

**JAMES HOUSE**  
**Broken Glass Twisted Steel**  
 ★★★★★



*Train Wreck / Here's To You / Ain't That Lonely Yet / Every Time It Rains / A Broken Wing / King Of Nothing / Little Time With You / In A Week Or Two / Over Here Tonight / Crying / Before I Run Out Of Time*  
 Producer: James House  
 Victor House Records  
 38:34

James House has long been one of my favourite writers. Back in the late 80s and early 90s if I saw his name credited as one of the writers of a song it would be the one I played first, and more often than not my favourite track on the album. Even better if he had collaborated with someone like Kostas. For a time he was signed to MCA, and then some years later Epic Records, during which spell he achieved his highest charting single with *This Is Me Missing You* (#6 in 1995). The Epic album also features the absolutely wonderful *Take Me Away* featuring Raul Malo, and how it was never a single I'll never know (it is listed as the B-side of *This Is Me Missing You* but if you were able to find a 'single' in 1995 you're luckier than me).

It's been a while since House's last solo release but he has dabbled in more rock orientated side projects. With a UK tour happening next month this is officially his new 'country' release.

As a writer House has had

notable success with Dwight Yoakam (*Ain't That Lonely Yet*), Diamond Rio (*In A Week Or Two*) and Martina McBride (*A Broken Wing*), and he includes those songs here along with some new songs and a new recording of *Here's To You*, which was originally on his *Hard Times For An Honest Man* album, and always one of his strongest songs. I suspect one or two of the other songs might have been written around that time. It has a fuller sound here and is the most straightforward country track on the album.

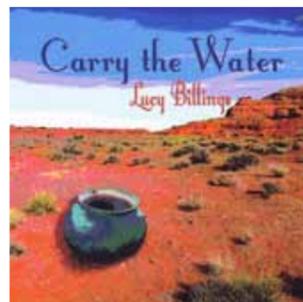
It's always interesting to hear a songwriter's take on a song you know by somebody else and I think *A Broken Wing* is a stunning piece of work. Always a showstopper for Martina, I absolutely adore it, and strangely enough, the thing that struck me here was not that it was a male voice, or that the note that Martina likes to hold on to for ages was absent, but how much I missed the "oooh-ee-ooohs" from McBride's version.

Of course, neither it, *In A Week Or Two*, or *Ain't That Lonely Yet* are going to compare to the versions that have entered your subconscious, and you wouldn't expect them to. *Ain't That Lonely Yet* is subdued and almost stripped down.

*King Of Nothing* is quite bluesy, and I couldn't help thinking how good it would be for Dwight, despite House being in possession of a voice which seems to come from the roof of his mouth rather than the back of the throat, and to which I am rather partial. He does stray slightly into Springsteen territory occasionally, such as on *Over Here Tonight* and the opening *Train Wreck*. Then again, maybe that should be Bob Seger territory, for during the final track I found myself singing *We've Got Tonight* to it.

Duncan Warwick

**LUCY BILLINGS**  
**Carry The Water**  
 ★★★★★



*Carry The Water / Wyoming / God's House / Canyon / The Answer / Edge Of The Ring / Courage / Asking You Why / Freedom / The Here And Now / What You Gonna Do / Not Far From Me / State Of Blind*  
 Producer: John Jennings  
 Sassy Time Records  
 52:32

Americana/folk singer Lucy Billings is back with a third helping of her addictive music. The singer began releasing CDs in 2006. The new one, like number two, *No Other Road*, is produced by the wonderful John Jennings, who also co-wrote two of the songs, and plays several instruments.

The first song, *Carry The Water*, is the most commercial Lucy Billings song so far. It's a co-write with John Jennings and was inspired by a trip the singer's sister made to Africa. Even today many women in Africa have to carry water, in pots for mile after mile, every day. The song is calm and melodic. Lucy Billings sings, "*Carry the water, backbreaking work, women must bear....*" Making this almost a new feminist anthem. Lucy Billings' warm vocal, with John Jennings superb production 'carry' this song home.

Lucy Billings' album contains her most mature songwriting so far. The lyrics are included

in a booklet, and they make interesting reading, even without the music. The song, *Canyon* has a haunting, melodic beauty, it's life affirming. The lyrics are a mirror image of Lucy Billings youth, projected forward.

In *Edge of The Ring*, a track about trust and relationships, Lucy Billings sings, "*I've been held back by the fear*". In this song's companion piece, *Courage*, we learn that there is, "*no more holding back*". The fear is gone, the relationship can develop. In these songs, the singer lets her audience into a private world, where personal thoughts are allowed to drift to the surface. *Courage* also features the lyric, "*I'm afraid of getting hurt, I'm afraid of time*". This gives the listener a feeling that problems may be around the next corner.

In the song, *Asking You Why* Lucy Billings has questions for God. "*How many wrongs could be part of your plan?*" In reality as humans we have the gift of choice, to do the right thing, or to do something bad, or even very bad. The song is about the terrible shootings in Tucson, Arizona when a deranged man attempted to assassinate the politician, Gabrielle Giffords, who was seriously injured, but survived. Six people, including a 9 year old girl, with dreams of a career in politics, didn't make it. This song also has a companion, *God's House*, which looks at faith. It's about a church which has been converted into a house, but does it still belong to God?

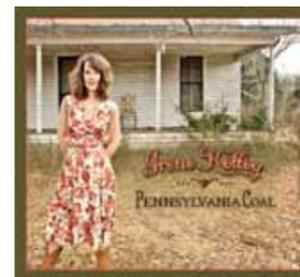
Other highlights of Lucy Billings CD are the beautiful country meets folk of *Wyoming*, love song *The Here And Now*, and a look at retirement in *What You Gonna Do?* The album ends with quality, piano-led ballad, *State Of Blind*.

Lucy Billings has few rivals in the Americana/ folkly area. She

is a very underrated songwriter, on her new disc, producer John Jennings creates a sound mix where you can here every note of music, every word of the lyrics. It sounds wonderful. Someone of Lucy Billings talent should be on a major record label.

Paul Riley

**IRENE KELLEY**  
**Pennsylvania Coal**  
 ★★★★★



*You Don't Run Across My Mind / Feels Like Home / Pennsylvania Coal / Breakin' Even / My Flower / Rattlesnake Rattler / Sister's Heart / Things We Never Did / Sister's Heart / Angles Around Her / Better With Time / Garden Of Dreams / You Are Mine*  
 Producer Mark Fain

**Patio**  
 37:49

Irene Kelley has been writing and recording for many years, mostly working in that country and folk mix now called Americana. Now she looks at her own history as she pays tribute to her ancestors in *Pennsylvania Coal*, writing or co-writing all the songs herself in a bluegrass setting. To take the story forward to the next generation, the final track, *You Are Mine*, is sung by Irene with her daughters, Sara Jean and Justyna.

The back cover is a 100 year old photograph of Pennsylvania coal miners including her grandfather and was the inspiration for this concept album. The title song is

particularly strong: she calls the miners "*heroes everyone*" and says that they were "*making a better life for someone down the road*". This may be romanticising it: did her forefathers actually think this way? Also, I think the songs are too idyllic and beautiful for songs of hardship.

The album has a lovely sound and the sparkling opening cut *You Don't Run Across My Mind* reminds me of John Hartford. Although the songs are linked, they work individually and the break-up song, *Breakin' Even*, and the love song, *My Flower*, are fine on their own.

The guest musicians include Carl Jackson on *Things We Never Did* and Trisha Yearwood on *Better Than Mine*. Carl once recorded Irene's *You Are A Rock* and her best known songs are *Love Can't Ever Be Better Than This* by Ricky Skaggs and Sharon White and *A Little Bluer Than That* by Alan Jackson. It's been some time since Irene Kelley wrote some hit songs but there is plenty of potential here.

If any CD calls for a lyric sheet, it is this one but it isn't provided. It would be good to follow what Irene Kelley is saying, especially as she must be hoping we learn something from these songs.

Spencer Leigh

**LINDA RONSTADT**  
**Duets**  
 ★★★★★



*Adieu False Heart / I Can't Get Over You / Walk Away Renee*

(*all with Ann Savoy*) / *The New Partner Waltz* (Carl Jackson) / *I Never Will Marry* (Dolly Parton) / *Pretty Bird* (Laurie Lewis) / *I Can't Help It* (Emmylou Harris) / *Hasten Down The Wind* (Don Henley) / *Prisoner In Disguise* (J D Souther) / *It's Gonna Work Out Fine* (James Taylor) / *Don't Know Much* / *All My Life* (both with Aaron Neville) / *Somewhere Out There* (James Ingram) / *Sisters* (Bette Midler) / *Moonlight In Vermont* (Frank Sinatra)

Producers: Various  
**Rhino**  
 50:19

Linda Ronstadt's career is at a standstill because she is suffering from Parkinson's Disease but she has a large body of work which can be used for reissues and compilations. Fortunately, she often ignored current trends and so a record made 30 years ago may not sound dated. Duets illustrates this – the 15 tracks stretch from 1974 to 2006 – but many of the tracks could have been made yesterday.

The ones everybody knows are *Don't Know Much* (1986) with Aaron Neville (1989) and *Somewhere Out There* (1986) with James Ingram from An American Tail, both written by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil. They are Linda Ronstadt's only Top 10 singles in the UK and she never had a Top 10 album. It stands to reason then that relatively few people in the UK own a Linda Ronstadt record and this collection serves an excellent purpose.

Those hit tracks may be the way in, but the delights are elsewhere. Her album, *Adieu False Heart* (2006) with the Cajun musician, Ann Savoy was excellent and of the three songs selected here, *Walk Away Renee* is pure delight. If

you only know the Four Tops' version you are in for a great surprise – angelic harmonies supported by violin, viola and cello. In a similarly low-key style is *I Never Will Marry*, a traditional ballad sung with Dolly Parton. *Pretty Bird* is a previously unreleased, unaccompanied duet with Laurie Lewis of an attractive Hazel Dickens song, and with Linda and Carl Jackson singing the Louvin Brothers' *New Partner Waltz*, the first six tracks are exquisite and utterly superb superb.

The LA country/rock of the mid-70s then hits in with Emmylou Harris, Don Henley of the Eagles and J D Souther, although the last two are not duet partners at all, but backing vocalists. The duet with James Taylor from 1982 should have been much playful: even the original from the spooky Ike Turner was more fun than this.

After some soul ballads with Aaron Neville and James Ingram, the album concludes in MOR territory with *Sisters* and *Moonlight In Vermont*. Linda's voice was added to a Frank Sinatra tape and maybe that's the way they'll go for Duets II: take her original records and add some new vocalists. I think they're fine as they are but you know how it goes these days.

Everyone knows that Linda Ronstadt has a marvellous voice and is a fantastic interpreter of the popular song. She can sing almost anything but this CD confirms what I have often suspected: namely, she is at her very best with country music and the more hardcore the better.

Spencer Leigh

