

JUDY COLLINS



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1961-2022</i>	<i>Folk</i>	<i>Golden Apples Of The Sun (1962)</i>

Only Solitaire

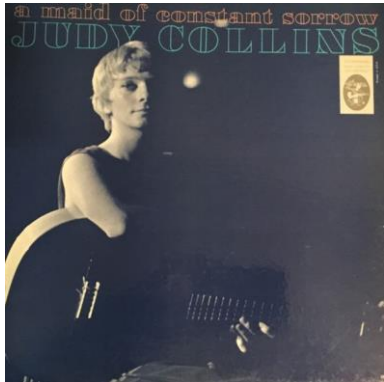
Artist: *Judy Collins*

Years: *1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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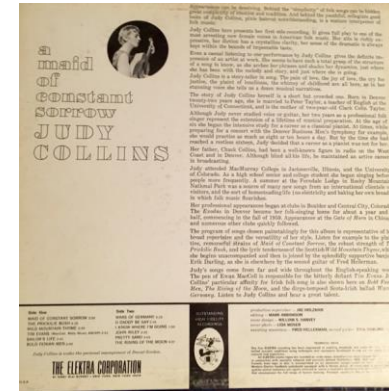


A MAID OF CONSTANT SORROW

Album released:
November 1961

V A L U E
2 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) A Maid Of Constant Sorrow; 2) The Pricklie Bush; 3) Wild Mountain Thyme; 4) Tim Evans; 5) Sailor's Life; 6) Bold Fenian Men; 7) Wars Of Germany; 8) O Daddy Be Gay; 9) I Know Where I'm Going; 10) John Riley; 11) Pretty Saro; 12) The Rising Of The Moon.

REVIEW

Once Joan Baez had all but invented the formula of the «pretty young lass with the golden voice telling tales of yore», it was only a matter of time — very little time — before the floodgates would open, and steady streams of similarly minded young lasses would follow... and not just follow, but actually line up at the offices of recording studios, ready to offer themselves for local, national, and international recognition. Few of them managed to stand the competition or linger on for even a small while in popular memory, but of those that did, arguably no one was more important than Judith Marjorie Collins, born and raised for the first ten years in the future capital of the grunge scene, but ultimately from Denver, Colorado — a Wild West Girl if there ever was one, who just kept steadily moving east until she hit the «green pastures of Greenwich Village» and never looked back.



Two historical details are of particular interest here. One is that Judy's musical journey started out on the classical path, as she received professional training from Antonia Brico, famous for being one of the first ever woman conductors and, as fate would have it, herself being a resident of Denver since 1942 (Judy herself would later honor her teacher by co-directing [A Portrait Of The Woman](#), a documentary on Antonia's life and career). The usual narrative goes that young Judy ultimately rejected the «academic» musical path in favor of her interest in the folk tradition — despite showing much promise as a

classical pianist — but I always tend to be a little skeptical of such depictions, as they tend to veer too much into the clichéd territory of «young unpretentious rebel breaking down elitist expectations». Far more likely, some people are just born to become great classical musicians, and others eventually come to understand that their true talent lies somewhere else. Even so, there is no denying that Judy Collins' years of classical training did bring a certain element of strict and regulated musical discipline to her folk and, later, folk-pop career — for better or for worse. (If you ever get a feeling that Judy Collins might have an even bigger stick up her ass than Joan Baez, that's probably got something to do with that, hah!).

Second, it is notable that, while most of the Greenwich Village types at the time were recording their stuff for established labels set up by folk experts, such as Folkways or Vanguard, Judy was the first one to get an offer from somebody totally on the side — namely, Jac Holzman of the (still relatively young) Elektra label, whom, I believe, most of us usually associate with The Doors; Collins, however, was his first big acquisition (unless you also count Theodore Bikel). Although this was nowhere near as big an event as Bob Dylan signing with Columbia the next year, it was a premonition of things to come: outsiders were beginning to get really interested in this folkie stuff, seriously considering the possibility that it might just be the next big thing in modern music. Allegedly, Judy had to be pressured into signing the contract; used to the idea that you had to get professional training in that particular musical line of work you chose for yourself, she was worried about being completely self-trained as a guitar player and singer — but I guess she must have gotten over that fairly quickly, since just about everybody else in Greenwich Village had even less practice, and *they* had no problem signing their contracts.

So much for objective history, and now on to subjective impressions: **A Maid Of Constant Sorrow** is a record that, if not downright invents, then at least perfectly defines the concept of «pretty young lass with the golden voice... and a complete and utter lack of any kind of personality». Maybe it's some sort of linguistic curse on all people named Collins: Shirley Collins, Judy Collins... Phil Collins... oh, never mind. Actually, Shirley Collins over in England, who preceded Judy in her career for a good three or four years, had a little bit more personality in that her voice wasn't nearly as pitch-perfect, and she actually sounded more «authentic» in her depictions of the lives of sad young Irish country maidens than Judy does with her deep, dark, ringing vibrato and deadly seriousness of attitude.

Given her emergence as Greenwich Village's second leading lady after Joan Baez, it would be intriguing to set up some sort of White Queen vs. Red Queen rivalry (more accurately, Black Queen vs. Chestnut Queen), but the truth is that both ladies had fairly comparable approaches to what they were doing. Judy's normal vocal range is lower than Joan's, so it is easier to stomach for those of us who have physical trouble appreciating Baez when she goes off oscillating into her super-sonic

charge; but, strange as it is, on these early records Judy also comes off as much more of a stren, iron-hearted Amazon warrior than Baez — possibly a consequence of her being so much more into the classic Irish battle song than Joan. If you, like me, were ever worried about Joan taking a bit too *religious*, overtly serious attitude toward the material she sang (in such stark contrast, for instance, to the relatively light-headed, light-hearted, humorous classic style of Woody Guthrie), then prepare yourself for an even harsher lesson in spiritual discipline when Judy Collins takes the stage. This is probably where all those Antonia Brico lessons truly paid off.

It starts off quite predictably already with the title track — which Judy tags as ‘*Maid Of Constant Sorrow*’, as opposed to Joan Baez’s ‘*Girl Of Constant Sorrow*’, and, funny enough, the difference shows: Joan’s higher, chirpier performance makes the «sorrow» more implied, while Judy gives it a deeper, more somber and melancholic reading. Neither of the two should be particularly scolded or praised for that, because essentially they just follow their natural range and do what is more comfortable for each of them — and while, physically, it is easier for me to enjoy Judy’s timbre, the atmosphere of cold, rigid sternness emanating from there is a bit more difficult to bear than Joan’s (relative) lightness. As for their musical talent, both ladies actually have comparable guitar-playing styles: competent, well adjusted to their vocals, but nothing too exceptional or out of line. (Judy is accompanied throughout on second guitar by Fred Hellerman of The Weavers, and occasionally by Erik Darling on banjo, also from The Weavers, giving her a slightly fuller sound than Joan’s early albums, but this is not a crucial point).

As is usual in such cases, discussing the highs and lows of individual performances would be an exercise in dancing on the edge of a pin: this is simply the folk idiom presented in a deadly serious, reverential, and textbookishly elegant fashion. If you are a beginning folkie and wonder about whose rendition of ‘Wild Mountain Thyme’ or ‘Pretty Saro’ to start with, Judy Collins ain’t a bad choice; but if, like I said, you are yearning for a stronger personal imprint, you will most probably be bored out of your skull. It does seem curious how Joan-of-Arcish this debut LP is: at least three or four songs are Irish rebel ballads, with the original «maid of constant sorrow» all but leading the charge on the chest-thumpin’ grand finale of ‘The Rising Of The Moon’ — next to numbers like these, Baez’ output might seem meek and submissive in comparison. But perhaps it is simply because we find ourselves a little prejudiced, mesmerized by the fascination of «Judy Blue Eyes» and expecting more of a gentle forest nymph than a bloodthirsty Valkyrie. Big mistake there!

In fact, if you are just an idle bypasser whose only acquaintance with Judy is through ‘Both Sides Now’ or a small handful of her other hits from the mid-Sixties and onwards, you *will* be surprised at how loud, tense, and aggressive she is throughout

this record — which might very well be simply a consequence of feeling nervous and uncomfortable in a new environment. She oversings even lyrical ballads like ‘John Riley’, which certainly do not require the audience standing at attention, and hardly ever relaxes even for a second, not even during the happy ending of ‘The Prickilie Bush’ (which most people probably know as Led Zeppelin’s ‘Gallows Pole’ with a much less happy ending). But then again, it’s an understandable attitude, and far be it from me to say that her skill level is inadequate for it.

Already on the second album, this early fire would subside a little, and it wouldn’t be too long before we’d definitively ascertain that Judy Collins was not going to be an early prototype of the Riot Grrrl; thus, **A Maid Of Constant Sorrow** is somewhat atypical of Judy’s «classic» sound — but only *somewhat*, because all the truly essential components are already there: the pitch-perfect voice, the deadly earnestness, the stereotypical sonic beauty, and the inevitable accompanying whiff of boredom if stereotypical sonic beauty isn’t particularly your kind of thing. Yet for 1961, it was still a relatively fresh sound, not to mention quite a relieving alternative for all those people who wanted themselves a Joan Baez but had no interest in replacing their windows each time they forgot to turn down the volume.

