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Jennifer Morrow

University of the Pacific, j_morrow1@u.pacific.edu

Jennifer Morrow is a recent graduate of University of the Pacific with a BA in English and minors in writing and music management ('19). She presented research on female singer-songwriters ...[Read More](#)

This article was written as part of the curriculum for the Bachelor of Music in Music Management and the Bachelor of Science in Music Industry Studies at University of the Pacific. Each student conducted research based on his or her own areas of interest and study.

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Emmylou Harris's Bold and Broken *Pieces of Sky*

Jennifer Morrow

Emmylou Harris released the album that is largely considered her debut, *Pieces of Sky*, in 1975, only two years after the death of her beloved musical collaborator, Gram Parsons. In many ways, the album can be interpreted as Harris picking up the broken pieces of her personal life and putting the metaphorical sky back together through music. Aside from its sentimental significance for Harris, the album also jump-started her career, gaining her notoriety for her unique blend of sweet vocals, classic country roots, and contemporary rock flavoring. *Pieces of Sky* is far from a perfect album; there are a few too many lulls and safe choices. However, Harris shines brightest in her most personal moments, such as the devastating “Boulder to Birmingham”-- her only songwriting credit on the album. *Pieces of Sky* is a significant album not because of its perfection, but because of its promise: a brilliant debut from an artist with the strength -- and vulnerability -- needed to create emotionally authentic country music with a pop-inspired sound accessible enough to reach a mainstream audience.

The album opens with the firecracker of a track, “Bluebird Wine,” written by Rodney Crowell. It’s the perfect way to start the album, as Harris hollers in the chorus: “It’s alright/ I’ve just hit my stride/ Right off the bat/ Lord, I’m drunk off bluebird wine.” The rock and rhythm and blues stylings paired with a lively fiddle and Harris’s fiery vocals are the perfect introduction to the crossover achievements that shine throughout *Pieces of Sky*. The energy set by this track recedes significantly as the album continues with “Too Far Gone” and “If I Could Only Win Your Love,” two country ballads about the trials and tribulations of love.

The first three songs on the album are certainly solid and feature seamless production and instrumentation, but it is not until “Boulder to Birmingham” that Emmylou Harris truly emerges

from behind the curtain and shows herself as an artist. This is the track that makes *Pieces of Sky* a triumph. Emmylou mourns the loss of Parsons with a tangible delicacy, each lyric piercing the listener like a needle weaving in and out of their heart. As Bud Scoppa described in his 1975 *Rolling Stone* review of the album, Harris's careful blend of anger, vulnerability, and strength are also apparent in her vocals: "...throughout the song, Emmylou juxtaposes her most intimate singing with her fullest, thereby deftly moving along the shifting sequence of perspectives to form a coherent progression. Here, working with her own ideas, her intelligence and sensitivity are readily apparent." The vulnerability peaks directly after the chorus, as Emmylou declares "Well you really got me this time/ And the hardest part is knowing I'll survive." It's a wise reflection on grief, the complicated sorrow of knowing that there is light at the end of the tunnel, but not with the person you have loved and lost.

Pieces of Sky scores high points for its maturity and emotional pull, but it's also a notable album for the creative journey through various musical influences it achieves throughout its ten tracks. The album features three cover tracks that perfectly illustrate Harris's eclectic music taste that contributes to her unique country-rock sound. Another standout moment on the album is her cover of "Bottle Let Me Down," originally recorded by country legend Merle Haggard. Emmylou's version is a joy to listen to, maintaining country and bluegrass stylings with a modern, pop twist, thanks to the expertise of her instrumentalists. As Bob Woffinden noted in his 1975 review: "Here, the production is of studied perfection. Careful and precise use is made of each instrument, and there's a beautiful clarity to the proceedings. And of course, the playing throughout is immaculate; one of the most memorable moments is Rick Cunha's guitar solo on 'Bottle Let Me Down'." Additionally, Emmylou's singing is especially sassy and playful here, showcasing her range not just in vocal ability, but in vocal styling as well.

Harris's other covers aren't as memorable, although her Dolly Parton homage "Coat of Many Colors" is perfectly-suited to her down-to-earth sound. Interestingly, Emmylou does not limit herself to covering country tracks, as seen in her attempt at "For No One" by the Beatles. It's an admirable and bold choice, as doing justice to a Beatles tune is no easy task, but this version leaves something to be desired. This can partially be attributed to the painfully slowed down beat and prototypical country stylings, which lack the emotional intensity and uniqueness of Paul McCartney's original recording. However, it's certainly inventive, and Emmylou's vocal blends together in a pensive way that brings a different depth and longing to the lyrics. It's also interesting that Harris chooses not to switch to male pronouns, which also greatly changes the meaning of the song. When Harris sings "She no longer needs you," it sounds almost empowering, giving a subtle edge to a previously forlorn and hopeless song.

Pieces of Sky ends leaving the listener hungry for more, curious at what other tricks Emmylou Harris might have under her sleeve. The album's thought-provoking final track is, "Queen of the Silver Dollar," penned by poet Shel Silverstein. When Emmylou sings: "She was once an ordinary girl with ordinary dreams/ But there's a man who found her/ And he brought her to this world/ He's the one who made a queen of a simple country girl," we can't help but think about her connection to the late Gram Parsons, who propelled her to stardom and tragically passed two years prior to the release of *Pieces of Sky*. The song reframes the album in the context of Emmylou's unique position as an emerging star with a troubled past, yet a bright future. By the end of the album, Emmylou Harris successfully establishes herself as a force to be reckoned with; a supremely talented vocalist with an emotional intelligence and eclectic sound that has made her a beloved artist across genre and generation lines.

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