

*I've tried and I have failed Lord
I've won and I have lost
I've lived and I have loved Lord
Sometimes at such a cost
One thing I know
The world's been good for me
A better place awaits
You'll see*
-Glen Campbell, "A Better Place"

Simply put, *Ghost On the Canvas* is the album of Glen Campbell's life. Take that as literally or figuratively as you like and it still is the case. With beauty, power, heartfelt emotion and deep spirituality, this set of songs – a song cycle, if you will – traces the arc of Campbell's 75 years: From dirt-poor, tiny-town Arkansas origins to Hollywood triumphs on the pop charts, TV and movies. From barnstorming days of youthful touring to hobnobbing with Elvis, Sinatra and the Duke. From troubled freefalls of addiction and bad life choices to personal and spiritual redemption.

It's all here in this series of songs, starting with the prayerful invocation quoted above and concluding what Campbell has said will be his final album with a glorious, celebratory guitar jam featuring his own still-stellar chops alongside those of such colleagues and acolytes as Billy Corgan, Brian Setzer, Rick Nielsen, Jason Falkner, Marty Rifkin, Steve Hunter, Tim Pierce and Keith Urban. The album was largely written by Campbell with producer-collaborator Julian Raymond, complemented by contributions from Jakob Dylan, Paul Westerberg, Teddy Thompson and Robert Pollard, with evocative instrumental interludes composed by Roger Manning as musical illustration. Raymond, who squired 2008's arresting *Meet Glen Campbell*, on which the artist matched his esteemed talents with vital material originated with such artists as Jackson Browne, U2, Green Day and even the Velvet Underground, here shapes a vision as unexpected as it is rewarding.

But it's also a moving, engaging and masterful musical experience in its own right. Ghosts, in the forms of allusions to beloved songs from his vast catalog of cherished hits, abound – the soaring strings and perky lilt of the title track and "Any Trouble" echoing without imitating the sounds that first took him to the top with "Gentle on My Mind," the organically lush swell of "It's Your Amazing Grace" reminding that Campbell was arguably the first "countryopolitan" star, the sunset hues of "A Thousand Lifetimes" bringing us up to date with that old "Wichita Lineman." But as *Ghost On the Canvas* recaps, it more so renews and transcends Campbell's colorful history. It is, again simply put, a terrific listen.

"A Better Place" matches its confessional tone with Campbell's lovely finger-picked guitar and a voice undiminished by the years, the same voice that's been such a friend to so many for several generations. The title song, one of Westerberg's entries, segues in with its telegraph pulse, more acoustic guitar and comfortingly enveloping strings pointedly recalling two of Campbell's breakthrough hits, "Gentle On My Mind" and "Wichita Lineman" – Westerberg's stated dream to become Campbell's new equivalent of Jimmy Webb, writer of "Lineman" and other Campbell hits realized. It's a song of craft, grace and depth, at once worthy of Westerberg's reputation stretching back to his days with the Replacements and of the Campbell canon.

The other guest songs seem to tap Campbell's sensibilities and artistic voice as well, bursting with the full richness of hope and joy. Dylan's "Nothin' But the Whole Wide World" presents a man ready to embrace whatever comes – "God wants you busy, never giving up," as good a summary of Campbell's stand as any. Rising English singer-songwriter Thompson's boisterous "In My Arms" (with Chris Isaak, Dick Dale and Brian Setzer adding guitar twang) wraps us in sweet, if complicated love. Pollard, leader of iconic indie band Guided By Voices, continues the tone with "Hold On Hope." And Westerberg comes back, gentle on his mind, with "Any Trouble," a joyous, satisfied celebration of domestic bliss, Raymond adding the sounds of children to underscore the spirit.

The interludes are just as key to the portrait being painted. “Billstown Crossroads” uses steel guitar and tinkling vibes to return to Campbell’s Arkansas home. “Second Street North” a swell of romantic promise. “May 21st, 1969” – the date his network variety show which became *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour* debuted on network TV – mixes carnival sounds with hints of the Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds*, the landmark album that Campbell helped craft, to call up the circus atmosphere of ascending stardom. “Wild and Waste” could be a lost scrap of score from Campbell’s big-screen debut alongside John Wayne in *True Grit*. “Valley of the Sun” uses the sounds of children playing in Campbell’s family life in Arizona. And “The Rest is Silence” returns to Beach Boys wistfulness in later life.

But it’s the songs by Campbell and Raymond that tug the heart the hardest, songs of failings and faith, stumbles and triumphs, the most private sides of a public star. And in the course it’s not just the album of Campbell’s life, but of ours. His story is a quintessential American tale and the music he’s made – from his studio years through his great span of hits – form its soundtrack. When he was on our radios every day and in our living rooms every week, he wasn’t just an entertainer but a friend. When suffered later, we ached, his failings being our failings. When he overcame the troubles, we shared in the joy. In “A Thousand Lifetimes,” as the music leaning to the rock side of his equation, he sings, “Each breath I take is a gift that I will never take for granted.”

When he sings “Strong” near the end of this album, we hear that it’s both an apology and pledge to his wife, Kimberly, whom he credits with bringing him the stability he’d been lacking, for putting him right. “This is not the road I wanted for us,” he sings, with equal tones of sorrow and stoic certainty. “But now it’s here.” As personal as that is, it’s something we can internalize, feel in our own lives. “The Rest is Silence,” with its wordless Beach Boys-esque vocals, serves as a closing prayer, a final impressionistic meditation to end not just the album, but a career.

It’s not the end, though. Campbell returns with “There Is No Me ... Without You,” again addressing Kimberly with a sense that with love there is no end, the all-star tag-team guitar coda sidling up next to George Harrison’s compatible “Something.”

“The past gets in my way,” Campbell sings in “A Better Place.” It may be the lone moment on the album that rings less than true. That past made *Ghost On the Canvas* possible, a singular life bringing a singular achievement that we are privileged to share.

-- Steve Hochman