

## CD REVIEWS

### THE NEW RELEASES

#### Connie Smith

#### LONG LINE OF HEARTACHES

Sugar Hill Records SUG-CD-4072

★★★★☆

*Veteran country singer in top form*

Connie Smith, one of the most underrated female singers of 1960s country, has been very badly treated when it comes to CD reissues and compilations. Trying to find new recordings by the veteran Grand Ole Opry star are even more difficult. After releasing a whole string of albums through the 1960s and into the mid-1970s, we were suddenly deprived of the rich tones of Ms Smith, arguably the finest country vocalist of them all. After 1978's *NEW HORIZONS*, we had to wait twenty years for a self-titled collection released by Warner Bros in 1998, and then a further thirteen years for this new release on Sugar Hill. Though she always sounded real country way back in the 1960s, all too often Connie's recordings were drenched in the excesses of the Nashville Sound, with unnecessary strings and choral background. There's none of that here; just lashings of steel, electric and acoustic guitars and piano, allowing the full timbre of her vocals to shine through. She might be seventy years old, but you wouldn't know it by the timbre of her vocals. She makes Taylor Swift sound like a whimpering kitten in comparison.

Production is by Connie's husband Marty Stuart. The recordings took place in the famed RCA Studio B in Nashville and accompaniment is provided by her road band the Sundowners (Gary Carter on steel, Rick Wright on electric guitar, gut string guitar, vocals, Ric McClure on drums and bassist Rod Ham) augmented by Stuart (various guitars), Robby Turner (steel), Paul Martin (bass, vibes), Dirk Johnson (piano) and Andy Reiss (guitars). Though the Stuart touch is all over this album, it is the sheer quality and exuberance of Ms Smith's vocals that carries the hard-hitting, emotion-packed material.

Though not renowned as a songwriter—she only penned a couple of her old hits—Connie Smith has co-written five of these dozen songs, and each one of them is a pure country gem. The title tune is a hard-hitting mid-tempo country tune kicked into gear by a great steel guitar intro that maintains its presence as Ms Smith unfolds the story of an impending break-up. *I'm Not Blue* is a sad-edged ballad with an emotional vocal as she tries to convince everyone that she is fine after romance has gone belly-up. Alongside her own songs, Connie has selected songs by such renowned writers as Harlan Howard, Kostas, Dallas Frazier, Roy Drusky, the once prolific team of Foster and Rice and the late Johnny Russell. In fact it's Russell's *Ain't You Even Gonna Cry*, which is the album's standout ... a real country break-up tearjerker. That is followed by the swing tempo of *I Don't Believe That's How You Feel* a classic co-write by Harlan Howard and Kostas. I have versions of this song by Tanya Tucker and Tracy Byrd. Though Connie turns in an excellent version, without the fiddle it is lacking and I have to say that Tracy's version remains my favourite. But it's good to hear superb renditions of old favourites like Drusky's *Anymore*, Patty Loveless *That Makes Two Of Us* and Johnny Paycheck's *My Part Of Forever*.

This album is ample proof, if it was ever needed, that Connie Smith was, and still is, one of the finest female vocalists ever to grace country music. *Alan Cackett*



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