

Kristin Asbjørnsen - Wayfaring Stranger: A Spiritual Songbook (2006)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Trying To Get Home* 2 *I'm On My Way* 3 *Ride Up In The Chariot* 4 *Now We Take This Feeble Body* 5 *In That Morning* 6 *Come Go With Me* 7 *Wish I Was In Heaven Sitting Down* 8 *Going Up* 9 *Don't Be Weary Traveller* 10 *I Am A Poor Wayfaring Stranger / Going Over Jordan* 11 *Oh Glory* Bass, Guitar, Vocals – Jarle Bernhoft Lap Steel Guitar, Vocals – Jostein Asnes Percussion, Piano – Anders Engen Vocals – Kristin Asbjørnsen

Norwegian vocalist Kristin Asbjørnsen is gifted with a voice that sounds quite southern: deep and lustrous, with some hoarseness, lots of passion and a wide range. Her spiritual songbook *Wayfaring Stranger* demonstrates these qualities beautifully, as well as her impressive control of tone, color and phrasing.

Asbjørnsen began her recording career a decade ago with the all-female vocal quartet *Kvitretten*, together with Solveig Slettahjell, Eldbjørg Raknes and Tone Åse. All four have pursued different routes since then, but they all have emphasized a highly original choice of texts. Asbjørnsen moved on to form the ensembles *Dadafon* and *Krøyt*, covering poems by Walt Whitman and Charles Bukowski, as well as Norwegian poets such as Anne Bøe, Ragnhild Lund Ansens and Tale Næss. Asbjørnsen contributed vocals to pianist Ketil Bjørnstad's politically charged *Seafarer's Song* (Universal, 2004) and wrote the score to Norwegian director Bent Hamer's film *Factotum* (Milan Records, 2006), which portrays Bukowski's hard times.

Wayfaring Stranger is a collection of Afro-American spirituals that Asbjørnsen studied with singer Ruth Reese, a Chicagoan who relocated to Norway in 1960 and lived there till her death in 1990. Asbjørnsen describes these songs as existential expressions of life: songs of longing, mourning, struggling, loneliness, hopefulness and joyful traveling. "Just as the spirituals were originally used to transcend the narrow limits of slavery, I experience over and over again that

the songs touch upon our struggles of modern life, our own quests for personal freedom, movement and protection."

The spare production of *Wayfaring Stranger* by percussionist Andres Engen, once a member of Bugge Wesseltoft's *New Conception of Jazz*, features Dadafon's guitarist, Justin Ansnes, and bassist Jarle Bernhoft, who contributes backing vocals. The three keep embracing Asbjørnsen's warm vocals, maintaining a direct and simple atmosphere. This humble attitude gracefully serves the repetitive lyrics, and the leisurely playing highlights the message of hope in these songs.

All eleven interpretations of these old spirituals are impressive, but, still, Ansnes' guitar playing on "Now We Take This Feeble Body," a duo with Asbjørnsen, sounds both rootsy and very modern in the atmospheric overtones that engulf Asbjørnsen's vocals. "In That Morning" gains passionate momentum, but still keeps a restrained elegance. The vocal choir plus percussion interpretation of "Going Up" retains the traditional, devotional aspects of similar Afro-American spirituals.

The interpretation of the almost standard spiritual "I Am a Poor Wayfaring Stranger," with its call-and-response vocal arrangements, Ansnes' bluesy guitar riffs, and the tight, interlocking playing of Bernhoft and Engen, is the highlight of this release. The hushed down version of "Oh Glory" is a masterful conclusion to this collection of life-affirming songs. Norwegian vocalist Kristin Asbjørnsen is gifted with a voice that sounds quite southern: deep and lustrous, with some hoarseness, lots of passion and a wide range. Her spiritual songbook *Wayfaring Stranger* demonstrates these qualities beautifully, as well as her impressive control of tone, color and phrasing.

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