



→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# ALISON KRAUSS

Doug DeLoach takes a look at the incredible career of America's leading lady of bluegrass and her band Union Station

If you were to ask Joe Public to name the American recording artist with the most Grammy Awards lined up on the mantelpiece, there is a good chance the answer would not be Alison Krauss.

And, yet, this past February, after accepting two more trophies during the 54th edition of the annual awards ceremony, Krauss moved ahead of Quincy Jones to become the most Grammy-honoured living artist of all time. The only person with more miniature gilded gramophones than Krauss (28) is the late, legendary orchestra conductor Sir Georg Solti (d 1997) whose final tally of 31 is in danger of being eclipsed sooner than later

by the 41-year-old fiddler and singer-songwriter from Illinois.

In less than three decades, Krauss has garnered official accolades for just about everything a professional musician can do from solo performances and recordings with her band, Union Station, to producing albums for others (eg *This Side*, Nickel Creek's 2002 release). In addition to the long list of music awards, there's one achievement by which the pop culture bona fides of every musician in the last 20-something years must be ranked – this past February, Krauss and Union Station were the featured guests performing the theme song for the 500th

episode of *The Simpsons*.

Krauss was born in Decatur, Illinois, and grew up in nearby Champaign. In elementary school, she studied chorus, strings and marching band, while playing mostly classical music on violin. The curious youngster eventually grew bored with the prescribed regimen in favour of more local influences, particularly manifested in the bluegrass and country bands in the area. Named state fiddling champion at age 12, Krauss made her recording debut in 1985, and two years later signed with Rounder Records aged 16.

Throughout her career, Krauss, who lists Def Leppard, Lynyrd Skynyrd, AC/DC

## Krauss succeeds in deftly handling the legacy of authentic bluegrass within the context of 21st century Americana

and Journey among her favourite bands, has managed to blithely endure bluegrass purists who have accused her of subverting tradition and effectively ignore demands from certain powers-that-be to stick to one stylistic path or another.

Her extended association with Rounder has produced several milestones including 2007's *Raising Sand*, which features the unlikely duo of Krauss paired with Robert Plant. To everyone's amazement, the T-Bone Burnett-produced album sold more than one million copies and boosted Krauss' Grammy stash by five.

1995 was the breakthrough year for Krauss with the release of *Now That I've Found You: A Collection*, which included nine songs recorded between 1987 and 1994, plus four previously unreleased tracks. One of those, 'Baby, Now That I've Found You', originally a Top 40 radio hit for The Foundations (in 1968), earned for Krauss a Grammy for Best Country & Western Vocal Performance.

Following the success of *A Collection*, Krauss dutifully fulfilled her contract with Rounder, which called for alternating solo recordings and albums with her band, Union Station: Jerry Douglas (Dobro, lap steel, vocals), Dan Tyminski (guitar, mandolin, lead vocal), Ron Block (banjo, guitar) and Barry Bales (bass, vocals). In succession came *So Long So Wrong* (1997) and *Forget About It* (1999), the latter, a solo effort, followed by Union Station releases including *New Favorite* (2001), *Alison Krauss and Union Station – Live* (2002) and *Lonely Runs Both Ways* (2004).

The year 2000 brought the release of the soundtrack for the Coen Brothers' film *O, Brother, Where Art Thou?* which won multiple Academy Awards and elevated bluegrass to a hitherto unthinkable level of popular appeal. Inspired by the movie's success, a concert tour and TV/DVD production, *Down from the Mountain*, was launched featuring Krauss and fellow soundtrack compatriots including Ralph Stanley, Emmylou Harris, Gillian Welch and John Hartford.

In recent years, Krauss has released another compilation, *A Hundred Miles or*

*More: A Collection* (2007), and *Paper Airplane* (2011). The latter album showcases Krauss and her steadfast Union Station cohorts in a style predominantly reminiscent of the band's earlier, rootsier efforts, notwithstanding the lingering presence of non-traditional stylistic elements.

Krauss attracts into her orbit fans that otherwise might have passed by the esoteric gravitational pull of 'bluegrass' or 'country' by exercising thoughtful, imaginative judgement when selecting material and by subsuming a prodigious talent in the service of collaborative support of her personal, and sometimes painfully introspective, vision.

For all the pop diva adornments and arguably dubious and occasional transgressions into musical tropes, the thrust of Krauss' oeuvre is more exploratory, progressive and expansive than preservative, conservative and derivative. Although her crossover appeal is usually couched in terms of melding bluegrass, country, gospel and rock, another creature resembling a seriously cool jazz chanteuse resides in those magical vocal chords. For evidence, check out Krauss' mossy rendering of Johnny Mercer's 'This Time the Dream's On Me' from the soundtrack to *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Perhaps it was this rather tenuous jazz connection that led Krauss and her band being programmed at the 2011 London Jazz Festival, where they performed four sold-out concerts at the Royal Festival Hall.

Overall, it's easy to see how people might criticise some of Krauss' music for being overly sentimental or serving a commoditised role. Regardless, way more often than not, she succeeds in deftly handling the legacy of authentic bluegrass and country music within the context of 21st century Americana. **N**

**DATE** Alison Krauss and Union Station are touring the UK July 13-15

**PODCAST** Hear music from Krauss and Union Station on the podcast

## BEST ALBUMS



**Too Late to Cry (Rounder, 1987)**  
You'll want this one not because it's her first, but because Krauss' Rounder debut, recorded when she was 16, is one of the best bluegrass records from an era when the genre was beginning to vector beyond the college radio and festival circuits.



**Now That I've Found You: A Collection (Rounder, 1995)**  
This is the album that catapulted Krauss into the mainstream, thanks largely to covers of 'Baby, Now That I've Found You' (The Foundations), 'Oh, Atlanta' (Bad Company) and the Beatles' 'I Will'. Listeners also get a taste of Krauss' splendid rendering of old-time gospel music on the Red Foley classic, 'When God Dips His Pen of Love in My Heart'.



**Paper Airplane (Rounder, 2011)**  
As I wrote in #76, this collection of 11 tracks, comprising the first Union Station release since 2004's *Lonely Runs Both Ways*, incorporates all of the qualities that have made Krauss & co the poster group for the 21st century bluegrass revival.

## BEST COMPILATION



**Live (Rounder, 2002)**  
This is the best representation of what Krauss and Union Station are all about. Twenty-five tracks on two CDs that will take you on a journey through bluegrass roots and country soul to twanged-up pop and gospel-infused exaltations. It includes the best version of 'I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow' you're ever going to hear outside of an up-close-and-personal experience.

## IF YOU LIKE ALISON KRAUSS, THEN TRY... SARAH JAROSZ



**Sarah Jarosz Follow Me Down (Sugar Hill, 2011)**  
Similar formula: child prodigy, on mandolin and banjo, with an angelic voice. At 12, jams onstage with Ricky Skaggs and David Grisman – and wows 'em. Courted by record companies, at 20, she's already released two albums and toured the world. Jarosz appears with Krauss on the fantastic *Transatlantic Sessions* (Series 5).