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music BY VANESSA SALVIA

Soul Journey

Gillian Welch soars on golden wings.

It was 1996 when I first saw and heard Gillian Welch. I was intrigued by the cover of the CD that came that month with one of my music magazines — the sepia-toned photograph of a waif-like creature wearing a vintage polka dot dress, a half smile and a yearning look like she was escaping the dust-bowl but leaving her family behind.

Welch debuted with *Revival* that year, a Geffen release featuring the wonderful song "Paper Wings." As her career charted skyward so did renewed affection for Americana. Welch introduced mainstream America to "Paper Wings" on the *Hope Floats* soundtrack, "Leaving Train" on the *Horse Whisperer* soundtrack and sang a siren song with Allison Kraus and Emmylou Harris in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Her latest release is *Soul Journey*, a 2003 album, so fans are probably already familiar with it. For those who aren't, Welch has described this CD as representative of the most personal songs she has ever written. Produced by her songwriting partner David Rawlings — he pair met while schoolmates at Boston's Berklee — *Soul Journey* is Welch's fourth album.

As usual, Welch's voice is as tattered as the American heartland, emotive and expressive in a sparse palette. Along with her guitar and some of the best backing musicians around, Welch has carved the landscape of country music to suit her plain-spoken, refreshingly unglamorous nature. In some ways, Welch's voice is pure country, or at least what pure country should be, and you can tell she's trying to be traditional.

Born in Manhattan in 1967 but raised in Los Angeles where her parents wrote material for *The Carol Burnett Show*, she's listened to Neil Diamond as much as Willie Nelson and her interpretation of country is necessarily cracked. She says on her website

(www.gillianwelch.com) that *Soul Journey's* songs are "closer to the kind of music I really

like than anything else I've put out." She explains she recorded the traditional tunes "Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor," "I Had A Real Good Mother and Father" and "One Little Song,"

for herself, not intending to release them. Welch must be growing more comfortable in her intimacy with fans because on *Soul Journey*, she allows her first completely unaccompanied performances.

EW



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