

Rita Coolidge: A Double Review

Her 2016 Memoirs and her 1971 debut album

Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill



Delta Lady: A Memoir by Rita Coolidge with Michael Walker.

New York; Harper, 2016. 225 pages. Illustrated.

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Several pleasing aspects of this memoir make it a welcome read. When writing memoirs celebrities often write exposés of other celebrities, usually with self-

justifications. Going into elaborate denial is also common. Frequently we learn little if anything about their art, or what made them famous. Some years ago one Hollywood star managed a life story that did not have a word about their motivations for acting, how they developed their craft or interpreted their roles. Instead over a third of the book was a bitter tirade against a partner. Fortunately *Delta Lady: A Memoir* avoids these faults. In 225 pages Rita Coolidge gives readers a great deal of information about her musical background, development, inspirations, recordings and performances. When it comes to dealing with people she has known, praise and positivity dominate. Fellow musicians Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Joe Cocker, Claudia Leneer, Booker T. Washington (formerly her brother in law) her lover Graham Nash and family members, all gain praise for both their personal qualities and musical abilities. She writes more ambivalently about Stephen Stills, Leon Russell, Bonnie Bramlett, Eric Clapton, her husband of six years Kris Kristofferson and his mother. It takes a great deal for her to condemn anyone and only a few examples (who are not named here) are given by her.



Kris Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge and friends

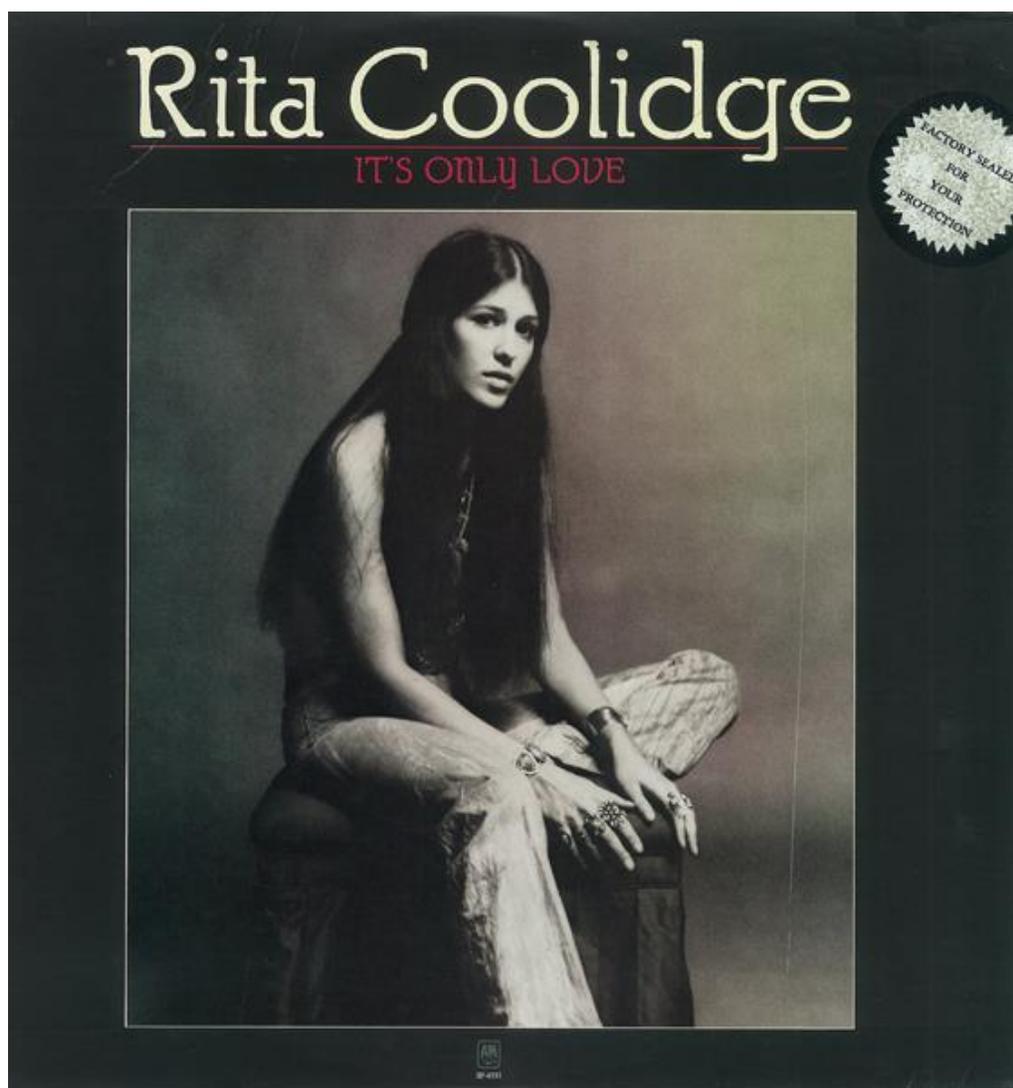
Her life from Lafayette, a small town near the Tennessee-Kentucky border where she was born in 1945, involved frequent moves as her father was a Baptist

minister. It was also full of racism and exclusion as the Coolidges had Cherokee ancestry in the old segregationist south. During her youth she moved from Lafayette to Nashville, then to Florida, before going back to Tennessee, gaining a university degree in art at Tallahassee. A brief stay in New York was followed by joining the Memphis music scene. In Memphis her singing abilities gained notice and she soon began recording. While there she met Leon Russell, a respected and prolific session musician, who persuaded her to go with him to Los Angeles in the late 1960s. Their personal relationship lasted a year, the intermittent musical relationship much longer. Leon Russell's compositions 'Delta Lady' and a "A Song For You" were written for her and she felt honoured. Just as she moved to LA her single 'Turn Around and Love You' had already reached Number one in LA and her powerful and distinctive voice meant that chorus and supporting singing became abundant. Rita began to be noticed as an upcoming star.

Producer David Anderle promised her a solo album contract if she took part in the all too aptly named Mad Dogs and Englishmen tour. The 1970 tour became legendary and notorious. Rita was given a solo spot to sing one of her greatest co-compositions 'Superstar' later recorded by Bette Midler and also by Karen Carpenter. She writes that the tour left scars and not only physical ones from the violence. Rita Coolidge writes that with Jim Gordon she wrote a song called 'Time' which had her distinctive riff at the end and that she recognised it in 'Layla.' While Clapton wrote different lyrics the whole composition became credited to Jim Gordon and Eric Clapton. With 'Superstar' she writes of how the song's idea came to her when she saw Clapton's adoring female fans gazing up at him and she wrote it with Bonnie Bramlett, although Leon Russell and Bramlett were credited on discs. Jim Gordon was later diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, so his reliability and recall would be minimal. Did he tell Clapton that Coolidge did much of the tune? Were Bramlett and Russell doing a different, if similar version to what Coolidge created? Considering the amount of drugs on the tour, were people conscious about what they were doing?

Although Anderle kept his promise, becoming the producer of her first solo album *Rita Coolidge* the cost was high. The gruelling seven week no breaks tour schedule combined with the drug scene, a vastly overloaded, crowded out staff and entourage, sexual politics, continually being filmed for the cameras, which were apparently everywhere and frayed gigantic egos, to create a perfect storm of trouble. Coolidge gives a graphic recounting of the nightmare tour and of how Joe Cocker was reluctantly put through an exhausting itinerary that far from rewarding

him, financially left him penniless. The high cost of the massive entourage for seven weeks and travelling by jets, and presumably the drugs and the film making meant that the tour was not a financial success. Although Rita Coolidge makes several strong criticisms of Leon Russell, the tour's organiser and after Cocker its biggest star, she does not repeat the story that as tour manager "he got the money and left Joe Cocker penniless." Although sympathetic to Joe Cocker, her eyewitness description of the extravagant, expensive to run, muddled and overstaffed tour, matched by others elsewhere bears out her comments. Virtually as soon as the tour ended Cocker was sleeping on lounges in the homes of Rita and Priscilla Coolidge. Even so, the tour and the documentary quickly led Joe Cocker, Leon Russell and Rita Coolidge to world fame and solo albums.



Delta Lady gives graphic accounts of the comradery, frequent euphoria and idealism of the Californian music scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s - and also its slow fall into competition, rivalries, and the grasping world of big business. Rita Coolidge blames the change to a large extent on the trend away from marijuana to cocaine, which she saw develop selfishness, malevolence and figurative blindness amongst those who made it a habit. Producers encouraged it though, because it kept energy and therefore profit margins high. Therefore some medical opinions claimed that it was not addictive. This also gives an indication of another cause for ruin of the hippie dream: its success brought commercialisation. She captures the rewards and pressures of the rock star lifestyle and what it was like being the wife of superstar Kris Kristofferson for six years; ironically much of what she writes on their marriage was adumbrated in the lyrics of 'Superstar.'

After their 1980 divorce her memoirs become brief. More information about those later albums from the 1980s and later would have been welcome. Rita Coolidge rounds *Delta Lady* off with an optimistic affirmation of the power of music to reinforce resilience, affirm love and encourage sharing. True enough, despite childhood racist bullying, a horrific traffic accident that left her facially scarred, experiencing being uncredited for some compositions, being punched in the face when she was expecting a marriage proposal, the killing of her beloved sister Priscilla, a late miscarriage and a sadly disintegrating marriage, nothing can wipe the joy, power or good heartedness from her remarkable voice.

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Rita Coolidge



Rita Coolidge

Released as an LP: 1971. Released as a CD with 'Nice Feeling' 2009.

Company: A & M Records

Produced by David Anderle for Willow Tree productions

Track 1: 'That Man is My Weakness' Track 2: 'Second Story Window' Track 3:
'Crazy Love' Track 4: 'The Happy Song' Track 5: 'Seven Bridges Road' Track 6:

‘Born Under a Bad Sign’ Track 7: ‘Isn’t That Peculiar’ Track 8: ‘I Always Called Them Mountains’ Track 9: ‘Mud Island’ Track 10: ‘I Believe in You’

Rita Coolidge’s first album was not really her musical debut. Her first single ‘Turn Around and Love You’ had become a hit years before. She was a prominent member of the popular group ‘Delaney & Bonnie and Friends’ and had done much chorus work. Producer David Anderle promised her a solo album if she took part in the 1970 Mad Dogs and Englishmen tour. As well as being a backup singer on the tour Rita was given a solo spot to sing one of her greatest co-compositions ‘Superstar.’ As the tour and subsequent documentary became world-famous, Coolidge had a highly rated reputation and was virtually famous before her first album *Rita Coolidge* came out a year later.

The album secured her a position as one of America’s great new singers of the 1970s - and with justification. David Anderle produced a work noted for its balance in many aspects. Old and new songs, rhythm and blues and bubbly pop, soaring vocals and mellow low notes, exuberance and regret are all there. With all these different contributions in the hands of lesser talents *Rita Coolidge* could have been an all over the place, a jarring, discordant album. Anderle must have had much to do with avoiding this pitfall, but the string and horn arrangements on most tracks by contributing musicians Booker T Jones and Jim Horn on the remaining three (‘Ain’t That Peculiar’ ‘Born Under a Bad Sign’ and ‘That Man is My Weakness’) are also a contributing factor. Other factors would be the use of some of America’s best session musicians. These include bass guitarist Chris Etheridge, drummer Jim Keltner, Leon Russell and Spencer Oldham on piano and organ, guitarists Ry Cooder, Marc Benno, Clarence White, Jerry McGee and Bobby Womack and her backup singers including Rita’s sister Priscilla and composer Donna Weiss. Graham Nash and Stephen Stills also modestly appeared on a few tracks in minor roles.

All this talent and fine songs wisely selected can only add to greatness: it cannot save an album featuring a bad singer. The singer’s abilities are at the core of any vocal album and here the core is solid, and beyond that to virtual perfection; her distinctive southern accent goes perfectly with the songs. Rita Coolidge never just performs a song, never just recites. She puts her heart and soul, her personality into the songs in just the right way. ‘The Happy Song’ has her exuberance; few songs can match it for inspiring a joy in life, although the preceding ‘Crazy Love’ comes

close. 'Mud Island,' 'I Always Called Them Mountains,' and Steve Young's 'Seven Bridges Road' are clearly sung by a southerner who loves the south. In 'Seven Bridges Road' her voice goes from mellow low to a soaring powerful affirmation with perfect pacing. In 'That Man is My Weakness' and Neil Young's 'I Believe in You' she sings as if this is what she feels and has experienced.

The album *Rita Coolidge* is heading for a fiftieth anniversary release milestone, but unlike so many 1970s albums, no sense of vintage of being a period piece emerges: the freshness remains.

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