, we all have our demons.*

With a dancing fiddle and picked banjo, “Sugar Creek” is an appropriately bluegrass tale of a girl’s first love set against the backdrop of backwoods Kentucky. Everything’s goes swimmingly for the girl and her “wretched child” of a courtier, at least for a while:

All summer long where he went I would follow

*Till his daddy found work up in Ohio.
Then he kissed my hair saying he had to leave.
He said, "When you're down by Sugar Creek, please remember me."*

Oh sure. Blame us and our good industrial jobs for your heartbreak. Although the music is engaging, my main issue is that this one, too, has some flimsy lyrical structuring, with several lines seemingly forced into spaces several syllables too small. Still, it's a catchy little tune.

Overall, Laurel Canyon Road is a solid—if not especially earth-shattering—album. Aside from the title track, most of the lyrics are not particularly striking—and occasionally they even come out hackneyed—but the music is consistently interesting, blending acoustic country with an occasional rock 'n roll bite. There's no doubt that this album is filled with the kind of tracks the radio loves, and I wouldn't be surprised if you heard several of them on your local station sooner rather than later, especially "Everybody's Somebody in a Honky Tonk" with its danceable swagger. I personally prefer the simple stompability of "Love Is a Rose" or the emotional appeal of "Laurel Canyon Road," but if you take the time to explore this album, you're sure to find something that speaks to you.