



ALBUM REVIEW

Chieftains - Down The Old Plank Road: The Nashville Sessions

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BY ARCHIVE

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Much well-intentioned malarkey is being expended pegging this collaboration between Ireland's celebrated Chieftains and Americana stars as a historic demonstration of the ties that bind traditional American music to "pristine" Celt melodies probably older than the hills, along with the suggestion that this whole exercise offers a "learning experience" so good for you it verges on a Significant Painful Obligation.

Fortunately, none of this is true.

Forty years on, the Chieftains sometimes coast a bit with all-star sessions such as this disc, the previous Long Black Veil CD (with Mick Jagger and Tom Jones!), and Another Country, which was cut with Nashville stars ten years ago. The dominant music here is from the old-timey, pre-bluegrass string-band catalog -- and quite American in the ways it blends some old Scottish/Irish/English verses and instrumental sounds with influences from Afro-American music, vaudeville and parlor songs, and more. The 1879 parlor waltz "I'll Be All Smiles Tonight", previously recorded as a change-up by the Carter Family, is given a clean, sweet turn by Martina McBride here, and is as "ancient and pure" as the work of George M. Cohan.

The ironic surprise is that there really is such a strong Celt influence throughout American roots music that most of the collaborators simply sound just like themselves, with a bit of Chieftain honcho's Paddy Moloney's pipes and whistles behind them. Del McCoury's "Rain And Snow" only underscores the beautiful impurity of this music with his idiosyncratic old-timey/blues/jazz-influenced singing. Buddy & Julie Miller offer a key highlight in their turn on Dock Boggs' "Country Blues", underscoring how those Kentucky high-from-the-holler sounds are almost as second-nature to Buddy as is Memphis soul.

But then, Vince Gill's stripped-down take on Merle Travis' "Dark As A Dungeon" offers similar, standout pleasures from that great song of the 1940s. Lyle Lovett offers a knowing take on Charlie Poole's bluesy "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down", and Gillian Welch & David Rawlings do a (now here's a shock) slow version of "Katie Dear".

Most adept at going "more Celtic" for this collaboration are Ricky Skaggs and Jeff White -- who have, tellingly, both adjusted to new situations before, in their country/bluegrass crossovers. They offer considerable, worthwhile instrumental give-and-take with the Chieftains -- as do Earl Scruggs (on "Sally Goodin") and Bela Fleck (on a series of reels).

This is more a pleasurable listening experience than an educational crash course -- which is what makes it good news that a second volume featuring Allison Moorer, Patty Loveless and Joe Ely will follow in the Spring.