



Joni Harms: Let's Put the Western Back in the Country

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By [Matt Cibula](#)

Where the Waters All Run the Other Way

Full disclosure: I know Joni Harms. Well, I kind of do. We both come from Canby, Oregon, a not-very-big town in the heart of the Willamette Valley. She's the most famous singer to ever come from Canby, perhaps the most famous person overall. In a town like Canby, there are only ever two degrees of separation to anyone else, and here's mine: my best friend from high school is her first cousin. Scott and I would go down to the Clackamas County Fair and watch her sing, and I think I probably met her a couple of times, but she was a couple of years ahead of me at Canby Union High School (yeah Cougars!), so it's not like Joni and I have hung out and downed beers at the Pudding River together or anything.

But I've followed her career over the years, when I could. Like many of us who grew up in a country town, I kind of rejected country music for a long time—but when I saw Joni's CD *Hometown Girl* at the HMV store in Manhattan 13 years ago, you know I snapped that up in a heartbeat. Despite my baby-fat snobbishness ("oh country music was only good back in the days of Hank blah blah blah"), I was belting out the chorus of "I Need a Wife" all over Houston Street and in seedy bars in Brooklyn. Her disc *After All* is a big fave too, nice fat slices of bouncy western swing.

But this disc is a huge step up for the Sweetheart of Clackamas County, because it marks the first time she's dealing from a position of strength in the music industry. Her Nashville "country" career never really took off, but she's busier now than she ever was when she was trying to make it happen conventionally, because she's probably the top "western" artist in the U.S. right now. Her song "Cowboy Up" (performed by ex-rodeo star Chris Ledoux, and the rallying cry of last year's Red Sox team thanks to Kevin Millar) was a huge hit last year in that segment, and won all kinds of awards and stuff. She doesn't *need* country. She's got western locked down tight with a double-hitch knot.

Wait, what, you don't know the difference between country and western? Well, it's kind of impossible to describe, except that western swing bounces more and sounds like Bob Wills and Jimmie Rodgers more; it's Hank Sr. rather than Jr. or III; it's a throwback Nudie Cohn suit instead of new boots and truck-endorsement contracts. Ain't no "Western Music Television", ain't no "Hot 97, All Your Western Favorites"; ain't no Shania Twainpop or Keith sub-Urban-ism in the western world. (Not that I'm hating on Nashville pop, far from it. I'm just saying.) This is rodeo music, it's the stuff playing in the background at the Cowboy Poetry Festival in Nevada, it's defiantly west-of-the-Mississippi and doesn't really care for any Music/Murderer's Row South-Eastern snobbishness.

What it is, is Uncool and Proud of It. And that's the *raison d'être* of the title track, which is Joni Harms's anthem for this emerging market. In a light, effortless voice, set to brushed drums and a sweet fiddle two-step, she makes the case for uncoolness as the new down-home cool: "They used to call it country and western / Will someone tell me where the western went? / Did it stray from the herd like some poor doggy / That wound up tangled in some barbed-wire fence?" She name-drops the Sons of the Pioneers (adding "daughters" to include herself, very smooth); she says we'll feel "home on the range" with our cups of coffee at the campfire (I always poured Yukon Jack into mine, but that's just me and my brothers); she even busts out with some "whoopee ti yi yeay" action at the end. It's profoundly conservative in a radical way. It's inclusive but it's defiant, and it's a great hard-nosed give-us-our-damned-props statement. And it swings like you wouldn't believe.

Most of the other tunes here are pretty western-ish too. "I've Got a Feeling for You" has about as many hooks as the whole new Carolyn Dawn Johnson album (which I liked, but still), and some adorable Andrews Sisters backing vocals by Harms multi-tracking herself. "Louisiana Hot Sauce" resurrects the Cajun feel of "Jambalaya" in its corny-but-cute tale of a guy so hot he reminds her of Tabasco: "Tiny beads of sweat on my brow / Feels like a fever from the inside out / Tell me how the thought of one little kiss / Could start this burning on my lips". And Harms's own version of "Cowboy Up" skips along on the get-tough-or-go-home tip like ketchup on a truck-stop steak.

Joni Harms co-writes all these songs with like-minded people like Hobo Jim Varsos and Wood Newton and George McCorkle and Barbie Isham and John Ramey and D. Scott Miller and man, now that I look at this, there are a lot of people in this new western music revolution. Can I be the first critic to say on this site that this is the next revolution in the world of music? Okay, then. Especially when the songs are this solid. "A Little Bit of Love" is pure angel-food cake, and it could be a hit on AAA radio or on your own Hot Country station if they take the bait. So could "We Work It Out" or the uncharacteristically rockin'-and-rollin' "Murphy's Law" (more Montgomery Gentry than Riders in the Sky, and my least favorite song here because of the strained metaphor of falling in love with a deputy named Murphy just when everything was going wrong, actually maybe it's pretty good after all)... but they probably won't be. It doesn't matter. Western is a law unto itself, and this CD will sell many thousands of copies without registering a huge radio hit. It's underground rebel music all the way.

But let's not slight the craft. These are all perfectly-constructed songs, and their construction helps listeners get over brief blips of lyrical corniness to unearth the deeper stuff within. "Coyote Café" is a total Marty Robbins corker, a tale of star-crossed love between a "señorita" and a "tumbleweed" that ends in death and ghostly reunion ... but if hard-hitting social relevance and modernisme-über-alles is your thing, then you haven't read this far anyway. And "We Work It Out" as a guide for good relationships is more a cutesy sentiment than a practical guide—but damned if it isn't the catchiest song I've heard since Coach Hackworth used to belt out John Anderson's "Swingin'" in the locker room while he taped my ankle, right before we beat Mountain View to go onto the state semifinals. (Um, yeah Cougars again!)

And lest you think this is all fluffy stuff, let's talk about the moment where this album makes the leap. It's "The Wind", a tale narrated by a woman on the edge of sanity. It's set in some unspecified past, maybe 100 years ago or so. The protagonist has left her family to marry a man and live with him out on "these godforsaken plains", miles away from any support system. Her husband has left with his wagon and his team over a week ago, leaving her alone and pregnant, promising to be back soon. But she hasn't heard anything from him. And she had the baby, but it died. And she can still hear it crying. And the walls are closing in. And the wind keeps howling outside. I don't recall a country song this dark, this chilling, this existential, since ol' Hank Sr. was still hearing that lonesome whistle blow. It's great songwriting, and it adds ballast to an already very fulfilling album.

I think this is very probably one of the best albums of the year in either country OR western music, and has a shot at my all-genre top 10 list for 2004. And that's not just the Canby pride talking, people. Better get on board with this whole western thing now or get left behind.

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