Gillian Welch – The Harrow and The Harvest (2011)



01. Scarlet Town 03:39 play *02. Dark Turn Of Mind 04:08 03. The Way It Will Be 04:48 04. The Way It Goes 04:02 05. Tennessee 06:36 06. Down Along The Dixie Line 04:50 07. Six White Horses 03:38* play *08. Hard Times 04:52 09. Silver Dagger 03:23 10. The Way The Whole Thing Ends 06:11*
Gillian Welch - Banjo, Composer, Guitar, Hands, Harmonica, Vocals David Rawlings - Banjo, Composer, Guitar, Harmonica, Vocals

This album has been a very long time coming. Gillian Welch released her last set, Soul Journey, in 2003, just a year after the soundtrack album for O Brother, Where Art Thou? (in which she appeared alongside Alison Krauss) won a Grammy. She became a country/folk celebrity, and yet for eight years there has been no follow-up, apparently because she was unhappy with her material. Now, at last, comes this brave, minimalist set of new songs that sound as if they have been around for decades. The opening Scarlet Town is an elegant lament that could be an undiscovered folk ballad, Silver Dagger is not the traditional song popularised by Joan Baez but a new piece that sounds like an Appalachian folk standard. Down the Dixie Line is a classic southern lament, and The Way It Goes is a jaunty, bleak story about a girl gone wrong. Welch writes fine, timeless melodies, and her mostly gloomy lyrics are performed in suitably mournful, no-nonsense style. She is accompanied by her partner David Rawlings, providing such sparse and thoughtful guitar backing that it comes as a shock when he adds a delicate burst of harmonica or thigh-slapping percussion. --- Robin Denselow

Does the world still remember Gillian Welch? Maybe best known among mainstream listeners for her entanglement with the “O Brother Where Art Thou” soundtrack back in 2000, it’s been eight long years since Welch released an album.

But questions about timeliness lose meaning pretty fast when listening to Welch teamed with her nearly symbiotic collaborator David Rawlings. Long trafficking in a sometimes spare yet intricately drawn sort of Americana that could fit just as comfortably at the turn of the 20th century, their latest delivers the same deceptively simple alchemy of dustily lilting voices, vivid lyrical twists and crisp acoustic flourishes.

While previous albums could flirt with rambunctious elements — for a folk duo, anyway (drums! electric guitars!) — “The Harrow & the Harvest” generally sticks to Welch and Rawlings’ quiet, almost achingly intimate wheelhouse. “The Way It Will Be” finds the duo’s voices merged to otherworldly effect amid haunting admissions like “I can’t say your name without a crow flying by.” On “Six White Horses,” the banjo, handclaps and harmonica cradle their voices so cozily that a twilit front porch practically appears wherever you might be listening. With “Tennessee” casting a sideways glance at the grim classic “Moonshiner,” and “Scarlet Town” carrying a similar drive as Welch’s “Rock of Ages” from 1998, the duo aren’t necessarily taking listeners anywhere new. But considering how beautifully they’ve constructed their rustic world, it’s just a rare treat to have them take us back again. ---Chris Barton.

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