

# Waiting for a Masterpiece:

The Rickie Lee Jones Story

by Kirby Ferguson



When Rickie Lee Jones emerged in 1979 with her platinum debut and an underdog top ten hit in "Chuck E's in Love", she established herself as an artist of monumental potential and already seemed on par with the likes of Van Morrison, Bruce Springsteen and Randy Newman. Possibly the most striking thing about her was her girlish, slurred singing, which most would consider either annoying or extraordinarily poignant in its innocence and vulnerability. Since then, Jones has come to be considered an underachiever, but her work has been remarkably consistent and not nearly so pompous as some critics have stated.

Like Van Morrison, Jones' music extends from the philosophies of *Astral Weeks* and *Moondance*: free-flow and tightly constructed pieces. *Rickie Lee Jones* (5) established her as a master craftsman with its lively r&b and gentle balladry. A true masterpiece, the album is one of the most assured debuts in all of rock and an overlooked masterpiece. *Pirates* (4.5) is a strong follow-up and a logical progression, presenting the same boppy r&b on numbers like "Woody and Dutch on the Slow Train to Peking" and "Pirates" but experimenting with more impressionistic compositions like "Traces of the Western Slopes" (wordy enough for a Yes album, that) and "Living It Up". It's a little less well-aimed than her debut, but the album has frequent moments of utter brilliance. 1984's *The Magazine* (4) introduces synths to the mix and Jones gets even artier, ("Theme for the Pope" indicates the kind of flakiness that may be Jones' Achilles Heel) but the album is nowhere near as pretentious as a glance at the track listing might suggest: joyous r&b numbers like "The Real End" and "Juke Box Fury" are as infectious as anything from *Rickie Lee Jones*.

After *The Magazine* Rickie disappeared for five years, reemerging in 1989 much quieter and much earthier with the masterful *Flying Cowboys* (4.5), on which she disposed with the experimentation of previous works -- not to mention the lively bops -- in favour of traditional pop song structures. The tunes are some of her best: the likes of "The Horses" and "Satellites" are moving, tuneful and accessible songs that should have returned Jones to popular, as well as critical, favour. 1990's *Pop Pop* (2) is Jones' only write-off. A collection of twee swing covers, it features Jones' singing at its most irritating. "Love Junkyard" sounds like a *Flying Cowboys* outtake and "Comin' Back to Me" (the Jefferson Airplane song) is the only brooding moment, but *Pop Pop* is astoundingly misguided.

Jones' new release, *Traffic From Paradise*, (4) actually justifies *Pop Pop*, incorporating the spare instrumentation and jazz influence of that album, along with the gentle melodicism of *Flying Cowboys*. Her restrained, hoarse singing is her least affected yet. To stand up in such stark relief, your material has to be pretty spectacular and Jones supplies some career summing material: "Stewart's Coat," "Beat Angels" and "Running From Mercy" are as tenderly tuneful as anything off *Flying Cowboys* but also haunting in their emptiness. Puzzlingly plopped in the middle of the album is a cover of -- of all things -- David Bowie's "Rebel Rebel", an odd moment of vulgarity on an otherwise gorgeous work.

Her least compromising work yet, *Traffic From Paradise* demonstrates that Jones' experimentation has finally come to a head. The world undoubtedly won't listen, but Rickie Lee Jones has reasserted herself as one of pop music's most daring and unique artists. With *Traffic From Paradise*, she takes her art to a singular new level.

