May Your Kindness Remain from Courtney Marie Andrews

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The newest album by 27-year-old singer-guitarist Courtney Marie Andrews, *May Your Kindness Remain*, is a refreshing and insightful contribution to country and folk music. Nearly every song on the album takes up, in one form or another, the psychological, emotional, and physical stress that great numbers of men and women endure in the present social climate.

Much of the album centers on the complexities of phenomena like relationship difficulties, mental illness, loneliness, and maintaining one's dignity in the face of poverty, long odds, and depression. By and large, Andrews does not blame these difficulties on the characters themselves—they are rooted in the harsh world around us. The album also features songs about the decay of the American "rustbelt" ("Two Cold Nights in Buffalo"), the plight of immigrants coming to America ("Border"), and a sardonic take on a relationship no longer worth fighting for ("I've Hurt Worse").

Andrews eschews simple explanations for the crises people find themselves in, and she avoids easy moralizing or clichés. Andrews conveys this most powerfully in her impressive voice—confident, clear, and surprisingly well-honed for a relatively young artist. She often draws comparisons to Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris in this regard. The country lilt in her singing enhances the lyrics, adding emotional depth that may not necessarily jump out if one simply reads the lyrics by themselves.

The opening song "May Your Kindness Remain" sets the tone for the album. Set to a Wurlitzer organ and straining electric guitar chords, Andrews opens with a theme that carries throughout—her admiration for the stoicism and grace of "ordinary people" under duress: "You're a good woman, and a good friend / You've got a good heart even when it's busted and bent." Describing a woman hard on her luck, who now spends her meager paycheck seeking solace in a bar or a casino, she implores with a gentle yell on the chorus: "And if your money runs out, and your good looks fade, may your kindness remain." Back-up singers—including gospel singer CC White—serve the song too.

On the slow, piano-driven "Rough Around The Edges," the opening quickly paints a picture: "Pulled in to meet you, windows down / Duct-taped mirrors, exhaust pouring out / Always late, never unwound / When will I learn to shut my mouth?" The song slowly reveals an individual suffering from some form of debilitating depression, but grateful for the loving person who hangs on in her or his life.

The harsh world facing the immigrant on the blues-heavy "Border" includes a grueling journey ("Sonoran sun, it never quits / If you cover your neck, it'll burn your lips / Horns in the hair, dust in the teeth / Coyotes man, the land of the free") underscored by the grinding, repetitive rhythm section in the song. Andrews, born in Phoenix, Arizona, implores a perhaps skeptical audience in the chorus to show some empathy and listen in ("There is always a reason, a story to tell / You cannot measure a man until you've been down the deepest well").

Perhaps the most moving songs on the album involve the imperfect and yet deep love her characters have for spouses, family, friends, or even the basic humanity of people to help those they don't even know. These include the soulful "Took You Up," "The Long Road Back To You," and "Kindness Of Strangers." The first of these is particularly effective as a contemplative ode to love that can survive the lack of material comfort. The uncomplaining singing of the chorus ("Ain't got much but we got each other / Not much, but love to

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offer / I took you up, I took you up") adds depth to the rest of the song.

Small, telling details of life also show up in every song—"A bum searches for shelter, so cold he dreams of hell" ("Two Cold Nights in Buffalo"), "Frozen dinners when money's tight, makin' love on a laundry pile" ("Took You Up"), or "Ten short of a ticket down to Denver, borrowed cash in the bank lien letter, waiting for this check to come through" ("Long Road Back To You").

One of the few drawbacks to the album is that Andrews' voice and songwriting are so powerful that the musicality is sometimes overwhelmed. Andrews and her producer Mark Howard have explained in interviews they were seeking a "lived-in" feeling for the album. That quality does emerge, with the album's heavy emphasis on soul, gospel, and Laurel Canyon country musical staples—including a heavy organ presence, gritty and strafing electric guitar, patient drumming.

However, beyond the punchier "Border" and "I've Hurt Worse," much of the music is a bit too toned-down, presumably to make room for Andrews' voice. The ballads tend to lose their musical impact at times because of their uneven dominance on the album. One wishes a few more risks were taken musically.

Nonetheless, this is clearly an artist with a great deal of sensitivity, talent, and warmth. There was genuine promise on her previous album *Honest Life*, but *May Your Kindness Remain* represents real growth.

Andrews has drawn inspiration for her songs from more than a decade of touring, and eventually working as a bartender in rural Washington state for several years. She has stated in interviews that she has always wanted to convey the stories of the people she played for and served, and to convey how things actually are for people in America. Speaking about the impetus for the new album she writes:

"It became clear how many people are struggling through the same issues. … People are constantly chasing that bigger life. A lot of people are poor in America—and because of those unattainable goals, they're also mentally unstable, or sad, or depressed or unfulfilled. A lot of people—myself included at some point in my life—are loving somebody through this. That's sort of the theme of the record: coming to terms with depression and the reality of the world we're living in. Mental illness is a taboo in this culture—or not taken seriously. I've grown up around it a lot, and sort of feel like I understand it from all sides."

Adding to this, Andrews recently told an interviewer from the *Telegraph*: "The working class of America I'm optimistic about. But the people running the country? I don't see much cause for optimism there. What can you do? Write another song about it is what I'll do."

One hopes Andrews continues to pursue these themes with the feeling and insight evident in her most recent album.

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