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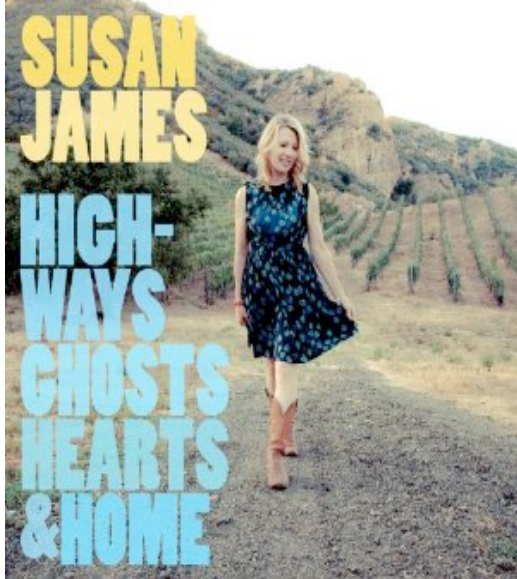
[Susan James – Highways, Ghosts, Hearts & Home 4.1.11](#)

[Chip Eagle](#) | Mar 30, 2011 |

Susan James

Highways, Ghosts, Hearts & Home

BluesWax Rating: 9



Break On Through

The fourth album from Los Angeles-based singer-songwriter **Susan James** feels like a breakthrough album, just as **Linda Ronstadt**'s *Heart Like a Wheel* and **Emmylou Harris**' *Elite Hotel* did in the '70s. It has the smell of a major studio production but not overbearingly so where it's all gloss and glitter devoid of any substantial context.

James appears to be a seasoned writer, blessed with a beautiful, lilting voice. She gets unfaltering support from **Paul Lacques**, **Paul Marshall**, and **Shawn Nourse** of the country outfit **I See Hawks in LA**; **Punch Brothers**' **Gabe Witcher** (fiddle); and, **Shivaree**'s **Danny McGough** (Hammond B3). The proceedings are immediately captivating with the opening track, "Airstream Girl," that interweaves infectious guitar riffs. "Cold Moon on the Highway" is similarly catchy as James sings about the zombie gig from hell. There's good pacing of tempos, styles, and arrangements here. After the monumental impact of the electrified "Cold Moon on the Highway," it quickly downshifts into the banjo-shaded, acoustic textures of "Old Jug Song" where James hauntingly laments a fallen musician known for old songs. Undoubtedly, "Out in the Woods" is the dreamiest track with beautiful vocals and a chord progression that becomes hypnotizing over the track's near six-minute duration and various steel guitar and studio effects that make nature seem near. Though the jangly "Calling Mr. Zimmerman" deals with self-confidence struggles and an intercession (read: phone call) to **Bob Dylan** (aka **Robert Allen Zimmerman**) for divine inspiration, it seems that it's really James that other writers should be dialing up.

Dan Willging is a contributing editor to BluesWax.

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