

Lee Ann Womack **The Way I'm Livin'**

In a world of faster, harder, louder, Lee Ann Womack wants something far more radical: to be real. Strip it all away, get to the core of life, love and raw emotion – and you find songs that distill it all to the stopping power of a hollow point bullet.

“It just seems like music when it is most powerful hits you right between the eyes,” says the Grammy-winning vocalist who has been singled out for “the clarity of a soul that realizes loss is a form of purification, a scraping away of false ideals and excess emotional baggage” by *TIME Magazine*. “Some of these songs are hard truths, tough moments, places you’d rather not be, but you know, life takes you to those places sometimes.”

Certainly **The Way I'm Livin'**, produced by Frank Liddell, is an unvarnished collection of songs by some of America's most progressive songwriter/artists. Whether the vintage country of Hayes Carll's “Chances Are,” the scalding gospel of Mindy Smith's “All the Saints” or the tortured linger of love in Buddy Miller's “Don't Listen To The Wind,” the emotions are unbridled, the performances wide open and the recordings intimate.

“We wanted to capture the moment,” continues the Jacksonville, Texas native. “Both the moment *in* the song *and* the moment when the musicians catch fire. There's a magic when the players find each other, find the heart of the song – and that spark is the greatest moment of all.”

Recorded almost completely live, with Womack on the floor with drummer Matt Chamberlin, guitarist Duke Levine, bass player Glenn Whorf and acoustic guitarist/occasional pianist Mac McAnally, the musicians leaned to her luminous, honey'n'sunshine voice. As Liddell says of the process, “The musicians wanted to support the way she *formed* the song. They were very much about *her* interpretations, the way she felt and saw the songs. Her voice served as the instrument they sculpted their playing to.”

The elegiac spaciousness of Chris Knight's “Send It On Down,” along with the faltering doubt and lonesome piano that opens it, offers an agonizing portrait of a lost soul trying to find some speck of hope. While one man's churning obsession gets rendered with percolating rhythms, Paul Franklin's whirling steel and a percussive guitar blaze across Roger Miller's obscure cut “Tomorrow Night in Baltimore.”

“I've never made a record like this,” says Womack, whose **Call Me Crazy, I Hope You Dance** and the 2005 Country Music Association Album of the Year **There's More Where That Came From** are among modern country's most acclaimed albums. “We only cut songs that spoke to *me*. I didn't think about anything else: ‘What would promotion want? What would marketing think?’ There were no voices in my head, and I embraced songs that really, *really* moved me.”

“Luke (Lewis) was very generous, allowing us to do this. He let Frank and I create the record I'd always wanted. We got to do things differently, to not think about anything except what's best for the songs and the feelings inside them. I think you can hear it.”

With the neon Wurlitzer tears of the forsaken Texas shuffle “Sleepin’ with the Devil,” the steel-basted molasses ache of Neil Young’s “Out on the Weekend” and the scalding title track that is the wages of sin on full-tiltage, the velocity of the songs, sentiments and vocal pyrotechnics dazzle. Womack is no set-on-stun, shover-of-columns-of-air singer; it is her nuance as much as the timbre of her voice and the notes bursting into flames when she does open up, as she does on “The Way I’m Living” or “All The Saints,” that define these performances.

“The thing about my wife,” says Liddell, “is she’s such a great singer, it’s easy to have her sing and go, ‘Wow!’ But there’s so much more inside her, so much heart and vibrance, really complicated stuff that she can translate into the notes – it’s not just the licks, it’s the conflict, the hurt, the haunt that kills me about her singing. To go that deep with her in the studio, well, it’s a whole other kind of vocal.”

“One of the differences, and I didn’t even realize ‘til we were putting the credits together,” Womack offers, “is every song came from a songwriter artist. They weren’t writing for cuts. They were writing stories they wanted to tell, pictures they needed to paint, maybe even emotions they had to exorcise. There isn’t a song here written to be ‘a hit,’ but more to hit you straight in the heart.”

That may be, but the a cappella opening, rumbling tribal drum building “Same Kind of Different” has the distinct feel of a song destined to bring people together. Proud, broken, honest, embracing, it is a ballad that recognizes healing in the buckling places, strength in the scars and hope in spite of what one knows.

“Our world is so divisive: everyone hates somebody else... people are all angry and focused on what’s wrong or different,” she offers. “I think there’s so much similar about all of us. If we’d focus on how we all hurt, hope and want to fall in love, to take care of the people we love, we might be able help each other heal.”

For Womack, who’s sung at the Concert for the Nobel Peace Prize, performed for multiple presidents, done award-winning duets with Willie Nelson and George Strait as well as tastemaker projects for Buddy Miller, Oscar-winner Randall Poster and Rodney Crowell, music is the ultimate form of connection and communication. Raised on classic country records by Ray Price, Nelson and George Jones, she recognizes the power of visceral truth in a song.

“To see how far a song can take a feeling,” Womack says, “is one of the most thrilling things I can do as a singer. In my career, I’ve been blessed to do many great songs, work with incredible musicians – and deep inside I always ask, ‘How far could I go?’ When Frank and I started, that’s what we wanted to find out... to seek.”

Quietly, over two three-day stints in a nondescript studio, they did. Using garbage cans for percussion, Aubrey Haney’s shining fiddle and the sort of reverence players bring in the presence of greatness, **The Way I’m Livin’** was born.

Unlikely songs in today’s two-dimensional world of tailgates, cold beers, hot clubs and hooking up, **The Way I’m Livin’** proves to be more real; written for the jagged shards of life’s rugged spots, turned over with some of the best melodies you’ll hear. Not fancy, big or glossy, but man, these songs will take your breath away.