

Stars and Stripes



Gillian Welch (photo by Arianna Mercer)

Gillian Welch and David Rawlings elevate the concept of roots music

By Sam Prestianni

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Roots revivalist **Gillian Welch** celebrates the lonesome highway of American memory with slow, sad, yet hopeful songs that evoke both myth and dream. On four albums in the past seven years, including the soon-to-be-released *Soul Journey*, Welch and longtime songwriting partner **David Rawlings** imbue the simple chord changes of traditional blues, country, folk, bluegrass, gospel, and old-time rock 'n' roll with tuneful melodies and lyrics that peer into the dark with eyes wide open. From archetypal images of freight trains and black-dust towns to classic icons like John Henry, Miss Ohio, and Elvis, the Welch-Rawlings songbook connects with the experience of America, from Appalachia to the Gold Country. Performed with spare instrumentation -- usually just vocals and a pair of six-strings or maybe a banjo or mandolin -- the duo's music is often stark and eerily beautiful, like first light glancing off a cracked mirror after a night of drunken despair. Surprisingly, Welch and Rawlings' efforts have met considerable success from the outset, including Grammy nominations and prominent appearances on the soundtrack to the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* This commercial triumph gives the pair's downtempo persona an ironic edge, which in turn deepens its appeal to altcountry hipsters and savvy aficionados of the fashionable Americana movement. In a testament to the twosome's broad fan base in the Bay Area, Welch and Rawlings have sold out shows over the years at both the Freight & Salvage Coffeehouse and the Fillmore. On the current tour they perform at the Palace of Fine Arts Theatre. This rare concert event at one of the city's poshest venues underscores just how far the singer/songwriters have elevated the concept of roots music. With Welch at the mike, the blues and folk forms once dumped on the grubby back porch of pop culture now shine front and center like a live American Dream.