Dolly Parton – Jolene (1974)

01. Jolene - 2:39 02. When Someone Wants To Leave - 2:03 03. River Of Happiness - 2:17 04. Early Morning Breeze - 2:43 play 05. Highlight Of My Life - 2:15 06. I Will Always Love You - 2:52 play 07. Randy - 1:49 08. Living On Memories Of You - 2:43 09. Lonely Comin' Down (Porter Wagoner) - 3:10 10. It Must Be You (Blaise Tosti) - 1:50

Personnel: - Dolly Parton – lead vocals, guitar - Jimmy Colvard, Dave Kirby, Bobby Thompson, Chip Young – guitar - Pete Drake, Stu Basore – pedal steel guitar - Bobby Dyson – bass - Jerry Carrigan, Larrie Londin, Ralph Gallant, Kenny Malone – drums - Buck Trent – banjo - Mack Magaha, Johnny Gimble - fiddle - Hargus "Pig" Robbins, David Briggs – piano - Onie Wheeler – harmonica - The Nashville Edition - background vocals

Of the three 2007 Dolly Parton reissues from Sony, Jolene is the most absorbing musically and the most problematic lyrically. A sparkling production creates a rich backdrop for both "Jolene" and "When Someone Wants to Leave" (both Parton originals), mixing acoustic guitar, country instruments (steel guitar, dobro), and light percussion. This tasteful mix, nicely spread across the stereo spectrum with Parton front and center, is a joy to listen to. Lyrically, however, these songs are a long way from Loretta Lynn's "You Ain't Woman Enough to Take My Man." Parton's female protagonists are downright pitiful, adrift in a world where a more attractive woman might take their man, where a woman cannot let go of a man who no longer loves her, and where a man is the "highlight" of her life ("Highlight of My Life.") Jolene, originally released in 1974, feels like a shot across the bow of the feminist movement, a reaffirmation that many women still liked the men to wear the pants (women, presumably, who listened to old-fashioned country music). This seems somewhat peculiar now, in that no one -- looking at her long, distinguished career and commanding stage presence -- would accuse Parton of being a weak-kneed songbird. Still, the music and Parton's vocal prowess are in top form on Jolene, and "I Will Always Love You" is one of her best performances (which is saying a lot). Like it or loath it, Jolene offers a fascinating snapshot of an era in transition, and captures Parton at the top of her game. --- Ronnie D. Lankford, Jr., allmusic.com

In the liner notes to Coat of Many Colors, while telling the story behind the title track, Dolly Parton referred to herself as "sensitive," and her awareness, not only of her own feelings but also of those whom she loves, is what drove the formation of the material on Jolene. Indisputably, Porter Wagoner had played a huge role in launching Parton's career, but his unwavering, iron-fisted domination over her public life had become too stifling for her to endure. Jolene was centered around I Will Always Love You, a song that became a chart-topping single for Parton and an even bigger hit for Whitney Houston. Although it was the only tune on the endeavor that directly addressed Parton's decision to leave Wagoner behind, the fragile, aching sadness that clung to her tenderhearted goodbye expressed the difficulty of her decision. Her honest, emotional delivery, along with the stunning interpretation of Wagoner's Lonely Comin' Down that appeared later in the set, allowed its subject matter to inform the rest of the cuts on the outing, turning them from simple love songs into loosely knit metaphors for the dissolution of the duo's relationship.

The problem with Jolene, however, is that even with this broader interpretation, several of its songs feel slight. Parton's pledges of devotion (Highlight of My Life and Randy) are particularly egregious, and although her bubbly personality carries them, they truly are nothing more than fluffy filler. On the other hand, the title track, which tells the tale of a housewife who confronts her husband's mistress, is one of the finest compositions that Parton ever penned. Its stripped down but insistent arrangement perfectly enhances the tension in her dramatic story. Likewise, on When Someone Wants to Leave and Living on Memories of You, she alternately ruminates upon a dying love affair and one that continues to haunt her long after it has ended. Two of the bonus tracks featured on the recently reissued rendition of Jolene — Another Woman's Man and Barbara on Your Mind — are worthy additions in that they similarly revolve around broken relationships, examining them from different angles with heartfelt empathy. It's here, in these tunes, that Jolene comes alive; and it's here that Parton cemented her reputation as a first-rate performer and top-notch songwriter. --- John Metzger, musicbox-online.com

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