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Susan James



Highways, Ghosts, Hearts & Home

(Self-released)

www.susanjamesmusic.com

The American music scene has rootsy singer/songwriters coming out of its proverbial ears, and it can be difficult to stand out from the pack. While the occasional radical rethink is usually admiral and often wildly successful, the whole Americana wheel essentially turns on the traditional makeup of the spokes and axis, so a sudden shift is often inadvisable.

All of which is a roundabout way of saying that a singer/songwriter can make his or her rep on two things: excellent songwriting and an eye for small musical details. Fortunately for Susan James her fourth LP *Highways, Ghosts, Hearts & Home* has both. The opening track sets the tone - "Airstream Girl" paints its portrait of an ambiguously free spirit with "a fairly nebulous career" using a peppy country tune but with a seriously spacey guitar jangle as an intro. The devotion of "On Your Side" rides an ethereal melody that seems to beam directly from some romantic netherworld, while the relocation joy of "Out in the Woods" emanates from an equally atmospheric place.

Even when James isn't messing with the formula, though, she's still a step above her contemporaries. "Falling Waltz 2" pulses with the bittersweetness of unrequited love, while "Calling Mr. Zimmerman" wrestles with the frustration of writer's block. "How To Fix a Broken Girl" drills right to the core of depression, while the seeming simplicity of "Old Jug Song" teems with loss. James is no pessimist, but she's also not afraid to scratch below the surface and let a little blood hit the air. Her chosen field may be teeming with like-minded colleagues, but James' talent serves to bring eyes and ears to *Highways, Ghosts, and Hearts & Home*.

DOWNLOAD: "Falling Waltz 2," "On Your Side," "A Weed is Not a Weed (When It Grows Where It Belongs)" MICHAEL TOLAND

