

MARY CUTRUFELLO RETURNS WITH "35"

Texas honky-tonk stalwart turned Minnesota heartland rocker Mary Cutrufello is back! Seven years after moving to Minnesota, and three years after being sidelined with vocal nodes, Cutrufello returns with "35," a taut and rockin' collection of songs showcasing her writing, her guitar playing, and her once-again powerful voice.

"Believe me when I tell you," says Cutrufello almost breathlessly, "Nobody is happier than I am that this record even exists!" And while it is a welcome return to the microphone for the multi-talented and articulate singer/writer/guitarist, it also stands on its own as her strongest collection of songs and performances to date. Guitars chunk, wail, chop, and make all manner of surprising sounds. The vocal chorus of Andra Suchy and Twin Cities legend Mark Lickteig offers daring takes on the traditional backing vocal role. And above it all is Cutrufello's rehabbed and rejuvenated voice, at turns proud and pleading, telling her stories of desperation and redemption, wonder and resolve.

35 is a long road, or a long time, or a point in life when it's a daily fight against the ossifying forces and the leaden pull of comfort. F. Scott Fitzgerald claimed there are no second acts in American lives; 35 is when you find out if that means you.

BACKSTORY

Connecticut-raised, Yale-educated Mary Cutrufello spent the 1990's in Texas, where her hard-driving honky-tonk style won her a loyal following, as well as kudos from the local media (cover stories in the Dallas Observer and Austin Chronicle, the first of 2 appearances on "Austin City Limits"), and such Texas legends as Willie Nelson, Billy Joe Shaver, Joe Ely, and Johnny Bush. Her first CD, 1996's live-to-tape "who to love + when to leave," showcased her gritty take on the honky-tonk tradition, and was hailed as "quite simply one of the sharpest, most essential country albums of the last decade" by Matt Weitz in the Dallas Observer. (Mary reissued "who to love" in 2005, on a single CD with her 1992 cassette "...and the Havoline Supremes.")

After that came a stylistic move back toward the rock that Cutrufello grew up on. While it left a few Texans confused, Cutrufello reminded them that "rock and roll is where I'm from, and as much as I love country, I have to give that part of me its voice too." In 1998, she released the critically-acclaimed "When the Night is Through" on Mercury Records. A spot on the "Tonight" show followed, as well as another "Austin City Limits" appearance and tours with the Allman Brothers and Gov't Mule, among others. But Mercury was swept away in the 1999 merger of Seagram's and PolyGram, and Mary's album was one of many casualties of that cataclysm. After some rambling and soul-searching, she ended up in Minnesota in early 2002.

"I'd moved to Texas to delve into honky-tonk music, and I guess in a way I moved to Minnesota to delve back into that straightforward midwestern rock sound I've always loved," she says. "I'd always had a great time when I passed through the Twin Cities on tour, and with the strong musical energy here, and the world-class players, I knew it'd be a great next place to be."

She put together a band and booked some gigs. "It was definitely starting over. But I had so much experience, so many miles, that it was actually kind of cool. We went to (ex-Prince keyboardist) Dr. Fink's studio and cut three tracks as a demo, which appear on the new album because I didn't think the performances could be improved upon. That band was that good. Those were the last recordings I made before the nodes. We were just starting to build up a

head of steam when my voice stopped working."

"The nodes were awful," Cutrufello avers. "They didn't hurt or anything, but I had to shut down the band, basically stop talking for several months--let alone singing--and then do extensive rehab. I can't tell you what a scary feeling it is to open up your mouth and have nothing come out. I mean, my singing was always the most natural part of my game. I'd had some lessons to learn to breathe, but basically what you're hearing is hand-honed emotion. Not being able to sing...well, I'd say my head was messed up even more than my throat."

THE MAKING OF "35"

"'35' is the record I was about to make when the nodes happened," she continues. "I had a great heartland rock band, a strong bunch of songs, and the timing felt right." But the band disintegrated when Cutrufello's voice failed her, and the recording project was shelved for a year and a half. When she finally did enter the studio in early 2005, she found that a few things had changed.

"I used some new musicians, some old, and some I'd always wanted to work with. Actually, not having a working band at the time worked to my advantage. For the first time, I went into the studio NOT thinking about how the songs would be recreated live. That was a conceptual leap I'd never been able to make before, and I think it really freed me up to try different guitar textures, more complex vocal arrangements, and even the odd random noise!"

Working with Minneapolis drummer/producer Greg Schutte, basic tracks were recorded over 2 weeks, and overdubs over the next year. "That was another new process for me," says Cutrufello. "Since I couldn't sing, I had a job driving a delivery truck for FedEx Ground, and the only time Greg and I could get together was usually Sunday afternoons. We would work intensely for 5 or 6 hours, then burn everything to CD and I'd listen to it all for a week. I was surprised that the thing was able to hold together with those long gaps, but I found that I was very focused when I was in Greg's studio, and having time to listen really gave me time to think, too. A lot of times, I'd have an idea percolating all week, and then we'd just pick an amp and a guitar, set up mics, and roll."

For the vocal performances, Mary turned to Merel Bregante, a long-time friend and collaborator. Bregante produced 1996's "who to love + when to leave," as well as several songs for compilation CD's, and the two had remained close. "Merel has the ears and the gear, and he really believes in me. He knows how to get great vocal performances out of me, and I felt that was going to be extra important because of what had happened with the nodes and all. So Greg and I flew down to Austin and did the vocals in a long weekend. Merel and Greg really hit it off--knowing them both, I pretty much knew that would happen--and when we needed a larger setup for the mixes, we went right back down to Texas."

Recording was completed in April of 2006, and a first round of mixes took place in early May. After more listening, final mixing and mastering took place in September, and "35" was a reality.

SO WHAT'S IT ALL MEAN?

"This is not a concept record," Cutrufello states rather emphatically. "Not that my other ones were per se, but they all did kind of work as song cycles, strings of narrative in a very self-conscious, 70s, golden-age-of-the-LP kind of way. That's kind of my home, musically. That and cast albums, which were what my parents listened to. And I still respect the hell out of records that do that. But this time, I wanted to just make 10 great songs and maybe let them talk to each other, but not try to make any larger collective point about the 10 of them."

It didn't start out that way. "The original idea was to call the album "American Rain," which was a song I wrote in the wake of the Columbine incident. It tells the story of a kid who

wouldn't go so far as to do what those two kids did, but who can relate with an almost creepy completeness to the darkness that brought them there. And then you have things like "Sonic Girls," which is considerably lighter, but which still speaks to a level of teenage restlessness. You know, after "Jack & Diane" but before "Jody Girl." And I had this grand unified theory, and it was gonna all run together like "Racing in the Street" runs into "Promised Land" even though they're on side A and side B of [Springsteen's] "Darkness [on the Edge of Town.]"

"And I thought that was cool. But then I had some other songs that were working pretty well for me that had nothing to do with any of that, and finally I said WHY does it have to be grand or unified? I mean, "If You Don't Want Me No More," which I wrote with Kevin Bowe, is kind of a resigned kiss-off song, and "Out of the Fire" is way beyond what any of my teenage protagonists would have been ready for, as is "Down to the River"...and suddenly the light went on and I thought, well maybe this is a GOOD thing. And I think by just letting the songs be, they have their own worlds, and it's more like a city block of characters as opposed to an extended family...or an ensemble sitcom cast..."

Perhaps. But certain themes do come to the fore here, as they do in much of Cutrufello's work. There's the body-count desperation of "Bring on the Night" and her cover of Springsteen's "Take 'em as They Come," featuring a searing top-of-his-range vocal performance from Reckless Kelly's Willy Braun. There's the knowing sadness of love found and lost in "(I'll Still) Love You Forever"--which Mary says was actually written about the relationship of the Tobey Maguire and Michael Caine characters in the movie "The Cider House Rules"... "but nobody believes me when I tell them that!" There's the world-weary sexual outlaw driving through the stark badlands of western Nebraska in "Panhandle Wind," thinking about all the good men she's pushed away, and what the final cost of that might be.

If there is a grand unified theory, it might be that life is full of lose-lose situations, and bad ideas that spring from moments of inattention, impetuosity, or shortsightedness...or sometimes, from good ideas. "Down to the River," which closes the album, speaks to that. It first appeared in acoustic form on 2001's "Songs from the 6." Of all the songs on that record, Cutrufello says, "that was the one that really cried out for a band treatment. When I moved to Minnesota and put the rock band together, that song took wing right away." If there's any sentiment that ties "35" together, it may well be the last verse of "Down to the River":

well it's the promise
and the pain
and the faith that makes you strong
pay the price
take the blame
face the doubts that dog you all night long

With "35," Mary Cutrufello has found her voice...again...faced her doubts, and made the best record of her career.