

Kathy Mattea

***Coal* (Captain Potato Records)**

Release: 4/1/2008

Kathy Mattea, the beloved, Grammy-winning singer of such classics as “18 Wheels and A Dozen Roses,” “Where’ve You Been,” and many other hits says that her new album offered her a “re-education” in singing. That album, COAL, is a re-education for the listener as well, a record that reshapes the way we think about music, reminding us of why we love it so much in the first place.

The songs on COAL are more than just mining songs. Mattea says she wanted to pay tribute to “my place and my people” on a record that is as much a textured novel as it is an album. Raised near Charleston, West Virginia, her mining heritage is thick: both her parents grew up in coal camps, both her grandfathers were miners, her mother worked for the local UMWA. Her father was saved from the mines by an uncle who paid his way through college. “It’s a coming together of a lot of different threads in my life,” Mattea says.

Mattea’s childhood was steeped in the culture of mining and Appalachia, but despite having a wide range of influences and “being a sponge about music,” she wasn’t exposed to much traditional mountain music. “I never thought I had an ear for singing real heavy Appalachian music,” she says. “I marvel at the wonder of someone like Hazel Dickens, I just never thought I could do that.”

Still, she dreamed quietly about one day recording an album like COAL. Mattea says she has been thinking about making this album since she was 19 years old and first heard “Dark as a Dungeon”. From there on out she quietly cataloged mining and mountain songs that she would someday record.

But the album was just a sketch of an idea until the Sago Mine Disaster, which killed twelve West Virginia miners in 2006. “I thought, ‘Now is the time to do these songs’. Sago was the thing that brought it all back to the surface,” she says. “When I was about nine, 78 miners were killed in The Farmington Disaster, near Fairmont in 1968. When Sago happened, I got catapulted back to that moment in my life and I thought, ‘I need to do something with this emotion, and maybe this album is the place to channel it’. And so I knew the time was right.”

It was a life-altering decision, one that would forever change the way she thought about music and singing. “This record reached out and took me. It called to me to be made,” Mattea says. “If you go through your life and you try to be open, you try to think how can you be of service, how can your gifts best be used in the world...if you ask that question everyday, you find yourself at the answer. And it’s not always what you thought it would be when you asked.”

She found herself discovering a part of herself she had never known before. “I had to unlearn a lot about singing. These songs are about getting out of the way; it’s about being with the song, opening a space and letting the song come through you.”

Known as one of the consummate songcatchers, Mattea has worked her magic again: there’s not a bad song in the bunch. “When I decided to do this, I wanted to be very careful about the songs I chose. I wanted some labor songs, some songs that articulated the lifestyle, the bigger struggles, and I wanted a wide variety musically,” Mattea says. “Most of all, I wanted it to speak to the sense of place and the sense of attachment people have to each other and to the land.” She chose songs by such celebrated songwriters as Jean Ritchie, Billy Edd Wheeler, Hazel Dickens, Si Kahn, Utah Phillips, Merle Travis, and Darrell Scott.

Mattea says she’s had good luck picking songs because she goes with her gut. “I’ve found so much of my voice through interpreting other people’s songs, it’s like a marriage,” Mattea says. “I’m breathing something into the song, collaborating with the writers on bringing something forth.”

But, she says, these songs had to go beyond that. "With these songs, it's not about how you sound, it's about sheer communication and expression, and a way to give voice to someone else's life experiences. It's being a voice for a whole group of people, a place, a way of life. And that's a sacred use of music."

Her delivery of the songs approaches the sacred as well. Mattea bares herself on performances like her a capella vocal of "Black Lung," which reveals a singer at the height of her powers (and left onlookers in the studio in tears). She never over-sings, quietly and subtly working her way through the powerful ballad "The Coming of the Roads" so that she delivers an emotional punch before the listener has even realized it. There is the pumping energy of "The L&N Don't Stop Here Anymore," and "Coal Tattoo," the beautiful, understated pain of songs like "Red-Winged Black Bird" and "Lawrence Jones." Her delivery of "Green Rolling Hills" is so full of pride and joy that the listener will wish to be a West Virginian, too, just to feel such beautiful homesickness.

Mattea wanted someone who could guide her with a firm, knowledgeable hand to work as the album's producer. Marty Stuart is well-known as a singer-songwriter but has been gaining a reputation as a seasoned producer as well, and he seemed the logical choice.

"Marty has a relationship to a commercial career and to this music, just like me; he understands that balance. And he's been playing it since he was thirteen; he has a vocabulary in hillbilly music," Mattea says. "He brought things into focus that I couldn't see on my own. He's a dream to work with, he's just brilliant and so generous."

The pickers on this album are a small, impressive lot that were as carefully chosen as the songs and the producer. Providing percussion on Mattea's first drum-less album is Byron House on upright bass. "Byron is very important to this record," Mattea says. "His slap bass is a big part of the sound. He is a total ensemble player, a brilliant musician with no ego." Mattea has played with guitarist Bill Cooley for 20 years and calls him "my silent partner, my unspoken collaborator on everything I do... I have been orbiting around him, musically, for a long time." Stuart Duncan offers mandolin, banjo (which is featured on his own transitional track with "Sally in the Garden"), and fiddle. "He's like Appalachian yoga," Mattea says. "There's never a note that doesn't come out perfectly. It's so Zen."

These three main pickers are joined by Stuart, who plays guitar, mandolin, mandola, and sings with Patty Loveless for background vocals on "Blue Diamond Mines." Also supplying background vocals are Tim O'Brien ("my brother," Mattea says) and his sister, Mollie O'Brien, who belt it out on "Green Rolling Hills." John Catchings offers a haunting cello, Mattea band member and studio veteran Randy Leago contributes keyboard and accordion accents, and legendary steel player Fred Newell makes a guest appearance.

Singer, songs, producer, pickers have all come together flawlessly to form a career record for Mattea and a great gift for music lovers.

Mattea says she had to dig really deep, to get to the dark and light places that held the power for her to let these songs come forth; but on the other hand, she sometimes worried that the songs were "almost too effortless to sing." Upon admitting this to Stuart, he didn't miss a beat before telling her that he wasn't surprised. "That's because it's in your blood, pal," he said. Mattea likes this explanation. "I think there's a mystery there: that somewhere in me, in my DNA, there's my great grandmother singing, and my grandmother, and my people, singing through me, with me" she says. "Maybe that's why it didn't feel like work."

- Silas House

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