

Gillian Welch

Before we go any further, before we address anything, I'd like you to forget. Maybe forget what Gillian Welch shows you've seen, the floorboards all sparking from the weight of these two souls, Gill and Dave, and their four collective cowboy-booted soles; maybe forget when you first heard "Orphan Girl," that song that seemed to exist outside of time and caused everyone who heard it to become the itinerant, the loner, the longing; maybe forget the years that have passed when last a new Gillian Welch record graced the hi-fi's of the music-listening world -- forget the pop stars risen and erased in those years, the administrations and regimes born and gone in those years -- forget, indeed, that there are eight of them, eight years, since *Soul Journey* arrived into the world.

The Harrow & The Harvest, Gill and Dave's new record, is both a product of and is unrelated to those years in-between. Best to forget that. What it is, indisputably, is the product of two people who have become so entwined in one another that the songs and the singing and the playing on this record seems to exude from a single voice. This is the sound of two people in a room, playing to one another, with one another. This is the sound of the room in which the two people are playing. This is the sound of two voices, locked in unison, locked in harmony. The sound of two people playing live, with no overdubs, and very few takes. Two people making music together as if they were one soul combined.

Now back up.

This is what we know: Gill and Dave met at Berklee College of Music; Gillian was studying songwriting, while Dave studied guitar; they met at an audition for a country band. Together, they moved to Nashville, TN where most of their work together has been produced. Since then they have influenced and inspired new generations of country and folk singers, songwriters and players. They have earned the slavish admiration of many of the most lauded and loved voices of the Americana milieu now living -- and some who have since deceased (rest their souls). They've had their songs recorded by the likes of Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, and Solomon Burke. Gill and Dave's body of work is deeply rooted in the world it has sought to portray in song: the American South.

"Yes, Tennessee figures rather prominently in the new songs," says Gillian. The record, however, has little of the sweet sunny south; in fact, there's a real dark pallor to the thing -- and the language in the songs seems to recall the shady groves of Tennessee far more than anything that the duet has done in recent memory. "The truth is, we absented ourselves from Nashville for a while, to escape the weight of home and studio and record label. But I think our thoughts turned back there with a newness and clarity I hadn't felt since I moved there almost 20 years ago."

And the record they've made, tonally, is a new Southern sound, with the sort of songs you wouldn't be surprised to hear issuing from some verdant, wooded hollow in Appalachia; the sort of songs you'd expect to be sung to soothe unquiet babies. Songs you'd expect to hear hollered from an Asheville grange hall, all too late in the evening. Songs with the wry humor of the back porch. "Dave says this record is 'ten different kinds of sad', but it's not without humor. I feel like there's a maturity in it and a sense of place that only comes with time." Gillian continues, "We feel at home in the folk tradition, and using its language

combined with our own." "That's the whole point of the folk tradition," laughs Dave.

And the language is gorgeous.

From the song "Tennessee":

I kissed you cause I've never been an angel
I learned to say hosannas on my knees
But they threw me out of Sunday school when I was nine
And the sisters said I did just as I pleased
Even so I try to be a good girl
It's only what I want that makes me weak
I had no desire to be a child of sin
Then you went and pressed your whiskers to my cheek

The thing is, the two of them, Gill and Dave, have arrived at a place in their music where it seems to be impossible to attribute those words to one or the other. That's what I mean about their mindmeld. It's not just them performing and playing and singing together that is so uncanny, so wholly of one voice -- the songwriting itself seems to have arrived at a similar apotheosis. "As a songwriting team," says Dave, "we are more seamless and fluid than ever before. It's nearly impossible to unravel who wrote what word, what line, what sentiment." Gillian adds: "It's truly immaterial at this point. When Dave and I really get down to work, it's like we're in a lifeboat, like we're the only two people in the world, and it is very quiet. I think some of that quietness comes through on these recordings." Listen to this record with the lights low. Listen to it on an old radio, cradled next to your ear. This is the sound of two people, singing and playing their songs. Forget the years in between.

"The way you made it That's the way it will be."

-- Colin Meloy
Portland, Oregon
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