

Get People to Listen: Caroline Rose, July 30 at the River Music Experience

Written by Jeff Ignatius
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The pleasing Americana music and nimble, emotive vocals of Caroline Rose’s “America Religious” – the title track from her debut album – mask massive amounts of meaning. Perhaps more accurately, they mask a lot of *words* whose meaning you’re left to decipher for yourself.

Take this line, which Rose said she’s frequently asked about: “America religious, I eat slices of white privilege processed by agri-business.”

“What I want people to get out of that line and the song in general is discussion about what race relations are like, and what things like immigration reform mean today, and agribusiness,” she said in a recent phone interview promoting her July 30 performance at the River Music Experience.

That didn’t clear things up much, did it?

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“I don’t really care what people think that it means,” she said. “As long as they’re talking about it, I think it’s great.”

Based on *America Religious*, Rose certainly bears discussion. The music is varied, compelling, and sharp in its genre, with “Here Come the Rain” a standout in texture, arrangement, and vocal performance.

But the lyrics are what leap out.

“America Religious” touches on one aspect of her storytelling, opaquely (perhaps impenetrably) literate. It begins: “Sun beam patches, like lightning in my vision, stumbling trembling as a tremor in the depths beneath the trenches.”

“There are a lot of thoughts in that” song, she said, “and a lot of words that are sort of crammed into the song. I like it that way. I like having more words and more meaning packed very densely into a song so that you can listen to it more than once and hear new things each time.”

Then there’s the much more plainspoken “Notes Walking Home from Work,” whose Dylan-esque folk style showcases incisive and smart writing: “I go for a walk ’round half past eight and / There on my stoop a man asking for change / I give him a dollar / He asks for one more / I ask him, ‘What for?’ / He says, ‘Does it matter?’” And this is an aside in a song from the point of view of a man worn down by routine, dissatisfied not with his station but himself: “I think somewhere beyond my chest you’ll find a spine.”

And if those examples make Rose sound a little too serious, try “Six Foot Woman,” with its nerdy sexual aggression: “Why don’t ya pink Cadillac me? / Write out a proof and subtract me?”

Despite her lengthy discourses on other songs, she tersely says of that one, “You can probably gather that song’s just about wanting to sleep with everyone.”

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For somebody still in her early 20s, Rose is thoughtful, mature, and careful about songs and music. She said she and her musical partner Jer Coons finished but scrapped two records before releasing *America Religious* earlier this month. “The first record that you put out is the first impression that people get of you, so in my mind it was a really big deal what I put out as a first record,” she said.

And she recognizes that there’s a difficult balance to find between the words, their messages, and the music.

Most songs start as stories or poems, she said, but much of what she writes doesn’t translate to music. “A lot of them it’s really hard to make into songs,” she said. “A lot of them just stay as poems. And I could probably write like 17 books of poems that don’t make it into songs.”

The key, she said, is to express ideas and thoughts suitable to pop structures, and to then craft musical settings that emphasize them.

“Music is a beautiful, powerful thing that can make words stand out much more than if they were on their own,” she said. “I’m hoping that the music helps to highlight the words rather than deters people from listening to the words. ... I don’t want it to distract from the words.”

But she also stressed the importance of comfortable and relatable styles to draw people in: “When you’ve got something to say, the most important thing is to get people to listen. ... If that’s in a pop structure, that’s great. Whatever tools you’ve got, I say utilize them to their full capacity.”

Caroline Rose will perform on Tuesday, July 30, on the River Music Experience’s Community Stage (129 Main Street, Davenport; RiverMusicExperience.org). The free all-ages show starts at 7 p.m., with opener Mo Carter of Busted Chaneliers.

For more information on Caroline Rose, visit CarolineRoseMusic.com.