

Odetta - *Ballad For Americans And Other American Ballads* (1960)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Ballad for Americans* 11:41 2 *This Land Is Your Land* 2:19 3 *On the Top of Old Smokey* 3:00 4 *Hush Little Baby* 1:30 5 *Dark As a Dungeon* 4:19 6 *Great Historical Bum* 1:56 7 *Payday At Coal Creek* 3:28 8 *Going Home* 2:40 9 *Pastures of Plenty* 4:00 Odetta – guitar, vocals Bill Lee - bass The Symphony Of The Air The Robert DeCormier Chorale Robert DeCormier - conductor

Odetta's (and probably the folk music world's) most ambitious album up to this point in time -- and for some years to come -- *Ballad for Americans and Other American Ballads* could only have come from Vanguard Records. The New York-based classical and folk label had already displayed the courage -- in the midst of the era of the Red Scare -- to sign and record the re-formed Weavers, Paul Robeson, and any number of other blacklisted performers, and here they were offering a provocative new recording, aimed at a new generation of listeners, of a piece well known as the work of a blacklisted performer and composer (Earl Robinson). The rendition of "Ballad for Americans" on this album is more sophisticated than the original by Robeson (which Vanguard also licensed for reissue). Music director Robert DeCormier carefully and ever-so-slightly smoothed out some of the more arch moments in the original work, so that it sounds less like late Depression-era agitprop than a more timeless mix of history, art-song, and folk music, but no less moving. In fact, where Robeson's original, from the period of the run-up to the Second World War, seems like a historical artifact, Odetta's rendition has a vitality and immediacy that puts it squarely in the thick of 1960, in the middle of the civil rights movement's heyday, at a time when Robeson, because of age and infirmity, and years of fighting the government's efforts to silence him, was in eclipse as an artist. Odetta herself is a less mannered singer than Robeson, and calls less attention to herself and her persona than he ever did to his, thus leaving room for the song to be felt and enjoyed as a contemporary statement. The piece will always "belong" to Robeson, who made it famous on radio, record, and in movies, but Odetta's version is a successful effort at extending its appeal to a new generation of listeners and perhaps setting it in a wider context, all while paying tribute to the original. And if that one work were all that this album had to offer, it would be enough, but the rest of the album is not filler by any means -- accompanying herself on guitar (with Bill Lee on upright bass), her renditions of Woody Guthrie's "This Land," "Great Historical Bum," and, especially, "Pastures of

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Plenty," Merle Travis' "Dark as a Dungeon," and the traditional "On Top of Old Smokey," "Hush Little Baby," and more are all beautifully stripped-down performances, as minimalist in their sensibilities as "Ballad for Americans" is lushly produced and orchestrated. "Payday at Coal Creek" gives the singer a good workout in the holding of notes, and is a dazzling display of her vocal dexterity, and her adaptation of the Dvorák-derived "Going Home" would have made a perfect closer, a minimalist spiritual of intense delicacy and poignance -- but then she is back, finishing with "Pastures of Plenty," one of Guthrie's finest creations, stretched out to four minutes in a rendition so ominous and provocative that it rates with the best this reviewer has ever heard (which are Guthrie's own and Dylan's early-'60s officially unreleased version).
---Bruce Eder, AllMusic Review

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