

Two new “cover albums”: Shelby Lynne’s *Just a Little Lovin’* and Cat Power’s *Jukebox*

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Country singer Shelby Lynne spent a decade in Nashville creating music for a hostile and restrictive recording industry. Between 1989 and 1999, she made several albums of country-pop essentially no different from the other various products coming out of the alleged “country music capital of the world” at that time. As Lynne told the *New York Times* in an interview published earlier this year, “I got to Nashville and was told what to record, what to wear.” This was not the sort of atmosphere in which a young artist could flourish.

Disillusioned with the entire process, Lynne eventually left Nashville and attempted to reinvent herself with the appropriately titled album *I Am Shelby Lynne* in 2000. Compared to the artist she had been up to that time, Lynne was now virtually unrecognizable both musically and physically. While not quite the great album some critics made it out to be, songs like “Your lies” and “Where I’m From” revealed an artist more talented than one might have expected from her previous work.

After another misstep—the dreadful, slickly produced album *Love, Shelby*—the singer found her footing again and made her best work to date. The albums *Identity Crisis* (2003) and *Suit Yourself* (2005), if not entirely satisfying, were nevertheless strong collections and a major leap forward for the singer. On *Identity Crisis*, in particular, one could detect a sense of relief as the artist began to break down some of the limitations she had previously been working under. Lynne was trying everything: rockabilly, traditional country, pop, etc. *Suit Yourself* followed in the same vein but was more focused and worked better as an album.

Her latest effort is *Just a Little Lovin’*, a tribute to the remarkable British pop and R&B singer Dusty Springfield (1939-1999). Throughout the 1960s, Springfield, whose music was heavily influenced by Detroit’s Motown sound, recorded several outstanding singles, including “You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me” and “I Only Want To Be With You.” Her album *Dusty in Memphis* is justly remembered as one of the great pop albums of the era.

On *Just a Little Lovin’* Lynne sings 11 songs closely associated with Springfield, including four from the classic *Dusty in Memphis* album. One original composition, “Pretend,” written by Lynne herself is also included.

Whereas Springfield often recorded with a large band frequently supplemented by lush string sections, Lynne has chosen to give her songs a stripped-down interpretation, using a small band and sparse arrangements. One feels, unfortunately, that on many songs,

particularly slower numbers such as the title track, the work suffers from a “mood” which is imposed upon the recording and has little to do with the material itself. Too often the sleepy, smoky stylizations of Lynne’s recordings don’t do justice to the many excellent compositions she performs.

One has only to compare Springfield’s original recording of “Just a Little Lovin’” and the new version by Lynne to uncover what is lacking; something essential has clearly been lost in the translation from one recording to the other. Similarly, Lynne’s “I Only Want To Be With You” lacks the inspiration of the original. When Springfield sang “I Only Want to Be With You,” there was absolutely no doubt in the listener’s mind that she meant every word of it. It was a lively and exhilarating version of the famous song about falling in love. Lynne’s version, treated to a slow, frankly “easy listening” arrangement, lacks these vital components. Even the song’s distinct melody loses its shape in Lynne’s version.

One does not ask that Shelby Lynne imitate the voice or other particular qualities of specific Springfield recordings, but these songs, with the lyrics and chord progressions they contain, require a special interpretation that has escaped the talented country singer on this album. A feeling of intimacy or even a tapping into “raw emotion” is not simply a question of stripping one’s band down to a bare-bones rhythm section, as Lynne has done here. It requires a far more substantial effort than that.

In spite of the album’s flaws, there are at least two songs which stand out in the listener’s mind as examples of what the album might have been. “Willie and Laura Mae Jones,” with its blend of acoustic slide guitars makes a strong impression and Lynne’s loosely delivered vocals are well-suited to the lyrics. “I Don’t Want To Hear It Anymore” is another excellent song, the best on Lynne’s album. It’s sung with a great deal of feeling and is a worthy treatment of the original. It ought to be heard.

The obvious missing piece in this tribute to Dusty Springfield is “Son Of A Preacher Man,” the song by which Springfield is to this day best remembered. Lynne has chosen, perhaps wisely, to avoid recording it. “Son Of A Preacher Man” was a sly song about a young woman having a secret affair with the son of a local preacher. Fitting snugly in a slow R&B backdrop, the lyrics speak volumes. When Springfield sings the line “Being good isn’t easy, no matter how hard I try,” one is absolutely certain that she has not tried nearly as hard as she’s letting on. It’s a perfect example of the way in which a great interpreter of popular songs can bring an

enormous amount of subtext and meaning to lyrics, becoming themselves the “author” of the work as much as the original composer. Shelby Lynne, on her new recordings, was simply not up to such a task.

Jukebox finds another talented singer, Cat Power (Chan Marshall), turning to cover songs on her latest album. Typically considered an “indie rock” singer, though it is too limiting a description for her work, Marshall has been recording music for more than a decade. In that time, she has shown herself to be a talented singer-songwriter as well as a gifted interpreter of other composers’ works.

Over the years, it’s also become clear that Marshall, in spite of such talents, has been a musician plagued by insecurities and stage fright. Struggles with substance abuse have taken their toll on the artist as well, as she has revealed in a number of very candid interviews.

While preparing for the release of her excellent 2006 album *The Greatest*, Marshall suffered a breakdown and was admitted to the Mount Sinai Medical Center for one week during which time the latter album debuted. *Jukebox* is her first new album since her hospitalization. Recent concert reviews suggest she is gaining confidence as a live performer, and one is genuinely pleased to see Marshall on the road to recovery.

Unfortunately, *Jukebox*, with a few exceptions, is something of a disappointment, particularly when one considers that a previous album of covers, simply called *The Covers Record*, yielded some interesting results. The new work suffers from many of the same flaws found on Shelby Lynne’s *Just a Little Lovin’*. There is too often a disconnect between the compositions and the arrangements chosen for them.

Jukebox starts curiously but promisingly, with a version of the Kander and Ebb song “New York, New York.” The sharply recorded drums make an immediate impression, and overall it is an interesting take on the song and a relief from the dozens of kitsch interpretations we’ve suffered through over the years. “These vagabond shoes” at least sounds more convincing coming out of Marshall’s mouth than most. After this, certain flaws on the album begin to emerge.

“Ramblin’ (Wo)man” is a take on Hank Williams’ “Ramblin’ Man,” one of the great country songs of the 1950s. Williams’ song was about a man compelled to ramble by some unsettled feeling brewing inside him. He spoke of a desire to see what was “o’er the hill,” but there was also a sense that he never truly expected to find anything there. Bound to roam the country until he dies, he instructs his wife to stand at his grave and declare: “Just say God called home your ramblin man.” The dislocated feeling captured so completely by Williams in that song has made “Ramblin Man” a classic. Marshall’s take on the song lacks the richness of the original. While her version retains some of the sadness of the earlier song, it is somehow less effecting.

“I Believe In You” is both an interesting and an unexpected choice of song to have recorded. First written and performed by Bob Dylan, the track is taken from his album *Slow Train Coming*. That album followed Dylan’s conversion to Christianity and marked his entrance into a dreadful and embarrassing gospel music period. Recorded by Dylan as a slow, reflective song, “I Believe In

You” was about someone who had suffered persecution but who had nevertheless remained true to his or her beliefs. It’s a song that lends itself to certain possibilities beyond its composer’s religious inclinations. Marshall gives it an upbeat rock ‘n’ roll treatment. The sturdy, aggressive rock arrangement seems an imposition here, a hindrance which doesn’t provide the kind of interpretation the song might deserve. One doesn’t feel, in Marshall’s recording, the suffering of the narrator or for that matter that she believes especially in the “you” of the song.

While much of the album is disappointing, there are also a few strong moments which shouldn’t go unmentioned. “Aretha, Sing One For Me,” the soul song first sung by George Jackson in the early 1970s, is one of the better tracks on the album. Marshall’s version is a straight forward soul song sung simply and sincerely. It almost makes one wish she had recorded the Dusty Springfield tribute instead of Shelby Lynne. The James Brown song “Lost Someone,” another slow soul ballad, follows this. While it may lack some of the pain heard in the wailing of Brown’s original, Marshall’s version is well-performed and believable.

Following these moments, there is little else to speak of on the album. “Don’t Explain,” once sung brilliantly by jazz great Billie Holiday, fails to impress in Marshall’s version. “Blue,” first sung by Joni Mitchell, makes excellent use of the electric organ, but does little more. It uses the same jazz-blues treatment featured so frequently on the album that the songs tend to run together in one’s mind. This is a very narrow color palette in which to work, particularly for an artist like Marshall who has, in the past, shown a talent for various styles of music.

Cat Power and Shelby Lynne are both talented and serious performers. The compositions on their new albums are rich in human emotion, in story and subtext. It isn’t at all hard to see why these songs appealed to them in the first place. But they fail too often to move us. Had the material been worked through more thoroughly, it might have produced something very remarkable.



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