

# Country in the Pink: Red, Hot and Country and Out In The Country

An OITM review by Rev. Miki Thomas

Although most country music is decidedly hetero, gays and lesbians still listen to it. Who doesn't get all romantic hearing Patsy Cline's version of "Crazy" while watching Desert Hearts? Who doesn't get a few laughs off Lyle Lovett's deadpan reading of "Stand By Your Man"? I'm sure that some of you out there also sneak in a few listens to Burlington's WOKO. That's okay; you aren't alone. There are many country stars who have a large gay and lesbian

following such as Mary Chapin Carpenter, Emmylou Harris, Lyle Lovett, Patsy Cline, and Anne Murray while Kathy Mattea, Garth Brooks, Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, Brenda Lee, and Tammy Wynette have all publicly acknowledged and affirmed their gay and lesbian fans.

However, that does not mean that the Nashville establishment is particularly gay and lesbian friendly. It is still a hotbed of conservatism. Look how it treated k.d. lang. It is this establishment that Kathy Mattea has to work against while trying to bring AIDS education to the forefront in the world of country music. She is usually one of few country stars wearing red ribbons at country music functions and she is always quick to bring up AIDS issues during interviews. She also spearheaded the making of *Red, Hot and Country*, the latest entry in the series of fundraising albums for the Red Hot Organization whereby proceeds from the sale of the album go to different AIDS organizations.

She rounded up a number of artists that can be divided into several categories: living legends (Dolly Parton, Carl Perkins, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Doc Watson, Earl Scruggs, Duane Eddy), contemporary stars (Brooks and Dunn, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Marty Stuart, Nancy Griffith, Patty Loveless, Mark Chestnut), best kept secrets (Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Alison Krauss), and questionable talent (Billy Ray Cyrus). According to the liner notes, each artist chose a particular song or genre that influenced his/her work, which explains the presence of Crosby, Stills, and Nash and Jackson Browne on the album. Hence, the album covers gospel, folk, rockabilly, and of course, old time country. Perhaps true to the purpose of this album, each song tends to focus on

some sense of loss, of what was and of what might have been.

There are several standout cuts on the album. Mary Chapin Carpenter's "Willie Short" gives what might be the whole premise of the album, that "living we are all different, but dying we are all the same." Nancy Griffith, with a little help from Jimmy Webb of "Up, Up and Away" fame, is stunning in the stark cut "If These Old Walls Could Speak", backed only by a few strings and a piano. Johnny Cash does a reverent reading of Bob Dylan's "Forever Young", sounding like a father giving advice to his children. Marty Stuart eschews his guitar to sing a cappella with Jerry and Tammy Sullivan on a couple of hymns, "Up Above My Head/Blind Bartimus". Not all the songs on the album are bleak. Dolly Parton is her cheery but tough self on "You Gotta Be My Baby" and Radney Foster sings some "white man blues" with "Close Up the Honky Tonks".

Even if *Red, Hot and Country* were not as good as it is, it is still a major achievement given the sometimes intolerant climate of Nashville. Kathy Mattea has done much to bring AIDS awareness to a community that believes that it doesn't affect them and for that she should be profusely thanked.

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Good country music does exist outside the country establishment in Nashville. Country music that doesn't quite fit the Nashville mold usually winds up on independent labels and unless one gets Mountain Lake Public Radio's WCFE and listens in on the country show every Saturday afternoon or is in the know about local musicians and labels, one wouldn't know much music exists. There are the rare few who do break out of the independents such as Nancy Griffith and Dwight Yoakam, but unfortunately, that

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