



The Gospel According to Patty

Listening to Patty Griffin's *Downtown Church* feels like attending an unauthorized late-night worship service, as if an unassuming member of the choir sneaked back into the sanctuary one night, gathered a few barroom musician friends, and together they let loose with their favorite instruments, passionate voices, and beautiful harmonies—and someone just happened to be there to bootleg it.

In reality, *Downtown Church* is the result of singer-songwriter Patty Griffin deciding to do a gospel album and then succeeding in getting Buddy Miller to produce it, a gifted ensemble of musicians to play on it, and an unbelievable cast of vocalists—including Emmylou Harris, Raul Malo, Shawn Colvin, Jim Lauderdale, the McCrary Sisters, Buddy and Julie Miller, and Mike Farris—to back her up. It's Americana at its best recognizing gospel music's impact on the genre. And true to Americana artists' somewhat snobbish insistence that their music be rootsy and real, Griffin and friends lay down these tracks not in some upscale music studio but in an historic Presbyterian church in downtown Nashville—a brilliant idea that really does succeed in giving the album the aural seal of authenticity.

Her seventh release, *Downtown* is Griffin's most thematically cohesive and mature album. She seems relaxed and comfortable here, enjoying the company of fellow musicians and friends. She also seems to be fanning the embers of her own faith. A self-professed lapsed Catholic, Griffin sings the songs on *Downtown* as if to get back in touch with

something that already runs through her veins. While her previous release *Children Running Through* (ATO Records) shows initial signs of spiritual longing, *Downtown* continues the search with greater clarity.

Listeners are treated to originals such as "Little Fire" and "Coming Home to Me," as well as fresh covers of old songs such as "Wade in the Water" and "We Shall Be Reunited." With the exception of "I Smell a Rat,"—a pronounced misfit in this collection, but nevertheless catchy and easy to like—the *Downtown* songs are emotionally soothing. Griffin's records have that effect on people anyway; but when she sings overtly spiritual songs, her voice becomes a balm to the beat-up and weary soul.

By the time I got around to the last song, the familiar church hymn "All Creatures of Our God and King," my tears were flowing. This is by far the most moving song on the album, or perhaps it is simply the perfect ending to an overall moving production. At first I sang the hymn with Patty, as if I were standing right next to her in church; but after the first verse, I just let the gentle piano and Griffin's soaring voice

take over as I worshiped the Creator with blubbing too deep for words.

Appropriately, Griffin dedicates this work to the homeless women and men of Nashville in her liner notes (those who have gone totally digital in their music acquisition sadly miss out on things like this). She also encourages listeners to make donations to the homeless ministry of Downtown Presbyterian Church (where the album was recorded), as well as to the Room in the Inn, a homeless shelter also in Nashville. I say "appropriately" because of the nature of the gospel; if we're going to sing about the man who befriended the poor, the marginalized, and the outcast, then let our heartfelt singing lead to meaningful action among them. This is one of the reasons I appreciate the fact that this album was made not by a band of the slick and polished variety, but by a scruffy group of gifted cowgirls and cowboys who sing earthily of personal faith and its implications.

I am not surprised that Griffin was nominated as artist of the year and *Downtown Church* the album of the year by the Americana Music Association. While Roseanne Cash's *The List* and Ryan Bingham went home with the prizes, Patty Griffin and *Downtown Church* are no less winners, sure to satisfy not only indie fans, but also those who find themselves perpetually on the lookout for spiritual substance in music and culture sure to satisfy not only indie fans, but also those who find themselves perpetually on the lookout for spiritual substance in music and culture.

So there's only one thing left to do: Buy this heavenly "bootleg" and listen in on Griffin and friends who have been left unsupervised in the sanctuary. 🎵

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