

Bluegrass Special

January, 2009

Quiet. Listen.

By David McGee

TRUE NORTH

Kim Richardson

Arkansas native and Memphis resident Kim Richardson is demanding to be heard with *True North*, her second solo album, a long-awaited followup to 2001's *Up Until Now*.

This is not to suggest a matter of volume--in fact, despite the accompaniment of a small, tight quartet and Richardson's own nimble acoustic guitar work, *True North* is a remarkably quiet, intimate album--but rather the force of the artist's literate, perceptive songwriting and the deep, human quality of her clear, ringing voice (some will find it reminiscent of the young Natalie Merchant, at times) and deliciously subtle southern twang. She's tough as nails and delicate as a blooming flower all at once, a woman unafraid of expressing her most vulnerable side but unwilling to be anyone's doormat. "This is your life girl, now live," she declares amidst the jittery rock pulse of "Jump On," which as much as anything is a call to engage the world with commitment and passion, right now, because "the train is leaving the station."

Her tough side surfaces from the git-go, on the album opening rocker, "Vinegar In Your Veins," wherein she slices and dices a feckless paramour who has revealed himself to be rather soulless once "the new wears off"--and that's just for starters.

Towards the end of the record she gets into a rockabilly frame of mind while declaring emphatically "Stop Jerkin' My Chain," the point of which should be clear from the title sentiment, but the pleasure of the passion unfurled here is doubled by the rumbling rhythm section and William Lee Ellis's sizzling steel guitar punctuations on a track that reeks of the Memphis from whence it springs.

Following a vitriolic start, though, Richardson enters poignant territory with the funk-tinged "'Cause You're Mine," a touching memory of a lost love she clings to, even though it now exists only in her mind as a sweet touchstone of a good thing that couldn't work out. Backed only by her delicately fingerpicked acoustic guitar and making effective use of the ache she can summon in her upper register, Richardson envisions her own funeral and ascent to heaven in "Six Miles High," adding the postscript, "When I go/let it be joyful/let there be peace when I die/let my soul complete the circle/look for me six miles high/bury me in the sky."

For pure get-down fun, check out the easygoing, J.J. Cale-like shuffle of "Devil On a Sunday," a brisk but unapologetic confession of some hell-raising ways, spiced with the solid, thumping rhythm section of upright bassist Amy LaVere and percussionist Paul Taylor, while Ellis provides the ebullient steel guitar licks dancing all around Richardson's swaggering vocal.

There's a couple of arresting songs about women--both with young daughters--enmeshed in difficult circumstances, one of her own doing in the smoldering twang and emotional turmoil described in "Midnight, MS," the other trying to make sense of her coming-of-age daughter's worrisome behavior in "Daughter," a folk-flavored song of alternately contemplative verses and roiling choruses, both songs sharing the metaphor of mighty waters overwhelming their protagonists. Rick Steff's forceful church piano drives the sturdy forward momentum of the title track, which is entirely appropriate for a song that finds Richardson emoting with gospel fervor in declaring her intention to find her *raison d'etre*.

In that light the closing track, the somber, fingerpicked "Virginia," has even greater, and deeper, impact. It's something of a bookend to the album opening "Vinegar In Your Veins," but whereas that song scores a lover for whom the conquest is all, this one whispers the pain of a long-term same-sex relationship--of nearly two decades, according to the lyrics--come to an abrupt end when one of the partners finds she can no longer live with the love "that dare not speak its name." In one of the song's few anguished outbursts, Richardson cries, "Oh, Virginia, you turned your back on your own," and later, solemnly, observes, "You changed forever to unfair." In the year of *Milk* and Prop 8, you'd like for certain folks to hear "Virginia" and understand the real human beings whose lives are as complex as any other's, whose love is as profound as any other's, whose pain of loss is every bit as all consuming as any other's. You want them to hear Kim Richardson singing softly, as if in prayer, "Oh Virginia, I will always feel her there" and feel the devastation of the ensuing silence.

True North comes full circle at that point, even as it suggests all the work left undone.
