



Kate Campbell Album Reviews

PASTE MAGAZINE

Kate Campbell, *Monuments*. Coming to a Kate Campbell album simply for entertainment is like entering a Paris bakery for white bread or an English pub for light beer. To Campbell, whose schedule more resembles that of a traveling revivalist than a folk singer (she was the featured performer at the recent Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta), entertainment isn't an end in itself; rather, it is a tool to deftly nudge listeners toward a higher purpose, toward tolerance, commitment and understanding.

Campbell's sixth release since 1995 continues a string of thoughtful, literate, accessible records that have created for her a huge grassroots fan base. Thematically *Monuments* concerns itself with a broad range of Southern stereotypes and pokes huge holes in them. Campbell even muses about the homogenized "New South" with tongue firmly planted in her Southern cheek: "They'll valet park you at the Galleria / they'll hang your coat up for you at the door / They'll take your check, your MasterCard of Visa / They love our money at those Yankee stores."

Songs like the mystical "Yellow Guitar" and "How Much Can One Heart Hold" offer fresh imaginative folk songwriting. Campbell smartly illustrates the Southern social tragedy with a vivid picture of an old woman who can't accept modernity and change living alone in her "Pettrified House," while in "Joe Louis' Furniture" Campbell chides us for callous racial attitudes that led to the great boxing champion's furniture being auctioned to pay his taxes.

In the deceptively lighthearted "Corn In A Box," Campbell takes a well-aimed shot at extremist on both sides who still make much of the interminable evolution controversy. Referencing scientific achievements like space flight and cloning, Campbell suggests that arguing evolution is tangential, even pointless when creation is the miracle:

“Evolution’s almost through / There ain’t much left that we can’t do / Seems like a paradox / Still can’t grow corn in a box.”

The album’s centerpiece, “William’s Vision,” is brilliantly composed as a conversation with tombstone maker William Edmondson, the first African-American to have a solo exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (1937). Campbell ends the tune by succinctly summarizing Edmondson’s source of inspiration and life’s work: “William had a vision / Straight from God in heaven / Pick up your hammer and chisel / And mark the graves of my children.” Campbell’s Monument has been hand-carved with much the same artistry that informed Edmond’s work. – William Michael Smith

MEMPHIS COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Kate Campbell, *Monuments*. Like its CD cover - an Edward Weston photograph of sculptures by self-taught artist William Edmondson - the music on Kate Campbell's latest record, "Monuments," is etched with a simple majesty.

It's tempting to call this album of exquisite portraits and devastatingly down-to-earth homilies by the Sledge, Miss., singer-songwriter her finest effort since 1997's "Moonpie Dreams" - until you reach the Edmondson homage, William's Vision, that is, and realize that "Monuments" is Campbell's greatest testament yet: to faith, fortitude and the mythic power she can instill in the commonest of life's subjects.

With a literate eye for detail and metaphor, Campbell weaves her country-folk tales like a masterly storyteller, more Flannery O'Connor than, say, Mary Chapin Carpenter or Iris DeMent.

On the tune Joe Louis' Furniture, the working-class narrator becomes owner of the boxing legend's coffee table and chair.

"I bought it at an auction 10 years ago," Campbell sings. "I put my feet up on it and watch the fights on HBO."

Then there's the Old South personification in Petrified House, an elderly woman who "sees the world through yellowing lace" and believes that "the south didn't fall as long as wisteria climbs up the wall."

Not every song carries such an impact and a few suffer from affected arrangements. But the best truly takes you on a journey.

Especially if you caught this year's full-of-wonder Edmondson exhibit at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, you'll want to hear Campbell's entry into a South where chiseled angels take flight and the softest hearts of stone miraculously exist. - Bill Ellis

THE BOSTON PHOENIX

Kate Campbell, *Moonpie Dreams*. This follow-up to Campbell's well-received 1995 debut, *Songs From the Levee*, is an even better collection – more focused, and with a broader musical palette. Campbell is more Southern than country; her sensibility is small-town literary rather than suburban, and the characters and locales her songs chronicle are evocative of Southern change and decline. Her musical influences range from Muscle Shoals-like R & B to the Band to acoustic country folk.

Even when the arrangements are contemporary, however, the songs are rendered timeless by the vintage instruments and Campbell's clear, unaffected vocals, pure of line with a thick Mississippi twang, sort of halfway between Iris Dement and Emmylou Harris. There's not a single clunker among the dozen well-crafted originals here. And "See Rock City," which chronicles the emotional life of a young woman yearning to break free of her small-town nexus, is the sort of intelligent, boomer-oriented country pop that could gain Campbell some Mary Chapin Carpenter-like success.

– Seth Rogovoy

USA TODAY

COUNTRY: Kate Campbell, *Moonpie Dreams* (***) Lauded by both the *Farm Journal* and NPR, Campbell's music perches comfortably between country and folk. The contemplative "Tupelo's Too Far" is very much in the Mary Chapin Carpenter mold, while the plainspoken "Delmus Jackson" is a character study in the style of Nanci Griffith. Such comparisons are unavoidable, but Campbell is nonetheless a distinctive talent. "Songs like Older Angel," a plea for better guidance from spiritual entities, and the peculiar nostalgia of "When Panthers Roamed In Arkansas" are one of a kind.

THE BOSTON GLOBE

Kate Campbell, *Moonpie Dreams*. Mississippi-born Kate Campbell has one of those voices that charms with its innocence and purity. Yet when coupled with her highly articulate and provocative lyrics, her sweet soprano takes on a totally commanding nature. In her second release, Campbell draws the listener into her literate songs as she artfully skirts the border between country and folk with a few rock and blues twists. Much of this album has a feel that falls somewhere between Neil Young's "Harvest" and the country folk sounds of Iris Dement, Nanci Griffith and Emmylou Harris. In a nutshell, Campbell is a major talent. She manages to juxtapose tales of the frustrations of rural Americana with her personal experiences, as well as dealing with more touchy topics such as domestic violence ("Signs Following"). She does this with incredible precision and poignancy and without ever sounding pretentious. Simplicity, sincerity and sophistication run rampant here. – *Mick Skidmore*

AMERICAN ROOTS

Kate Campbell, *Rosaryville*. Kate Campbell's music has been compared to that of Mary Chapin Carpenter, Lucinda Williams and Nanci Griffith-- yet in all honesty, Campbell's sound is hers and hers alone. *Rosaryville*, Campbell's fourth album, is full of intricate

details concerning the wise and humble characters whom Campbell brings to life. From the mother and daughter of “In My Mother’s House” to the Cuban cigar maker in “Rosa’s Coronas,” Campbell’s songs speak of everyday folks and their everyday, real life struggles and small miracles. Campbell’s voice is absolutely beautiful and her backing players deliver sparse songs with uncluttered finesse and unplugged power.

NPR’s *All Things Considered*

Kate Campbell, *Songs From The Levee*. Kate Campbell’s debut album, *Songs From The Levee*, on the Compass Records label, addresses social issues, paints pictures of her past and conveys her stories along with straightforward melodies. Whether the album cut is autobiographical or a homespun tale, they convey an understanding of the nuances of southern living. Although she is from the Mississippi Delta, she is not a blues singer. She sings her own folk songs and plays guitar with a back-up band.

Kate Campbell’s songs create beautiful musical folklore by weaving a tapestry of tales with trains, rivers and landscapes. The universal images used in *Songs From The Levee* triggered memories from my childhood: camping on Valcour Island with my family and skipping stones across the Brandywine River.

Kate Campbell was born in New Orleans, but spent her early years singing Sunday services at her father’s Baptist church in Sledge, Mississippi. After receiving a Masters Degree in Southern History, she moved to Nashville to teach college history and work on her songwriting skills.

“Jerusalem Inn”, one of the most uplifting cuts on the *Songs From The Levee* album was influenced, both in theme and imagery by Campbell’s early diet of gospel music. “Wild Iris”, another of my favorites, is a playful story of one woman’s lifelong love for her mate.

Kate Campbell’s lyrics reflect her talent as both historian and songwriter. She is able to blend history, memories and music into each song she writes. “A Cotton Field Away” takes a personal look at integration. “Trains Don’t Run From Nashville” laments the brutal effects of technology on the culture, and “Bury Me In Bluegrass” which appears to be a protest song about family farms turning into shopping malls, is actually a love story about a family, which deeply cares for their land after they sell it.

Songs From The Levee is an inspiring collection of well-crafted songs, clear vocals and simple direct arrangements. Kate Campbell is an intriguing and enthusiastic storyteller. She gives her listeners ample reason to look forward to album number two.

GOLDMINE

Kate Campbell, *Visions Of Plenty*. In the remarkably short space of two albums, singer/songwriter Kate Campbell has come from total obscurity to gain a position of praise and prominence usually achieved only after attaining a much lengthier resume. It’s no wonder; as *Visions of Plenty*, her remarkable third outing attests, Campbell is a wonderfully sensitive and expressive singer and songwriter, one with an eye for detail and an ear for a vibrant melody.

Musically, Campbell wins comparison to the likes of Emmylou Harris, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Nanci Griffith. However, it's her literary reference points that have made the critics sit up and take notice. Born and raised in Mississippi and Tennessee, her songs capture the heart of the Southland in a way that some have likened to William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams.

The sweetly engaging title track finds her singing of faith and dreams even in the midst of despair and desperation. The images of urban decay that's captured in the minimalist lyrics of "Deep Tang" is awash in futility and resignation. "Bus 109" and "Crazy In Alabama" offer vivid views of the struggle against segregation from a southerner's point of view, capturing the chaos and confusion that run through childhood memories.

"And the train of change
Was coming fast to my hometown
We had the choice to climb on board
Or get run down"

Fortunately, Campbell also finds reason to rejoice, whether it's the celebration of spirit in "Funeral Food," a playful poke at religious quackery in "Jesus and Tomatoes," a would-be-bowling pro's just-shy-of-perfect score in the perky "Bowl-A-Rama," or the embracing envelope of love and support that shines through the soothing "Perfect World."

In addition, the album demonstrates real musical muscle, thanks in part to a stellar supporting cast that includes Emmylou Harris, Spooner Oldham and especially producer/guitarist Johnny Pierce whose engaging arrangements complement the songs with shimmering textures throughout. From the delicate blend of recorder and guitar on the lovely "This Side Of Heaven" to the bluesy gospel stance of "Sing Me Out" to the funky saxophones that accompany Kate's Bonnie Raitt-like take on "Suit Yourself," Campbell and company effectively vary moods and melodies throughout.

Is *Visions Of Plenty* the best album of Campbell's career? It's hard to say; her first two offerings, *Songs From The Levee* and *Moonpie Dreams* are so outstanding, they defy comparison. But as far as Campbell's competition is concerned, those who aspire to claiming 1998's folk or country album of the year are gonna be hard pressed to come up with a musical masterpiece that can top this. Any takers? -- *Lee Zimmerman*

Large River Music, P.O. Box 121743, Nashville, TN 37212
Phone: 1-866-LR-MUSIC Fax: 615-460-9142 www.katecampbell.com