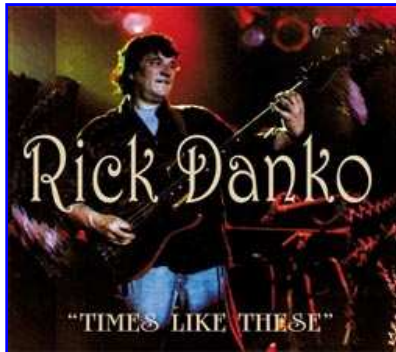


Cave 17.

Rick Danko - *Times Like These*



Times Like These is Rick Danko's final solo album, technically unfinished when he died in 1999 and released the first time a year later (it's recently been reissued). Danko brought in Band members Levon Helm and Garth Hudson, as well as people related to the group, including Professor "Louie" Hurwitz, Maud Hudson, and the Crowmatix. It's not any kind of reunion album, though; it's a Danko solo album.

There is a certain amount of looking back, of course. "This Wheel's on Fire" makes a great reappearance, with new instrumental pieces opening and closing the song. Jim Eppard picks the melody as the song slowly builds, and three minutes of absent vocals rewrite the song (but based around the idea that listeners already know it — "if your memory serves you well"). Danko comes in unexpectedly angry, biting on the words and cutting to the meat of the final verse. The effect is focusing — the "if your memory" becomes an attack, because of course the addressed party's voice has served her (or him?) well, and Danko knows it. You get a few lines and an explosion. The lack of vocals — and Danko's new delivery — heightens the effect of the song, and is a new interpretation of the speaker.

The other key revisiting moment on this album isn't a return to the Band, but to Sam Cooke, with a cover of "Chain Gang." Danko had an element of a soul singer in him, even if his strained tenor came out more like a hurt country boy (though let's not make too big a split between classic soul and C&W). On this rendition, Danko drops the tempo way down, and he and duet partner Randy Ciarlante make this tale sadder than Cooke ever did. Cooke played his number with a bit of hope, a temperedly happy tune with a chance to get home. Danko plays it as a number of pure isolation. Sure, there's a "gang" here, a crowd, but more so, there's nobody else. It's an apt interpretation, and one that naturally blends an old soul tune into a modern Americana album.

The disc has a few other covers (like its placid afternoon "Ripple") but Danko's own tracks stand out. The title track provides the album's highlight, a dangerous job for an opener, but *Times Like These* isn't downhill from there. It's one of those songs you feel bad that more people haven't heard, because it contains two qualities that set it up for classic status: the feel that it was written in another era, and the sense that it's utterly contemporary in its concerns. Danko pushes the boundary of sentimentality without crossing it. His lyrics are successful, but it's that great vocal skill that commands the track's balance, with Danko wary yet warm, and realistic but undefeated.

It's a fine way to begin an ending, I suppose, and *Times Like These* hold up. I have a few quibbles about it (mainly concerning the production that sometimes dates itself, as on "Change Is Good," but I've found myself playing this record far more often this summer than I had expected to. It's easy to forget how great an artist he was, given that talent he was surrounded by, but that would be a mistake. I imagined this record to be a fan club curiosity, but, even 30 years after the Band's finest moments, Danko managed to put out a memorable and relevant album.

This was written by Justin Cober-Lake. Posted on [Tuesday, August 12, 2008](#), at 5:05 pm. Filed under [Music](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Follow comments here with the [RSS feed](#). [Post a comment](#) or leave a [trackback](#).