

Kathy Mattea - Coal (2008)

Written by bluelover

Sunday, 29 April 2018 14:42 -

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1 *The L&N Don't Stop Here Anymore* 4:14 2 *Blue Diamond Minds* 5:03 3 *Red-Wired Blackbird* 2:56 4 *Lawrence Jones* 3:08 5 *Green Rolling Hills* 3:47 6 *Coal Tattoo* 3:17 7 *Sally In The Garden* 0:48 8 *You'll Never Leave Harlan Alive* 5:06 9 *Dark As A Dungeon* 4:38 10 *Coming Of The Roads* 4:40 11 *Black Lung/Coal* 6:12 Kathy Mattea Guitar (Acoustic), Vocals John Catchings Cello Bill Cooley Guitar (Acoustic) Stuart Duncan Banjo, Fiddle, Guitar (Acoustic), Mandocello Eric Fritsch Hammond B3 Byron House Bass (Upright), Main Personnel Randy Leago Accordion, Piano Patty Loveless Vocal Harmony, Vocals (Background) Fred Newell Bass (Upright), Pedal Steel Mollie O'Brien Vocal Harmony, Vocals (Background) Tim O'Brien Vocal Harmony, Vocals (Background) Marty Stuart Guitars, Mandocello, Mandolin, Vocal Harmony, Vocals (Background)

Although she's moved steadily towards a more roots-oriented style over the years, Kathy Mattea will probably always be remembered for her pop-styled country hits from the 1980s and '90s on Mercury and MCA Records. A lot has changed, though, and she's no longer a major-label darling, and her latest album, *Coal*, on the independent Captain Potato imprint, is exactly the kind of release she wouldn't have been allowed to do earlier in her career when everything hinged on delivering a radio hit or two or three. *Coal* is a heartfelt examination of the hard, often dangerous life of coal miners, and includes classic mining songs by the likes of Merle Travis, Hazel Dickens, and Jean Ritchie all arranged in a delicate, muted acoustic style by Mattea and her producer this time out, Marty Stuart. Mattea grew up in West Virginia, and while her father escaped the mines, both her grandfathers were miners, so when the 2006 Sago Mine disaster hit, which left 12 good men dead, she made up her mind to record this sparse, striking album. It won't land her on the new country stations, but it's a beautiful testament to a difficult way of life, and working on an independent label, she's been given the freedom to make an album that has more to do with the heart than the ring of distant cash registers. Highlights include versions of two of Jean Ritchie's finest compositions, the precise and brilliant "The L&N Don't Stop Here Anymore" and the only slightly less striking "Blue Diamond Mines," a muted and effective take on Billy Edd Wheeler's haunting "Red-Winged Blackbird," and a sturdy rendition of Merle Travis' classic "Dark as a Dungeon," but everything here is of a piece, and Mattea's unadorned vocals and Stuart's supporting arrangements never overstate things,

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allowing these songs to tell their forceful stories of lives spent reaching for personal dignity and redemption in the face of almost impossible odds. It's bleak, sad, and tragic, yes, but Coal, in the end, is surprisingly reaffirming because of it. Coal won't fill the dancefloors but it will fill the heart with hope and remind that even in the darkest times and places, there's a song worth singing, and those songs, the ones that emerge from the bleakest situations, may well be ones we need the most. ---Steve Leggett, AllMusic Review

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