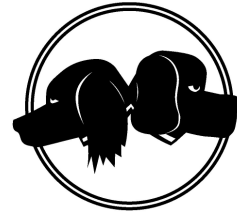


KELLEY HUNT
Mercy – Release Date May 15
Press Bio
By Geoffrey Himes



two dog media

If you're looking for someone to write and sing the theme song for a movie set in Kansas, Kelley Hunt is an obvious choice. After all, the big-voiced blues and R&B inspired singer/songwriter was born in Kansas City, grew up in the prairie town of Emporia, Kansas, and now lives in the college town of Lawrence, Kansas.

The film "Bunker Hill" is set in Kansas, and Kelley sings "Mountain To Move" over the closing credits. The song also climaxes her new album, "Mercy," a showcase for her rapidly developing songwriting gift as well as her widely recognized vocal firepower.

There aren't many mountains in Kansas, but there are plenty of churches, and Kelley's grandmother sang Gospel music in New Orleans. From these sources, Kelley draws on the mountain metaphors, the two-fisted piano chords and the emotionally embellished vocals to create a secular hymn about the seemingly overwhelming problems we all confront from time to time.

"It's hard to be strong," she sings in her barely constrained alto, "when you are walking on nothing but faith up a mountain of fear." Slowly but surely the song gathers momentum as her piano figure bangs a bit harder and her voice shouts a bit louder. "It might take a little push," she finally wails, "or a powerful shove. We're gonna see the mountain fall, and we will do it with love."

Not everything on the new album is so serious. The preceding song, which Kelley co-wrote with Delbert McClinton's longtime collaborator Gary Nicholson, is called "Wig Chalet."

The song describes a shop on the funky side of town, and the music is just as greasy. The band is full of all-stars—bassist Bob Babbitt from Motown's Funk Brothers, drummer Bryan Owings (Buddy Miller Band, Shelby Lynne), guitarist Colin Linden from Canada's roots-rock supergroup Blackie & the Rodeo Kings and organist Mark Jordan, from Van Morrison's band among others—but Kelley holds her own as usual as the pianist on the second-line groove. "So many choices, it was more than I could take," she cries gleefully, "beehive, bouffant, curly or straight."

By moving from anthemic hymn to tongue-in-cheek funk, Kelley's new album demonstrates the breadth of her talent. This collection of songs could well be the wedge that helps her break through to a larger audience. But no matter where her career takes her, her music will always be rooted in Kansas—whether it be the smoky blues and jazz dives of Kansas City or the heartland storytelling of Emporia.

"When my mom was younger," Kelley says, "she sang and danced professionally in Kansas City. My father grew up in Kansas City and he played upright bass in the Navy band. My parents were very hip people. While my friends were growing up with sit-coms and show music, I was growing up with Etta James and Billie Holiday. When my siblings brought home Hendrix, my parents didn't say, 'Turn that down'; they said, 'Turn that up.' I was playing piano by ear by the time I was three, emulating what I heard all around me.

"I always knew that I'd do music for the rest of my life without even thinking about it. When we had talent shows, I'd jump up and pound something out on piano. When I was 16, a couple of my brother's friends asked me to be in their blues-rock band, Monarch. I played a Wurlitzer piano and a little organ. Their female singer didn't show up for a gig one night, and they all looked at me and said, 'I hope you can sing.' I'd been writing and eventually I worked up the nerve to say, 'Hey, can we try one of these?' It was very exciting to be 17 and playing my own songs for people. I never looked back."

The movie "Bunker Hill" is a science-fiction thriller with a political theme set in the small town of Bunker Hill, Kansas. Directed and co-written by Kevin Willmott (best known for "C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America"), the story centers on a Wall Street executive who gets out of prison and tries to reconcile with his estranged wife, who now lives in Kansas. A massive terrorist attack cuts the town off from the rest of the world, and the community descends into a violence that can be an allegory for what happens whenever fear and prejudice combine with incomplete and unreliable information. Kelley not only wrote the theme song but also co-scored the entire film and even had a small speaking part as Connie, the wife's best friend.

"Kevin had asked me to write a song for the movie," Kelley recalls, "and I said, 'I think I already have something that might work.' I brought him seven songs, but as soon as he heard 'Mountain To Move,' he stopped me. He thought it was perfect, because the theme of the movie is, 'I have a choice how to move forward. I can move forward with love or with fear, but I have to choose.'"

Kelley's Kansas roots also inspired the song "Emerald City." Drawing from the 1900 L. Frank Baum novel, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," and the 1939 Victor Fleming movie, "The Wizard of Oz," both set in Kansas, Kelley developed the metaphor of a society where the sparkling jewels and painted horses distract the citizens from the man behind the curtain is really running the show for his own purposes. If this reminds the listener of a certain North American country, the parallel is purely intentional.

"When I go out in the world and people learn I'm from Kansas," Kelley says, "'The Wizard of Oz' is the first thing they mention. I got this image of the Emerald City as something that's shiny and new but not quite what it seems. I wanted to take those 'Wizard of Oz' references as far as I could; I wanted to stick the knife in and turn it. I associated the Emerald City with the reason we first went to war. A lot of people in this country don't want to look at those reasons; they say, 'I'm happy to live in the Emerald City.' It's interesting to perform that song in other countries. When we played that song in Switzerland, it got a huge reaction."

European audiences love Kelley because her huge voice embodies the blues and gospel qualities that foreigners can't get enough of. A particularly good showcase for those traits is "You Can't Fool Me Anymore," a song she co-wrote with Jim Ritchey. It's a clever number that begins with a triumphant declaration that her no-good man can't trick her any longer but ends with the wistful wish that she could be fooled into love once more. As impressive as the vocals and lyrics are, however, the song is really built atop Kelley's chunky blues piano riffs.

"I was influenced as much by piano players as by singers," she admits. "When I heard Johnnie Johnson play on those Chuck Berry records, just rocking out in that higher register, that knocked me out. Or Ray Charles playing those horn parts on the piano; that just moved me. Or Mildred Falls, the accompanist on most of the Mahalia Jackson records, playing that strong left hand and coming up with strong answering lines that stayed out of Mahalia's way but filled out the songs like an orchestra.

"As a kid I was all over that stuff, because it made me want to dance around. When I started singing, my grandmother from New Orleans told me, 'Don't sing it if you don't mean it.' That's the no-bull kind of singing that really resonated with me. I really liked a song that was a story; I like being told a story. And that carried over into my own songwriting."

She made her solo recording debut with 1994's "Kelley Hunt," produced by Mike Finnigan, who has recorded with Jimi Hendrix, Maria Muldaur and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. Kelley followed it up with a 2000 live album, "Inspiration," co-produced by Kelley and her husband Al Berman.

By then Kelley had been playing blues and roots festivals all over North America and Europe. She was taking her songwriting more seriously and scheduled a meeting with top Nashville producer Garth Fundis to pitch some songs for Trisha Yearwood. When she showed up for the appointment, she quickly learned that Fundis had grown up 10 miles out of Lawrence and the two bonded over "that Kansas thing." Fundis liked the demos Kelley had brought and asked if she had anything else.

"So I just sat down at the piano and played for a long time," she remembers. "I just started reeling out the tunes. As I'm playing and singing, Garth is bringing various people in. I looked up and realized how much time had gone by and how many people were there I hadn't seen come in. Garth was just smiling at me, and he said, 'I want to make a record on you.'"

Fundis took Kelley over to Gary Nicholson's house the next day and just left her there. She hit it off with Nicholson, who ended up co-writing five of the dozen songs on the "New Shade of Blue" album and co-produced the disc with Fundis. Nicholson even got his pal Delbert McClinton to sing with Kelley on "Deal with It," and Kelley's powerhouse rasp matched up well with her duet partner's. Released in 2004 by Coda Terra/88 Records, the album led to return invitations to play on "A Prairie Home Companion" (which she has done 6 times), "Beale Street Caravan" and the "House of Blues Radio Hour."

Her partnership with Nicholson encouraged Kelley to seek out other co-writers. On the new album, she co-writes not only with Nicholson but also with Jim Ritchey, Dwight Liles, Stacey Schneider and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg. The result is the most varied and most impressive collection of songs Kelley has taken on yet.

"Each of the people I've written with bring something different to the song," Kelley points out, "so we come up with something neither of us could have written on our own. Chocolate and peanut butter is going to make a different pie than just chocolate or peanut butter on its own."

While her other collaborators are fellow musicians, Mirriam-Goldberg is a different kind of collaborator, for she is a poet who neither sings nor plays an instrument. A Lawrence resident with several books of published poetry, she first connected with Kelley in 2004.

"Songwriting is not her main focus, so when we get together it opens the door to try different things. She doesn't even worry about ABA or any standard form for that matter; we just dive in. Our song 'Love,' for example, is unusual in that it doesn't tell one story; it's four stories on one theme. It's a political statement that it's nobody's business how you define love in your life, that stereotypes have no place when people decide who to love and how to love them."

This is not the only literary collaboration Kelley has taken on. Since 2004, she has been working on playwright Marcia Cebulka's "Now Let Me Fly," a theater piece based on oral histories and personal interviews with people involved in the 1955 case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that led the Supreme Court to outlaw segregation in public schools. Kelley has served as both an on-stage performer and overall music director for the show.

Kelley also contributed a track, "The Next Step," to "Songs of Peace and Forgiveness," the 2006 CD to benefit the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation of Washington, DC. Joining Hunt on this tribute to blues legend Edwards were Phil Wiggins, Eleanor Ellis and members of Saffire.

But now her focus is entirely on her new album, "Mercy." The title track is a solo vocal-and-piano performance that suggests, in the form of a slow hymn, that we must extend mercy to others if we expect to receive any in return. From the Latin-soul groove of "Give Me a Sign" to the film-noir feel of "Lone Star Road," from the rock guitar of "Freedom Day" to the R&B piano of "Drowning Man," the disc offers a remarkable variety of moods and personalities. It's an approach that's wittily explained by the song "Wig Chalet" and the narrator's epiphany that you can assume a new personality each time she dons a new wig.

"We had been playing in Springfield, Missouri, and there was a shop there with yellow squares and black letters that said 'Wig Chalet,'" Kelley recalls. "In the window were all these Styrofoam stands with these funky old wigs. When I got together with Gary, I told him, 'I want to write this song about the Wig Chalet but not about the wigs.' As the song unfolded we realized it was about choosing your own persona, about how you can be whatever you want to be. It's about finding redemption by being yourself and not letting someone else define you."

"That's why I think it's actually one of the most interesting times to be doing music. With everything in such flux, I think the listening public will be more supportive of artists with their own authentic identity. How to reach them is the puzzle. Part of the answer for me is being absolutely relentless in touring and being out there. If I can get my music in front of people, the rest will take care of itself."

--Geoffrey Himes

(Geoffrey Himes writes about music for the Washington Post, the New York Times, Paste Magazine, Jazz Times, Offbeat and the Baltimore City Paper. His book on Bruce Springsteen, "Born in the U.S.A." was published in 2005.)

Contact

Two Dog Media

Kim Fowler

615.228.7177

kimfowler10@gmail.com