

REVIEWS

Finally! At last! Considering that she made her recording debut in 1973 with *Asleep at the Wheel*'s maiden voyage, it's amazing that it's taken nearly 40 years for Chris O'Connell to release her first solo album.

During the *Wheel*'s zenith, she dueted with leader Ray Benson on "The Letter That Johnny Walker Read," managed to outdo Toussaint McCall's original on the R&B ballad "Nothing Takes The Place Of You," swung like crazy on "Song Of The Wanderer," and took a backseat to no one on Irma Thomas' "Ruler Of My Heart." If the *Wheel* had been dubbed the Chris O'Connell Band, instead of being one spoke of a multi-pronged whole, she would've probably been recognized for what she was – the greatest female country singer of her generation.

There are at least six *Wheel* alumni here, including co-producer Danny Levin, and ex-Wheelers Leroy Preston and Brenda Burns contribute songs, but this CD is all O'Connell. As such, the repertoire ranges from Johnny Paycheck country to Rodgers and Hart and Irving Berlin standards, from the Elvis hit "(Marie's The Name) His Latest Flame" to a striking rendition of the folk song "Shenandoah" – which is exactly what O'Connell fans have been waiting for: an album that shows her interpretive mastery, able to meld disparate elements into a cohesive experience.

A great rhythm guitarist in the mold of Eldon Shamblin or Freddie Green, O'Connell is surrounded by such superb six-stringers as co-producer Don Margraf, Cindy Cashdollar on Dobro, Bill Kirchen on baritone on "My Baby Don't Love Me Anymore" (featuring Junior Brown's hot licks), Derek O'Brien adding some jump blues, Noah Jeffries' flat-top flatpicking, and Carter Arrington's tasty electric. The only quibble is multi-instrumentalist Levin's organ on some cuts. It may be stylistically accurate, but it's distracting – even in a set where Joel Guzman plays bossa nova accordion.

It took a long time, but O'Connell proves she's more than just a great female country singer. Male, female, country, or anything else, she's simply one of the best singers around. – *DAN FORTE (Vintage Guitar)*

Some people claim that *Asleep At The Wheel*, which she joined out of high school in 1973, was never the same after O'Connell left for good in 1990, and they still wonder what became of her. I have fond memories of Ethyl 'n' Methyl live shows but she and Maryann Price never recorded (though you can find their Southwestern ads on YouTube), but then O'Connell did seem to disappear, hence the ironic album title. I remember a mutual friend joking about a brief return that she was the only person who ever moved to Austin to *not* play music. O'Connell put out a children's album in 1992, but this is effectively her debut, with 13 songs that either made her laugh or cry, drawing on not exactly standards from Irving Berlin, Peggy Lee, Johnny Paycheck, Little Willie John, Rogers & Hart, Frank Sinatra and Del Shannon and friends like LeRoy Preston, Bill Kirchen, Blackie Farrell and Brenda Burns. Kirchen is also part of an enormous all-star cast, headed by O'Connell's co-producer Danny Levin, who were tapped selectively to suit each number. If I still had a radio show, I'd be leaning on Jimmy Van Heusen & Carl Sigman's *I Could Have Told You So*. O'Connell's stunning version more than holds its own against those of Dinah Washington, Esther Phillips, Carmen McRae. Eva Cassidy and others, but close behind would be Berlin's show tune *It'll Come To You*. By turns jazzy, bluesy, torchy, jumping, swinging and sultry, O'Connell claims Laura Lee McBride's crown as 'Queen of Western Swing.' - *John Conquest (3rd Coast Music)*