

he touches, his baritone singing booms like a jukebox in a Memphis corner bar. Though they are all very good singers who harmonize nicely with each other on this album, this is not a singing album per se, as the true strength of all three is their instrumental skill.

Rich DelGrosso belts out Rich Lyons' satirical, cheeky song played traditional style, *Google Blues*, a song that you either really love or really hate. Martin Grosswendt is absolutely superb on slide guitar on this tune, interacting beautifully with song leader Rich DelGrosso on mandolin. Some will argue that it makes the blues fresh, pertinent and funny for today—tongue-in-cheek and witty. Others will maintain that it makes a mockery of the harsh African American experience that gave life to this music. This writer heard an angry rejection of this song by a prominent, usually gentle African American acoustic blues player, who denounced the song choice after stating his high esteem and respect for the Ragpicker musicians. "That song is everything that is wrong with the blues today," he said. "Some people think the blues can be about anything at all. They trivialize the blues because they really don't understand the feeling, the conditions under which the black folks lived. The blues is now reduced to *She googled up my shady past!*" He has a point. Lyons is not a traditional blues musician, and the notion that you can write blues about googling is far removed from true blues.

Yet, that singular questionable song choice, mistake or not, doesn't detract from the fact that this is otherwise a very fine album with some of the best string players on the scene today. Tip your hat to these Ragpickers who play up a storm. It's a triumphant win for the acoustic blues in the 21st century.

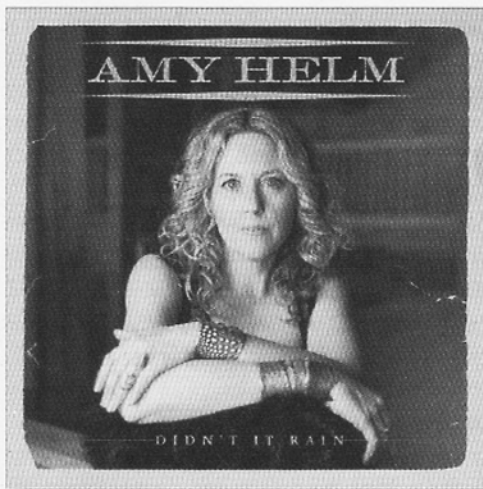
—Frank Matheis

AMY HELM

Didn't It Rain

eOne Music – EOM-CD-5264

Didn't It Rain is the long awaited debut CD from singer, mandolin player and sometime drummer Amy Helm, who is the daughter of the late iconic singer, drummer and sometime mandolin player Levon Helm. In addition to mirroring her father in terms of how she channels her talents, Helm's music is very much a blend of blues, gospel, country, R&B and rock, which her father helped shape 50 years ago with the Hawks and the Band and continued to champion with his Midnight Ramble



until his passing in 2012. *Didn't It Rain* may be her solo debut, but Helm is a seasoned performer, having worked extensively as a member of the Midnight Ramble band and as a founding member of the rootsy Brooklyn-based ensemble Ollabelle.

The recording has been in the works for a while—she actually re-recorded a number of completed tracks after playing the tunes live with her band, the Handsome Strangers—Byron Isaacs on bass, David Berger on drums and David Littleton on guitar. In fact, three tracks have been in the can long enough to feature the distinctively loose yet totally in the pocket drumming of her father, who is also credited as executive producer. Proud dad aside, he assuredly would approve of the rocking grooves, sparkling musicianship and heartfelt, soulful singing that his daughter delivers. Kudos for making a great sounding recording must go to producer Isaacs.

The program literally kicks off with the driving second line drumming by Berger on the powerfully emotive, down-home gospel of the title track, *Rescue Me*, an original, is a surging soul workout that features Little Feat's Bill Payne on piano. Helm takes things back to church for a fiery, stripped down cover of Sam Cooke's *Good News*, that is propelled by Berger's "hambone" handclaps and body slaps and the dueling guitars of Jim Weider (on slide) and Larry Campbell. Helm shows her versatility as she moves from gospel and soul to heartfelt country ballads on tracks like *Deep Water* and *Sing to Me*. Helm senior's raspy Arkansas twang counts off the opening of Martha Scanlan's *Spend Our Last Dime*, and he provides a rock solid foundation as his daughter plays mandola and sings with bravado on a Band-like romp through a blues-meets-country rocker. Her mandolin opens the haunting gospel blues of *Roll the Stone*, and her impassioned vocal builds in intensity as it rides on a pulse provided by David Littleton's

banjo line and guest John Medeski's stabbing organ fills. Helm really cuts loose on *Heat Lightning*, with Campbell and Chris Masterson unleashing dueling guitar lines and her father's galloping boogie beat driving the whole affair. *Wild Girl* closes *Didn't It Rain* with passion and fire, a duet that features Littleton's jagged edge guitar and Helm's starkly mournful vocal that takes everything down to the root of it all and gives the blues the final say.

— Robert H. Cataliotti

KAREN WOLFE

No Regrets

Coday – KD 875

The opening track, an Omar Cunningham creation entitled *B.O.B.* (i.e., "Battery Operated Boyfriend") has made some encouraging noise around the South, and it may be Karen Wolfe's most successful outing yet. It has a crisp, danceable backing track with plenty of percussive punctuation and a lithe, soul-chording guitar line running through it. Wolfe's voice is dusky, unforced and straight-ahead—sharpening the irony of the storyline, an antic tale of a woman who has been compelled to "cheat" on her less-than-satisfying boyfriend by using an electronic sex toy. It's a theme that several southern soul artists have tackled in recent years, and Wolfe sounds both comfortable and delighted with her opportunity to weigh in. Another Omar Cunningham offering, *Ain't No Right Way to Do Wrong*, showcases Wolfe's gifts with more serious-minded material.

Old-school soul aficionados will recognize a couple of Bill Coday remakes (both co-written by Denise LaSalle, who happens to be Wolfe's sister-in-law; Anna Neal Coday, the label owner, is Bill's widow): a funk-toughened version of Coday's 1971 hit *Get Your Lie Straight* and a new version of that B-Side, the bluesy *You're Gonna Want Me (Back)*. Other fare, such as *Southern Soul Party Mood*, *Super Lover* and *All Night Ready Man* (despite its melodic echoes of Gene Chandler's *Rainbow*) are cast more firmly in a contemporary southern soul mold; *Don't Nothing Here Belong to You* (no relation to the standard *When You Leave Don't Take Nothing*) is a sassy, sharp-tongued throwdown from a woman who's fed up with being used and is ready to declare herself free.

Karen Wolfe has already proven herself a capable vocalist; as she (and her producers) expand into more imaginative repertoire, she shows herself increasingly able to summon