

Living Blues

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—Robert H. Cataliotti

AMY HELM

What the Flood Leaves Behind

Renew BMG – 538643742

What the Flood Leaves Behind is the third album as a leader by singer, mandolin player, and drummer Amy Helm. Her roots run deep in the Americana genre and reach back to one of its primary sources, her father Levon Helm's work with the Band. She is a veteran performer having worked both alongside him in his Midnight Ramble band and in the folk-oriented group Ollabelle. Her warm, soulful voice is at home in a wide range of genres from blues to soul, country to gospel. Her debut release, **Didn't It Rain** (2015), showed



a blues rock/R&B orientation, and she moved toward a softer ballad approach on **This too Shall Light** (2018). While this current offering features a melding of both those approaches, gospel is the roots music that has the most definitive impact on the album's ten tracks.

The craft of songwriting is very much front and center on **What the Flood Leaves Behind**, as she covers tunes by or collaborates with an array of contemporary composers. Helm draws the album title from the opening track, *Verse 23*, a slow, reflective piece written by MC Taylor (Hiss Golden Messenger) that echoes her passionate delivery with a gospel chorus. *Breathing*, written by Helm and JT Nero (Birds of Chicago) is an urgent, driving soul number with a kind

of stutter-step phrasing and a slight reggae lilt. The surging organ signals the gospel influence on the Helm/Mary Gauthier collaboration *Cotton and the Cane*, a poignant tribute to her father's rural Arkansas roots. Daniel Norgren's *Are We Running Out of Love* is a beautifully sung, mid-tempo folk rock number that is elevated by more of that gospel chorus backup singing. Helm recalls her folksy roots with Ollabelle on the shimmering ballad *Carry It Alone* (Helm, Erin Rae McKaskle, and Zach Djanikian). *Wait for the Rain* (Helm, Elizabeth Ziman, Steve Salett) is another gospel-influenced love song that builds tremendous momentum as Helm pushes her voice into the upper register. She switches gears and cuts loose on Salett's *Sweet Mama*, a Rolling Stones-style blues rocker with crunching guitars weaving in and out behind her vocal. Helm channels the Stax Records soul sound with her own *Calling Home*, imbuing the performance with a gospel fire. Her original *Terminal B* has an infectious nursery rhyme simplicity and features her gentle mandolin picking and whistling. The program concludes with the ballad *Renegade Heart*, featuring a resonant acoustic piano accompaniment and a powerful crescendo built with surging horns. Amy Helm has shaped her own musical identity built on a familial legacy, and with ***What the Flood Leaves Behind***, she has crafted a set of healing and uplifting performances for troubled times.

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