



Texas and Americana Music Reviews

William Michael Smith

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Kimberly M'Carver *Cross The Danger Line*

Prime CD PCD 76

by William Michael Smith



*A Houston girl with roots so deep, I'd never leave my home
But still I venture out to see this world*

Kimberly M'Carver is another of Houston's buried treasures. She burns up the road part of the year, playing everywhere from Austin to Toronto, Nashville to Europe, yet she remains vastly under-appreciated in her home town, where she is considered not only a great singer but also a songwriter's songwriter by the small but vigorous Americana music community. As usual, what

is Houston's hamburger helper is the wider world's filet mignon. A fixture at a number of Houston venues (she regularly appears at Hickory Hollow, Mucky Duck and Anderson Fair), in M'Carver's case familiarity hasn't bred contempt but it has left her in the same predicament that most of Houston's best artists find themselves. They have a small, hardcore, wouldn't-miss-a-show following, but in a broader sense they are often more appreciated elsewhere. No wonder there is an old musician's saying that "Houston is a great place to practice." But to make a living and get respect, you have to get out on the road.

If at some date in the future some industrious independent filmmaker decides to do the Emmy Lou Harris story, don't be surprised if Kimberly M'Carver stars as Ms. Harris. While M'Carver doesn't necessarily resemble the goddess of roots music, she's certainly got the voice. Only M'Carver's may be an even purer voice than Harris's, a voice with wider range and uncannily perfect pitch and tone. M'Carver

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may not quite have the vocal dynamics of Dolly Parton, but she's close enough to have Dolly looking over her shoulder. M'Carver also could be mistaken for Allison Kraus. There are also echoes of Linda Ronstadt in her country mode. In other words, Ms. M'Carver has a Hall of Fame voice, one of those rare vocal instruments most artists would kill to have.

Not only is M'Carver's voice in excellent form on her first release in seven years, *Cross The Danger Line*, her songwriting just keeps reaching new heights. The fact that her "Death and Texas" isn't being heard across the radio dial in Houston is another sign that the district attorney needs to investigate some of these local programmers who keep claiming they play "The Songs of Texas" or "The Sounds of Texas" or whatever their latest fraudulent false-advertising buzz-phrase is. Or else it proves that the County Health Examiner needs to offer free hearing aids to the obviously impaired radio programmers in town. Come on, people, listen up. We've got a winner here right in our midst and her name isn't Shania or Martina or Faith!

For her first independent release (her previous records were done for the prestigious Rounder/Philo label), M'Carver is backed by producer/guitarist Scott Neubert (Hal Ketchum, Irene Kelly), ace fiddler Aubrey Haynie, bassist Viktor Krauss, drummer Bob Mummert, mandolin picker Brent Truitt, and Jim Lauderdale and Claire Lynch join for some of the harmonies. While there are drums and a bit of electrification, this album projects an acoustic feel. Musically my ear compares it to the likes of Union Station (without the banjo and with just a pinch of Texas saltiness).

The album opens with "Death and Texas," a quick-time word-playing M'Carver composition about the age-old habit of fooling around. The hook is built around the old aphorism of "the only two things for certain in this world are death and taxes." In this tale of a lawman's wife who fools around with other men ("Sherri sits her shot glass down/painted nails and sweet perfume abound/she's wanting something new") which results in this case in the death of the lover, M'Carver conceives a uniquely Texas twist.

*For Sherri's husband wore a star
He'd closed his eyes but never more
'Cause there are certain things in life
Death and Texas and another man's wife*

To top the strong opening track, M'Carver gives an astounding understated version of the great Marty Robbins torch song, "Return to Me." On this track, M'Carver has that wavering vulnerability that typifies Texas singers like Tish Hinojosa. If you are a fan of fine voices, put your headphones on and listen closely to M'Carver's overdubbed harmonies. They will cause the hair to stand up on the back of your neck.

"Santa Fe" is another track that should prove radio-friendly. It is a love song with a southwestern feel and more drop-dead over-dubbed harmonies.

Mornin' breaks in this eastern town and a chill just fills my bones

*How could I have ever left your side
Why does the blue of this distant sea seem cold with each wave's rise
It can't compete with that golden brown when I see Santa Fe in your eyes*

*Santa Fe won't you take me away
I'm getting lost way out here
Santa Fe won't you show me the way
The only thing warm is my beer*

M'Carver explores Loretta Lynn territory with another wry play on words, "You Ain't No Palomino" (pronounced pal-oh-mine-oh). M'Carver is marking territory and laying out the "no trespassing" signs in this leave-my-man-alone vignette. There are numerous Nashville leading ladies who ought to be looking at this song as hit material.

*You ain't no palomino, running wild and free
And he ain't no passing mustang, this ride belongs to me*

*I saw the way you watched him, I saw you flip your hair
I saw you swish your tail around as if I wasn't there, but I knew
So there's just one thing to do
You should find your own love, you should never let him go
You should hear the words I'm saying, I think you should know how I feel
Girl, these words are real*

"Fix 'n Paint" is another cleverly crafted tune that would probably be appealing to Nashville's leading ladies were it not so melancholy and pathetically true. M'Carver's tragic image of a woman lost in the world of barroom memories is quite clear and equally chilling.

*This blinding light comes early when the night has been too long
It seems a weary journey at the end
Still this stale, cold barroom sings its sweet hypnotic song
These four walls seem to be her only friend
Over in the corner where the sun is streaming in
An eerie apparition of a saint
Sits upon a beaten chair that's seen the last night's wars
The chair now wears a sign that read "fix 'n paint"*

*"Fix 'n paint" the words it read, whirled around her aching head
It doesn't help to break it slow, a scarred heart can't just stop 'n go*

M'Carver rounds out *Cross The Danger Line* with two choice covers, Greg Trooper's "Ireland" and Townes van Zandt's "Niles River Blues." Where she infuses Trooper's tune with uplifting, high-stepping Irish enthusiasm and good feeling, with just her acoustic guitar and Houston's Dave Peters on mandolin she gives a sparse, delicate, absolutely appropriate interpretation of van Zandt's sad lament.

It is one of the mysteries of the music business that Kelly Willis and Terri Hendrix

seem to be on the verge of stardom while Kimberly M'Carver struggles for radio play and higher visibility. While both ladies are highly talented, they are no more talented than M'Carver. Perhaps Ms. M'Carver, who doesn't particularly enjoy the grind of touring (although she does plenty of it), just hasn't "sold her soul" to the dream the way it seems artists must to move to the highest echelons of the business. Or it could be that she's not willing to uproot herself from Houston to move to one of the music centers where the stars are made. We can only hope that *Cross The Danger Line* will gain Ms. M'Carver the wider attention her talent deserves because the record certainly compares favorably with anything on the Americana scene today.

Not that we Houstonians are complaining. The way things are working out, we can catch one of the top singer/songwriters in the country on any number of weekends at warm, friendly little clubs like Hickory Hollow for a five dollar cover. Life in the Bayou City is good.

* If you haven't discovered Houston's Kimberly M'Carver, what are you waiting for? Buy *Cross The Danger Line* at www.primecd.com Ms. M'Carver can be seen at the Café Caberet Dance Hall in Bandera with Radney Foster Nov. 9, at Hickory Hollow in Houston Nov. 10, and at the Gypsy Tea Room in Dallas Nov. 21 with Honeybrowne.

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