

Larry Jon Wilson

Album: Larry Jon Wilson

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A few years ago, Larry Jon Wilson cropped up on the DVD reissue of much-acclaimed 70's songwriter doc Heartworn Highways. It was his first high-profile appearance in nearly 30 years.

Having emerged as part of the original alt. country – meaning artists in thrall to the songcraft of Hank Williams et al, but intent on giving the finger to rhinestone-encrusted conservative Nashville values - movement in the late 60's, LJW never quite achieved the same stature as his feted contemporary colleagues in the campaign to expand the definition of what country music means. Not for Wilson the lofty status of Kris Kristofferson, the relentless work ethic of Guy Clark or the tragic cult hero worship of the late, great Townes Van Zandt. He remained in the margins, determined to do things his way, only to drop off the radar altogether following the fourth and final of his acclaimed solo albums, 1979's Sojourner.

Now he's back. And as far as comebacks go, this long-overdue, self-titled album number five is pretty spellbinding stuff. Far from sounding rusty or washed-up, the booming baritone is intact and, following the example of Rick Rubin's barely-there production on Johnny Cash's first American Recordings instalment, the sparse to the point of being non-existent arrangements – Wilson's softly picked guitar, a few weeping sweeps of fiddle – places the focus firmly where it belongs – the singing and the stories. Which is exactly as Wilson intended it; no drums, no fireworks, just raw intimacy and first-take freshness, all of it imbued with the regrets, dismay and hard-won wisdom accrued during 30 years of hard travelling. The result is the most heartbreakingly desolate Americana album since Richmond Fontaine's similarly stark 2005 masterpiece the Fitzgerald.

If at first the tunes here appear half-cooked, little more than barely formed ideas and loosely connected phrases, a bit of concentration and patience rubbishes such underwhelming first impressions. This is storytelling at its finest, and a few rambling detours are required to get the point across. The mood remains sombre throughout, but the finest moments – battered but unbowed Shoulders, Losers Trilogy's unbearably poignant 7-minute odyssey of bad luck and worse decisions, the stark sermon Where From, the weary heartbreak of Goodbye Eyes and the rhythm 'n' blues-hued Throw My Hands Up – manage to mould the relentless sadness into something incredibly moving, hypnotic and very, very beautiful. Even when the material isn't up to that much – the middling Willie Nelson – Bob Dylan co-write Heartland – Wilson's stellar performance injects potential nonentities with compelling, weather-beaten majesty.

Janne Oinonen

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