

FolkWax Sittin' In With

Gretchen Peters

The *Burnt Toast & Offerings* Interview

By Arthur Wood

Part One -

The Road To *Burnt Toast & Offerings*

Arthur Wood for FolkWax: You said to me recently, "There was a time when I thought I'd lost my enthusiasm for music." Did that happen after you released your third album, *Halcyon*, in 2004?

Gretchen Peters: It was going on during that time. I've always had this sort of internal place that I've protected, that's allowed me to write and create. I've never really had a full-blown case of writer's block. My loss of enthusiasm for music never got into that very inner place from which I draw whatever it is that I need to create. Making *Halcyon* and touring that album, especially in the U.K., for me was the beginning of waking up. One of the things that happened while writing *Halcyon* was I realized, for the first time really, that I could write about my own life. I realized that I didn't have to make up characters. I had an interesting life that I could actually draw on, that was full of texture and colors and stories. That may sound kind of funny because I'd been writing fairly successfully for eighteen years, but it was a revelation to me. What I wasn't doing, during the making of that record, was I wasn't listening to and connecting with and getting excited by other people's music. I was struggling with the fact that I felt burned out.

FW: The songs on *Halcyon* were as strong as any on your first two albums. Was there a sense that, for you, the second album pursued a similar formula to the first one, whereas the third broke new ground?

GP: Until *Halcyon* I really hadn't written an album. I had collected songs I'd written and put them on albums. With the self-titled second album particularly, it was literally a matter of "OK, we've got eleven songs, now it's an album." While I'm very fond of a lot of songs on that album it wasn't written as a cohesive piece. It doesn't sound that way when you listen to it. When I wrote *Halcyon*, while some of the songs were lying around, for the first time in my life there was a conscious effort to write for an album. As I said, *Halcyon* woke something up in me.

FW: Was this spreading your wings and trying something new, triggered by your first two albums having been very successful?

GP: The first album, *The Secret Of Life* - the old adage is, "You have your whole life to write your first album and a year to write your second." The song list for the first album was easy to put together because I picked the songs that I loved the best. It was that simple. Four years elapsed between the second and third albums. I had done a lot of interesting things, but I had a feeling that I was stagnating. Thank God my happiness meter isn't dependent on how many records I sell, then again being artistically successful and being commercially successful are

different things. It was simply that I knew somewhere inside of me I had some growing to do. I was dissatisfied with myself because I felt I wasn't growing. *Halcyon* was the beginning of that process. Then I went through a lot of personal stuff including a divorce. In my case you couldn't separate those things, they were intertwined, because I was married to my record producer/manager.

FW: You told me ages ago that you received a letter from Tom Russell after *Halcyon* was released. How significant was that letter in introducing you to a new musical world?

GP: It was huge. I can't overstate it. It was like a missive from beyond. That U.K. tour in 2004 was a critical time for me. A couple of things happened. I remember the first day we were in the van, going to the gig. I had a new iPod and I put the headphones on. I think I was listening to David Gray, the *White Ladder* album. I thought, "Why have I been denying myself this? Why have I not been listening to great music like this?" I had this epiphany. I don't know how to describe it. I was suddenly happier, there in that van listening to music and going on tour than I had been in months, maybe years. That was a huge awakening. The second thing was getting Tom Russell's letter and that happened right after that tour.

FW: How aware were you of Tom Russell when you got his letter.

GP: I knew he was a very well respected Folk artist. I knew that, for instance, he had written "Outbound Plane" with Nanci Griffith and that Suzy Bogguss covered it. I wasn't intimately acquainted with everything he had done, but I was very much aware of him. I think, in a way, it was even sweeter that it wasn't somebody that I was intimately familiar with. It was truly anonymous—I mean he really basically sent me a fan letter that said, "This is such a great album"—but he also extended an invitation which, I think, had it been even a year before, I would have found some reason not to do it. Out of I don't know what? Reticence? I would have turned it down thinking, "Well he really didn't mean that." As it happened I was at this really critical place, psychologically, where I knew I needed to bust out. I didn't quite know what to do first. Anyway, he extended this invitation to come to Austin and sing on his *Hotwalker* record. It was very off handed.

FW: That's Tom.

GP: Yeah. He threw it out there and I emailed him back and said, "You're on. I'll be there. When do you want me there?" It was a completely off-the-hip decision on my part, and opened up all sorts of doors for me. I wouldn't have played Kerrville the first time in 2005 if it hadn't been for Tom. I certainly wouldn't have been received there the way I was had he not given me, sort of, his blessing. He introduced me onstage and it was like saying to the audience...

FW: Listen to this girl.

GP: Also she's from Nashville, but she's OK. She's one of us, kind of a thing. I think, rightly so, there's a bit of a jaundiced eye towards what comes out of Nashville—often times for good reason.

FW: But that audience is well aware that good and bad music is made in Nashville.

GP: If you say Nashville hit songwriter, they wouldn't necessarily think thoughtful folkie.

FW: But they know Guy Clark. Back in the late 1980s at Kerrville, Guy Clark spotted young Buddy Mondlock's potential and persuaded him to move from Chicago to Nashville. There's a whole history of similar occurrences.

GP: I'm proud of a lot of the music that comes out of Nashville. There's a perception and I've been a little sensitive about it, because I've had experiences of it—when I went on the songwriter's train ride with Tom, Nanci Griffith, and Mary Gauthier, I had a woman come up to me at the end of the trip and say, "I didn't think I was going to like you." I knew precisely what she meant. She said, "You know, that Nashville thing." Having Tom bring me on at Kerrville, it was like getting the Pope's blessing. It was very meaningful and that night was big for me. That is an audience I felt immediately at home with. I felt a complete kinship with them. It was as if I had found my right place after being in the wrong place for a long time.

FW: As far as your songs are concerned, there had been a 'John The Baptist' at the Kerrville festival, because Jimmy LaFave covered your "On A Bus To St. Cloud" on his 2000 album *Texoma*.

GP: [laughs] I'm not sure I like where you're going with this metaphor. [laughs] That's correct, LaFave had gravitated to my songs. I love what he does with them, the magic he works with them. In this business you don't create in a vacuum. Appreciation from your peers, especially peers whose work you admire, means a lot. It means a whole lot. It's all well and good to say, "Well I do what I do and I do it for myself. And if I please myself that's good enough." I don't think that's the real world for most of us. It's validating and wonderful to gain approval from people whose work you love. [ED. NOTE: LaFave covered Peters' "Revival" on his 2005 album *Blue Nightfall*]

FW: Did Tom reveal to you how he came to hear *Halcyon*?

GP: He saw my picture on the cover of *Maverick* [A U.K.-based *Roots* music publication] and asked someone "Who is that?" Someone said I was from Nashville and he almost blew it off, but then somebody gave him a copy of the record. He listened to it and became really relentless about it. He drove his booking agent mad and she's now my booking agent...

FW: Yes, Val Denn.

GP: He drove Val crazy. Apparently he always played my CD in the car when they were driving around together. I mean she loved it, too, but he wouldn't stop playing it. He was on a mission and I'm just eternally grateful to him for all that support. I've done a lot of shows with him since then, plus I've sung on two of his albums.

FW: Where else did Tom lead you? In fact, did he lead you or did his breakthrough simply make you footloose and you sought stuff yourself?

GP: Well, it opened a door that I was so ready to walk through - a door that I'd been trying to find. My marriage was ending. I was facing the certainty that I would be making all future business decisions on my own. It was daunting, but I was ready to go there. What it did for me was it reinforced the idea that looking at things positively is a good thing. Previously I might have been encouraged to be cautious. "You don't know this guy," that kind of thing. I was ready for a new approach, because my real nature is to go out and embrace possibilities. It seemed to me when I did one hundred doors opened. A lot of people in Nashville felt I should stay home and write songs, but I knew I needed to play. One aspect of what I meant when I said to you I wasn't enjoying music was I wasn't really able to - the only protracted time I spent performing was when I came to the U.K. I did the odd thing here and there in the U.S., but I really wasn't touring. I had a U.S. booking agent, but that relationship was almost nonexistent. Let's face it, the most lucrative part of my career was writing songs and a lot of people would have been happy for me to continue doing that. The problem is I had no reason to do that, unless I was making a record and then touring and everything that goes with that.

FW: Is performing for people your biggest joy?

GP: It's my most uncomplicated joy, put it that way. I don't know if I would describe writing as a joy, but it is a joy when it is working. When it's working it's the best there is. In a way performing is an endless challenge to be here now, to be in the moment. It's like athletics, in the sense that you have to stop observing yourself and let the moment happen. It's almost a spiritual practice and I needed that. I'm a very cerebral person and I tend to spend a lot of time in my head. Left without that spiritual outlet of performing I would drive myself crazy.

FW: From your debut album through to Halcyon it's pretty obvious that you've never been a regular co-writer. You collaborated with Bryan Adams for a time and you've written with Suzy Bogguss, but that's pretty much it. Given your recent career changes, has your approach to writing remained much the same?

GP: Yeah. I think my nature as a writer is what it is. I've accepted and come to grips with it. The hardest thing, really and truly, when I receive incredibly flattering and nice offers to co-write, is to figure out how to say, "No." I always preface my reply by saying "It's me, it's not you. It's me. I would love to do this, but you will find that I am a terrible co-writer." And it's true. While there are some that I am very proud of, I don't think as a group if you stand my self-written stuff next to my co-written stuff, I think the songs I've written on my own are stronger. I guess, for me, the problem I have with co-writing stems from a combination of inhibition and single mindedness. If I have a song idea that makes me want to write a song, that's pretty strong. There's a feeling that I'm being pulled toward something. If that pull is strong enough someone else is just going to be in my way, even though it may take me a long time to get there - and often does. That doesn't mean that my vision of the song, however hazy and indistinct it might be at the outset, is not firmly embedded in my brain. I may not even know what it wants to be about, I just know I'm being pulled. I can sense it, I can feel it, and it would be a distraction having someone else there.

There are exceptions obviously. A lot of times I am pulled and drawn to write a lyric that I really like and for some reason I can't get a melody. That has happened. That happens to me probably

more frequently than anything. That's a time when I think about and sometimes do collaborate. Sometimes I just try it for the hell of it. I've just co-written a song with Matraca Berg. Matraca co-writes frequently. We were laughing about it because everybody was expecting this incredibly touching and wonderfully literate, serious song. We wrote, basically, a funny homage to Nashville girls - the old style Country Queens. There's nothing serious about it. It took the pressure off for the both of us.

FW: Have you worked on a song that, say by the time sixty minutes had expired was complete - or are they long drawn out obstacle courses?

GP: I've had a few that were written in an afternoon or ninety-nine percent written in an afternoon. They're miraculous and wonderful and they happen, but only a handful. For the most part writing happens in two waves. It's odd when people, in hindsight, ask "What were you thinking when you wrote that song?" A lot of time when I start a song I don't have any memory of it starting. It's almost like the first part pours out of me.

FW: I once observed a friend, late at night at Kerrville, compose a song. It was entrancing to observe him.

GP: There's a mystical quality to it. That's the first wave. Then the craft and the hard work comes in, the knocking it around and the kill-your-darlings part of it. That's the hard part. A lot of times I find what I need to do is allow some time between the two waves. I've learned that I do better if I let the first part just spill it and don't bring my internal editor into play. Just let it go and then leave it alone and not even look at it. Let it gestate.

FW: Do you go back and complete the song about a week later?

GP: It can be a month or two.

Part Two - Making *Burnt Toast & Offerings*

Arthur Wood for FolkWax: Once you decided to begin work on your latest album, did you talk with many album producers?

Gretchen Peters: No. I knew I wanted Doug Lancio.

FW: And that was it.

GP: When he said "Yes," that was it. I thought *1000 Kisses* was one of the most amazing things I'd ever heard [Editor's Note: Peters is referring to Patty Griffin's 2002 debut album for ATO Records which Lancio produced]. It wasn't the technical aspect of the record that clinched it, because I was surprised to learn later that it was recorded on a Roland 1600 - I've got one, it's a tool that a lot of songwriters use if they don't have full-on home studio - it's basically a home recording hard disc, not a big, fancy thing. Of course, first it was Patty and her incredible singing and writing, but the production of that record seemed...

FW: He allowed the songs all the space in the world.

GP: Yeah he did, but they were so caressed by his production. It's all of a piece and I thought it was a brilliant piece of work. I sent him a copy of *Halcyon* and asked, "This is my current album, would you consider making the next one with me?" He said "Yes" and so I sent him the first of two tracks. He called me back and said, "Not only yes, but this is going to the top of my list of what I'm excited about doing next." That was all the encouragement I needed.

FW: Did you have in mind a specific sound for the record, without remaking *1000 Kisses*?

GP: Well there's plenty of difference between Patty and me anyway and I wasn't interested in having the sound of her record. This was a momentous decision for me because I had never produced a record with anybody but Green [Daniel]. This was a huge change for me. I was interested in somebody that would take, maybe, a more intuitive approach towards production. Green is a very good producer, but everything is planned, it's very methodical and the records are very pristine sounding. I was interested in something more organic, earthy. In fact, I thought it would be a plus if there were some room noise, some ambience such that the listener would feel like he/she was in the room with the musicians. You could hear the room and the people playing in the room and not have it sound clean and pristine. In addition there's definitely a psychological side to producing, I wanted to work with somebody who would set up a situation and let things happen rather than direct everything.

FW: You mean like A, followed by B, C, and D.

GP: Yeah. I sensed after only meeting Doug one time that that's how it would be with him.

FW: Doug lives in Nashville, so other than Patty, were you aware of his work?

GP: I knew he had played with Nanci Griffith. I knew his guitar playing too, which was a big plus for me. I'm picky about guitar players - especially in Nashville, because guitar sounds can become very clichéd and dated. During the Nineties, Nashville guitarists played through all kinds of effect pedals. There would be "the effect of the year" and everybody sounded that way. Three years later they'd say, "Oh, that album was made in 1993." I didn't want that, I wanted something more organic and Doug's playing is less about hot licks than it is about atmospherics. The kind of atmospheric sound where you're not even sure if it's a guitar. Doug is a master at that, just fabulous, so that was a big factor for me.

FW: Doug cut *1000 Kisses* in his basement studio, so why did you use David Henry's TrueTone Studio for the main recording sessions? Did you already know David?

GP: Well, I did and I didn't. I had gone to the Ryman Auditorium to see Bruce Hornsby and David Mead opened the show. Mead knocked me flat. Keep in mind I was in the first flushes of my renewed love affair with music. I was eating it up wherever I could find it. I bought David Mead's record immediately. As it turned out we had a mutual friend and I was raving about him and that's how I ended up meeting David Mead. At the Ryman David Mead played acoustic guitar and this guy David Henry was playing cello.

FW: And that cello player produced Mead's 2004 album *Indiana*.

GP: Exactly. *Indiana*, at the point where I was about to make my new album, was one of my favorite records. It's my favorite David Mead album, I think it's genius. Anyway, that was David Henry. David plays cello, plays with a sort of Rock attitude. He can put a cello on things you'd never even dream. At that time I was listening to lots of records with strings, like Hem and Innocence Mission. I was enamored by the string thing, but knew I wanted it to be alternative, if you will. I didn't want the "Nashville String Section." The normal string deal - that would have been too straight.

FW: Another case of A, B, C, and D.

GP: Right. I knew I didn't want that. So I'd seen this wild cello player - Doug and I were talking one time and I was playing him records that I loved with strings on them and I mentioned that I heard strings on some of my new songs. Not necessarily full string orchestras, but maybe a quartet here or a cello there. Doug mentioned David Henry. I said, "That's the guy who plays with David Mead." Doug and I decided we needed a studio that was big enough to track with a band, because we intended recording live as much as we could. Doug's basement is OK, but we really needed a bigger room. It turned out that David Henry was the guy, he had the studio, he had the cello, and he pulled a few other magic tricks out of his back pocket, too. He plays the euphonium and a horn on the record. So that was how David Henry got involved.

FW: I first knew of David Henry through the Rod Piccott albums he recorded/produced. Last year Slaid Cleaves, who incidentally went to school with Rod, cut his covers album *Unsung* at David's place. Rod and David co-produced that album. The music business is just little cogs that get in train with one another, and motion takes place.

GP: That's exactly right. David's studio really, really lent itself to the feeling we wanted on this album. You know, it's just an old house. You can hear the room - Barry Walsh played an upright piano that he had. The default rule was "If it sounds good, then it's good" and it didn't matter whether it was recorded properly or according to the rulebook or whatever. It was very much the kind of experience I wanted to have, which was getting away from the rulebook really. I felt like I'd earned that on my fourth studio record.

FW: On *Halcyon* you cut the track "Imogene" at a Florida studio called Dreamsicle. According to the *Burnt Toast & Offerings* studio credits you worked there again.

GP: That's my little house in Florida. I take my recording gear with me when I go there to write. I love to write there, because there are no interruptions and no distractions. I hole up down there—if I have a batch of songs that are anywhere from fifty percent to ninety-five percent complete, I can go there and finish them. You know, finishing eight songs in a week is an incredible feeling. It's a very productive place for me. What I started realizing, because Doug and I talked about it early on, is I brought him what I thought were song demos, but after listening to them he said, "Why don't we build on this track that you've started."

FW: And these were recordings you made at Dreamsicle?

GP: Yeah. In a lot of cases it would just be an acoustic guitar and maybe the vocal. Doug might keep the vocal or a background vocal. In a couple of cases it was a drum loop that I had created. We liked the feel of a couple of those tracks so much and just built on them.

FW: What did you record in Doug's basement?

GP: The lion share of the overdubs. Once we had tracked with the band we moved to Doug's and I cut a fair amount of vocals there, although a couple of vocals are live at David's. And a couple I had done in Florida. Most of the instrumental overdubs were done at Doug's.

FW: Did the album sessions take place in one continuous period or were they split over a long period?

GP: We did two tracks early on - just Doug and me. "The Way You Move Me" was recorded long before the album was started. I was thrilled with the way it turned out. When we began working together I didn't have a lot of songs. I gave him what I had and said, "See what you can do on these." It was a kind of a get to know you thing. We also worked on "Summer People" and really loved parts of it, but felt it needed a drummer and bass player on it. It wasn't quite all there, but we waited until we were working on the album proper before completing it.

FW: When did you record that pair of songs?

GP: Probably late 2004.

FW: In the liner booklet the publishing credits on those songs is 2004.

GP: Yeah, that would be right. Bear in mind also that I was going through the tumult of a divorce and rearranging my business affairs, so it took me a while. I was, at one point, frantic about not having written in a while - probably around late 2004 early 2005.

A good friend said, "You have to think of it like manure."

I said, "What on earth do you mean?"

She said "Well, you don't put fresh manure on a garden. You have to let it age, before it can do anything for the plants - before the plants will grow - otherwise it will burn them."

I thought, "That's right."

She said, "You're going to have to wait for some time to pass."

She was absolutely right. Time passed and sure enough I came up with more songs. By that stage I was really ready to get this album done and decided to go in, in a very concentrated period of

time. We tracked everything we needed in four days and then spent three weeks doing overdubs and mixes.

FW: When did those sessions take place?

GP: I think we started to track the day after Labor Day 2006.

FW: When you were tracking, you used your usual backline of John Gardner (drums, percussion) and Dave Francis (bass).

GP: Yeah I did. I love the way those guys play, I feel like they understand my songs. Doug and I talked a lot about different players and we used a bunch of players in other roles on this record. I think part of it, for me, was that I had changed so much around me - I felt a little bit of familiarity would be a good thing.

FW: Barry Walsh on keyboards/piano was another constant.

GP: Barry, Dave, and John are consummate musicians and all three really get my songs. They know what's required. I thought it was a nice mix between the people that Doug brought in and the people I brought in. David Henry was new. Doug was new. My working relationship with David Mead was fairly new and we'd written a few songs. Having him come in and sing on one that we'd written was great.

FW: Moving on to the liner booklet artwork, was the prominent use of sepia shades a reflection of the album title?

GP: Not consciously. I also like to be involved with the visual parts of making an album. If I couldn't be a musician, I'd be a graphic artist. I love the process and I've been told - perhaps flattered - by artists that I've worked with that I'm good at it. I think that this album definitely felt like those colors to me. The artist that I worked with, Aimee Roberts-Mazurek, was another new component. I saw her work on a Stephen Foster tribute album.

FW: You mean the album that won the Grammy? [Editor's Note: The debut release by American Roots Publishing, *Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs Of Stephen Foster*, won the Grammy Award in 2004 for Best Traditional Folk Album]

GP: Yes. I saw her work and thought it was really beautiful. I called her, gave her a copy of the album, and she really, really responded to it. She liked the album and I knew immediately that we were on the same page. When we started talking about the package I told her what I normally tell an artist, "Do what you're inspired to do. I'll give you some ideas that I have. I see this as being a very feminine looking package." To me there's something very feminine about this album. I don't quite know how I mean that, but it's not stark and modern, it's embellished. It's colorful and it's flowing - things I associate with being feminine. That's all I said to her, but she was going to go there anyway, there was no doubt about that. Everything that she presented to me, it was as if she was reading my mind. There were things I wanted to see in there, but really the music guided her. She and I had very much the same sensibilities, visually anyway.

FW: There's another part to the artwork equation, because you picked a guy who is a genius with black-and-white film. How did you find Michael Wilson? I know him from Jeff Black's album covers.

GP: Aimee recommended him. She said something to me that correlated with the music, "I've looked at your past albums and they are beautiful, but they look very, very polished. After listening to this album it seems like it wants something more moody and earthy. Maybe not earthy - earthy is not the word. More organic and less buffed and polished looking." I completely agreed and I have to tell you, it's a scary thing to go in front of a photographer that you know is not necessarily trying to make you look as good as possible. [laughs] He's an artist - he's trying to make art. He's not a fashion photographer.

FW: Michael's one of the best-kept secrets in photography.

GP: He's a lovely guy. I wanted these pictures to be real, because I felt this album is as real as it gets for me. I wanted the pictures to be honest. I wanted all of it to be honest. Aimee did a beautiful job of melding his photographs into the package - it's not stark, but it's very moody; very, very moody. Michael shot a lot of black and white, and some color, but she didn't use his color pictures in the package. I said, "Aimee if we're talking about all these shades of reds, how's that going to work with the black-and-white pictures?" She said, "That stuff happens with me." She uses a lot of textures and things, not just simple photographs.

FW: In a few photographs there are railings behind you. In one picture there appears to be an antebellum mansion beyond the railings, as I can see pillars.

GP: We shot everything in my house or in the neighborhood where I live in Nashville. There's an old Catholic church here - actually you hear the church bells on "Breakfast At Our House"—and the wrought iron railing that you see surround that churchyard. It was the easiest photo shoot ever, because it was all done around here. He's just a conjurer that guy.

Part Three - About The Songs

Arthur Wood for FolkWax: David Henry nailed the intro to the opening track "Ghost" with his "phantom" cello note.

Gretchen Peters: You know what, that was a bit of a happy accident. Initially that track started with my acoustic guitar and then David played that long cello note. At one point we listened to it and took the guitar out. I think we did that to try and hear something else. Anyway, we took it out and everybody looked at each other and said, "That's the way it should start." Although it's very stark, it set everything up so beautifully. I had to be convinced at first, but ended up loving it. That ghostly note was one of those wonderful things that happens when you are in the studio that you can't plan for. You only hope it happens.

FW: A short way into the opening track the narrator mentions soaking in the bath and that line is followed by someone audibly exhaling.

GP: Well, that's Doug's magic right there. One of the things I really, really look for in musicians and I love and delight in when I find one, is a musician that listens to the lyrics. They're surprisingly rare. When you find someone who is playing and listening to the lyrics, it makes all the difference in the world in terms of making a song bloom - from what it was when written down to what it can be on a record. "Ghost" came in one of two major outpouring of songs that happened over the course of 2005 and early 2006. It's just a portrait of a woman in a marriage that's dying.

FW: After hearing the song a few times it became obvious that despite the song title, the main character was alive. Something else is dead or dying and that comes sharply into focus in the closing line "But would it have killed you to say my name?" What intrigued me and confirmed that the "ghost" was alive is that tending a garden is mentioned twice in the lyric. I would guess you're a keen gardener.

GP: Oh I am, I definitely am. I drew, obviously, even saying this makes it sound more conscious that it was, even giving words to it makes it sound intentional, on images that I had of myself doing the things I really loved - soaking in the bath and working in the garden. When you are looking back and telling a story, for me stories have to be visual, songs have to be visual. I'm a big believer in painting pictures rather than trying to explain things. When you're trying to tell your own story it helps to observe yourself, I guess, the way you would observe anybody else. Those were images of me doing things that made me happy. One thing that happens when you find yourself in a relationship that's dying, and anybody that's been married and divorced knows this story, is a huge, very slow turning has to occur where you accept, realize and say out loud what you know inside of you has happened. Before you accept what's happened, there's a big effort to deny it. In the process of trying to twist and turn yourself into what you think you need to be to make this work, you lose yourself - you can become invisible. In a marriage of long standing or a relationship of long standing it's pretty common, unfortunately, for two people to not even be able to see each other anymore. Unfortunately it happens. Relative to my talking about losing my passion for music I looked back at myself and thought, "Who was that, that worked in the garden? Who was that person? That person isn't here anymore." That, I guess, was the seed for the song.

FW: "Sunday Morning (Up And Down My Street)" seemed like a fairly optimistic song to me with the homely "breakfast frying" and "a baby crying."

GP: There's one tiny thread of sadness in it towards the end in the lines "And the day is comin'/When we won't be sad no more." No one may ever notice it, but I needed that to be in there.

FW: Because?

GP: That song, like many of these songs, is very personal. It's almost literal. It's a picture of the neighborhood where I live and there are a lot of little landmarks in this wonderful place that I've found myself in. Many of these songs were written at a time basically when - what's the word, where two lines cross...

FW: Intersection?

GP: The intersection of the death of a marriage and the birth of a love affair. There are some very happy songs, positive and optimistic songs - for me God knows - on this record and there are some pretty dire ones, too. That was my life at that point.

FW: Without going down a religious road, I saw it as a very picturesque song about what happens on the day of rest.

GP: At a time in my life when I had tremendous upheaval and pain I also experienced some of the greatest happiness that I've ever had and it's, I guess, an attempt to paint a picture of that contentedness. That's really hard to do. It's much harder to write a happy, positive, and contented song than it is a painful one. I really was feeling that way and wanted to paint a picture of it. Similar, for instance, to "Chelsea Morning" [Editor's Note: Peters is referring to a Joni Mitchell composition that appeared on the Canadian's 1969 sophomore album Clouds. The song was inspired by New York's Chelsea Hotel]. "Chelsea Morning" is sweet and naïve in a way, and I mean that in the best way. "Sunday Morning" is a portrait of two happy people, but that little thread was important to me because it made it true. You can have contentedness and bliss and pain and sorrow - not only can you have them at the same time, but if you're really alive and feeling everything, it's almost impossible to have one without the other. They each intensify the other. That was a very emotionally intense period of my life. The joy was deep and the pain was deep, too.

FW: The "Summer People" song, were you ever a holiday resort waitress?

GP: This is one place where I diverge from reality, I was never a waitress, but I was a summer person. As a child I grew up in New York and spent all my summers on the beaches of Long Island. I had friends who lived there permanently who were the locals. All my life, growing up, I heard the phrase "summer people," which referred to the fact that they didn't last. They were there for the season and then they'd be gone. When you got to a certain age there were summer romances, but you didn't fall in love with a summer person because you knew they didn't stay. There was definitely a separation and the locals were a little bit disparaging about them, although the summer people were who brought in the money. At the same time you didn't get too close. I had always been intrigued by the phrase. It was a really appropriate metaphor for a lack of trust, for something that's fleeting and doesn't last - a relationship that won't weather the winter so to speak.

FW: I thought the main character, the waitress, was my kind of woman. Anyone that says, "I've got a long list of reasons and a very short fuse," you better be on your guard. Stand back.

GP: [Laughs] I was actually at the beach in Florida when I wrote that. It's funny you asked me a while ago, "Do you ever have songs that you finish in the course of an afternoon?" I was in the midst of writing other songs and that idea literally hit me across the face and lines were coming so quickly I couldn't get home fast enough so I had to memorize them in my head. Then another line would come and I'd recite the whole thing again. I was terrified I was going to lose lines in

the course of walking from the beach to my house. I managed to make it home and got them all down on paper before I forgot any. It literally came that fast, which is so unusual. I think that song had been waiting to spill out for a long, long time.

FW: There's only one thing I want to know. Did the waitress quit?

GP: Oh, hell yeah! [We both laugh] Hell yeah, in every sense of the word.

FW: "Jezebel" I struggled with. I could see that she was a fallen angel and the lyric seemed to hinge around the line "Your pride's your gift, and love your only sin."

GP: There is almost, I think, an epidemic of moralizing and being judgmental going on in American culture right now. There are a lot of people who claim that they know what's right and they claim to be Christians and they claim to be able to prescribe for other people what they should do. They claim to have a whole lot of interest in what other people are doing. Until you've been in a situation where you're being judged you don't realize how infinitely gray human experience is, as opposed to it being black and white and how there are many, many sides to a story. Your compassion for people, in all sorts of circumstances, isn't busted wide open until you've been in a situation where you've been judged.

"Jezebel," to a great extent, is a very personal song for me. She is somebody who has fallen, in the sense of having fallen from grace in some people's eyes. She's committed a sin. She's a bad woman. The reality is always different from that. The reality is we're all human beings and we're all doing what human beings do. Human beings screw up, they fall in love at the worst possible time, they do all sorts of things. I felt incredible compassion for that character. People who feel ready, willing, and able to judge other people and prescribe what they should do, just haven't walked in those shoes. I simply wanted to focus on that.

Let me put it this way, one of the lessons of real maturity and adulthood is reaching the conclusion that there is no black and white. I was trying to grapple with that on a personal and a universal level and this is a legitimate part of that. I saw it happen the other day when John Edwards' wife, the presidential candidate over here, when they announced that she had cancer. All these people decided that he was doing the wrong thing and that it was selfish to continue to run for president. I think if you've been in a situation where you've made a decision and people have judged you for it, without knowing you, you should have a lot of compassion for something like that. I did. When I saw what people were saying about him I thought, "How dare they judge him." It is his wife's and his decision and there can be many good reasons why they are doing what they are doing. It's just something that some people learn and some never learn.

FW: Relative to the song "Thirsty," I have to ask if you are a big Jazz fan?

GP: Well, you know, it was in the air when I was growing up. Pretty much all my parents ever listened to was Jazz. I am a Jazz fan and more and more so. My ex-husband was a big Jazz fan, so I heard a lot of it. I've been around it all my life and I simultaneously love it and am intimidated by it, because Jazz—the musicianship goes to some other place. For a folkie like me it can be quite intimidating from a chord structure and melodic point of view. I was raised on

Django Reinhardt and Ella Fitzgerald. I think there's a little thread of Jazz going through some of my songs and it's definitely present on "Thirsty."

FW: Referencing "you" in both instances, the opening verse is full of negatives while the second mentions the devil at the bottom of a whiskey glass. In the next two verses the focus is "me," while in the final verse it's "we." I was struggling to figure out if this was a song about craving or aspiration.

GP: [Laughs] First of all, let me say the first and second verses are pretty clearly about someone who has a drinking problem. What I was interested in is that the truth of the matter is, it's the old cliché - it's a family disease and everybody plays a part. Everybody is fulfilling a role and when you are playing that part there's something you're getting out of it, too, even if you're the quote unquote innocent victim. Above and beyond that I think we humans all have it in our nature - we all have our substance. It doesn't necessarily have to be a drug or alcohol. It might be sex. It might be food. It might be news. We've all got our dark spot.

FW: I'm definitely the news channel guy, but for me it's an aspiration, it's not a craving. [we both laugh]

GP: Now, there is also a positive way to look at "Thirsty." There is some truth to the fact, I think for me, that I wouldn't have this itch to write or create if I were constantly satisfied. I think satisfaction all the time is a myth anyway. I definitely think an itch of dissatisfaction is what drives people to create and do things.

FW: The inference would be that, these days, you are thirstier than ever.

GP: Well, it's a bit oxymoronic because I'm happier than ever, too. The bottom line is you are either a creative entity or you are not. No matter how happy you are you get a little antsy if you haven't made anything in a while. That's how I am. I was thinking the other day it's about time for me to write a few new songs, because I'm not myself unless I've done that recently.

FW: I took it that apart from simply being a fun song, "England Blues" was a thank you.

GP: Oh definitely. It's a love letter really. There's nothing Blues about it, except for the melodic structure, which is why it has that title. It's a love letter to the U.K. We have spent, I think, a total of about three of the last fifteen months over there. I've gotten to know it pretty well and it's just a collection of scenes from over there. The song partly sprang from that tour in 2004 when the whole sky opened up for me and I thought, "I'm so happy doing this. Why am I only doing this every three or four years? What's this about?" It was also inspired by the joy of playing for folks.

Part Four - The Songs of *Burnt Toast & Offerings*

Arthur Wood for FolkWax: Not necessarily because it was a co-write, but I took "The Lady Of The House" to be a total fiction. From this song onward I'll occasionally drop in links to songs we've already talked about. A door-to-door salesman calls at a house, but it seemed to me that the lady who answered the door could have been the ghost.

Gretchen Peters: Well I hadn't thought about that. Yeah. Hmm. [laughs] David Mead came to me with the beginning of a melody and the line "Open up your suitcase and show me what you got," which I loved. I don't recall if it was David or me that came up with scenario of the door-to-door salesman and the lonely, desperate housewife. I was very interested in her character. I felt, on some level, I had been her, understood her. I wanted to make sure she was nuanced. I didn't want anybody in the song to be a simplistic victim. One of the best aspects of that song is that she shows some disdain for him at the outset. It hints that she thinks she's above him. She's simply trying to get herself, psychologically, to the place where she can see that there's a possibility and that love is out there somewhere that the idea isn't ridiculous and she's not ridiculous.

FW: Is there an inference that the door-to-door salesman might not be the one, but love might be found with someone else in the future?

GP: Yeah. I was interested in how much nuance we could get into that scenario in three or four minutes. David is wonderful. He was wide open to going there. We sat and talked a lot about this song, as with others we've written, but with this song especially, almost as though it were a play. We talked about - What do they think of each other? Where is her mind at? What's going on here? What is she thinking? We talked it out a lot before we really wrote anything.

FW: It struck me that this was the fictional song, if there was such a thing on the album.

GP: Yes. For this album I wrote a lot of things that were very close to home and very much what you see is what you get. By the same token I felt that if they worked thematically it didn't matter to me whether it was about me or not. I don't think it should matter, I think that's crazy. You're making a piece of art, not writing your memoir. I struggled with that idea for about five minutes - I thought did I really want to write, basically, my divorce album?

FW: That approach, to the listener, might have been akin to being struck with a bludgeon. At least with the presence of "The Lady Of The House," "Summer People," the fun song "England Blues," and the cover "One For My Baby," you have real variation.

GP: Exactly. I came to the conclusion that, a) what else am I going to write about. I mean, it's pretty disingenuous - you write about what you write about - you shouldn't be editing that part of it, b) it's not about me really, it's about the songs. At the end of the day if things worked together thematically it's not about me - it has nothing to do with me. It has to do with does one song relate to another song, in some way. That was the litmus test I used and my quandary diminished looking at it that way.

FW: You said earlier that you're not averse to listening to Jazz, so I guess you love the American Songbook. In that regard you've covered "One For My Baby."

GP: Oh, God yes. Some of the best songwriting that ever happened, happened from the pen of a relatively few composers. Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, Cole Porter, The Gershwins. It's phenomenal what they wrote.

FW: Historically speaking, because you produced the Songbook track with Barry [Walsh], when does it date from?

GP: During that 2004 tour of the U.K., we had a night off in London and went to see The Rat Pack [Editor's Note: This biographical musical focuses on Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., and Dean Martin]. We heard that song and Barry and I just looked at each other and said, "We have to work that song up. What a gem it is." Of course I'd known it my whole life, we both had. Something in the universe every once in a while will send a song to you and say "Now listen, damn it!" You may have heard it a thousand times before, but you sort of hear it for the first time, that time. That happened, I think, for both of us that night. I think Barry wanted to tackle the piano part, which is quite challenging - even a little daunting. I thought for a minute, "Do you really want to go there?" Sinatra has got his stamp on it. Then I thought if you reduce the song to being a song and you sing it because you want to tell the story rather than because you want to prove what a great vocalist you are, all is well.

FW: Don't you think that Joe the barkeep is sick of hearing "Set them up Joe," every night?

GP: Possibly. [we both laugh] We worked it up after that tour and started doing it as our encore for a while. It was one of those things where the song grew through performance over the course of two years till we concluded "Better get this on tape before it goes past its sell by date." We recorded it in a room at Sony Studios in Nashville, we wanted a really great sounding piano and we wanted a big room so that we could record it the way they recorded things back then, which is mikes set up much further away. The bass and the piano, everybody in the same room, record it live, plus you can hear the room. It's a different approach to recording and we wanted that. We decided that we would do as many takes as it took to get a great version. Which is what we did. We played it till we felt we had the magic one and that's what you hear on the record.

FW: We spoke earlier about "The Way You Move Me," and the fact that it only features you and Doug Lancio. To me the theme of the song focuses on the indefinable spark that ignites love.

GP: Absolutely. Yeah.

FW: What I thought was really sneaky of you, is that verse one includes the line "In my finest hour, it's something like church." [Editor's Note: The liner booklet includes a dedication to "Barry Walsh, for knowing that music is church."]

GP: Boy, you are such a sleuth. Church is a big theme for me, obviously. I was raised by agnostics and I think my fascination for, you know, religious themes, comes from that. The story and the words in the song are beautiful - the sense of being able to lose yourself in the passion of that situation is a beautiful concept. I really think there's a relationship for me between the lack of acknowledgment of that part of human life in my family, when I was growing up, because my parents were so intent - and this is no slam against them, I'm glad I was raised the way I was - upon getting me to use my logic and thinking and my mind. There was a lack of attention to the need, at least my need as a child, for mystery, magic, ritual, pageantry, and even some spiritual food - for lack of a better word. I think that's partly a reason for my lifelong fascination with it.

FW: Have you always existed at a distance from organized religion?

GP: I played with it at different times in my life growing up, in adolescence. I could never find anything in the world of organized religion that really fit, ever. I do feel a lot of damage has been done in the world because of organized religion, but that doesn't negate my sense that people have souls and spirits - in any way negate that. I've come to the conclusion in my wiser years, perhaps, that we're not meant to know what we're not meant to know and that that's fine. A mystery is a mystery and it's meant to be, like the Iris Dement song "Let The Mystery Be." I really believe that now. Church, as we have talked about, is music for me.

FW: "This Town" is the next song.

GP: That was written when I moved to the Nashville neighborhood I now live in, which was something I'd wanted to do for a while. Nashville has got its funky side and its glossy, shiny, new side, and it's constantly changing like all cities, but I'm so thrilled to be where I live now and I think I found some sort of a parallel - once again by saying it, I'm making it sound more intentional than it really was - but I think I found a parallel between the way I was feeling, which at the same time was pretty raw from the whole experience of my divorce, while at the same time being completely rejuvenated and excited about being where I was in life and where I was living in Nashville. I thought, "What a parallel, what a metaphor really this town is for me. I may not be brand new, I may be a bit ragged in spots, but I'm also full of possibilities." You know, just like a couple of lines in that song "they're either building you up or they are tearing you down."

FW: "This Town" also works as a love song to the city.

GP: Oh, absolutely.

FW: The curve ball that threw me was the Celtic arrangement featuring John Mock on concertina and pennywhistle. I thought Boston equals Irish was valid, but Nashville equals Irish didn't compute.

GP: [laughs] Doug, Patty Griffin, Barry, and I performed at Celtic Connections in Glasgow, Scotland, in January 2006. We did The Transatlantic Sessions. When you're not singing, you sit on a couch on the stage and watch the proceedings. I played an arrangement of "This Town" with fifteen or so Celtic pipers, fiddlers, and accordionists. It made an impression on Doug and when it came time in the studio to do that song he said, "Why don't we try to get some of that stuff and put it on there?" We could have gone down one of two roads. It could have been Celtic or a traditional sounding Bluegrass/Country kind of thing. We were more intrigued with the other idea because we remembered how that song sounded in Scotland with Aly Bain and those guys, so we called John Mock. We didn't have in mind particular instruments. It wasn't a case of "John come in and play pennywhistle and concertina." It was "John, what do you think? What have you got in your bag of tricks?" That approach.

FW: Now here's a coincidence, the lyric to the second track, "Sunday Morning (Up And Down My Street)," mentions "breakfast" and "bells." "Breakfast At Our House" is the second last song on the album, and how does the track end...

GP: There's the sound of bells. Yeah, I wish I could say that that sequencing was intentional, but it wasn't in the least. They are certainly two different breakfasts, that's for sure. They are diametrically opposed. That song was another that I wrote pretty much in one sitting. I had six to eight things to finish and I practice the tactic of diversion on myself when I'm trying to write, which is to keep rotating what I'm working on so that I never apply my brain too intensely to one thing. I think you can actually damage a song that way. After rotating between three or four different things trying to work on them, frustrated, I wrote the song pretty much in one sitting. In a sense, it was a form that I was very familiar with. It's something that I do better than a lot of things, which is a portrait that tells you everything you need to know about an entire relationship.

FW: You use the word "rain," but anyone listening closely will be able to envision that they're "tears," there's even a line that references "burnt toast and offerings." We're all familiar with burnt toast, while offerings aren't so clear.

GP: I thought of that line in terms of the offerings that you give each other when you are in a desperate place in a relationship. The little things you give each other include the courtesy of not bringing up unpleasant subjects—that sort of thing. Burnt toast is the relationship, if you will. Offerings are what you throw up to the gods in the hope that you don't have to go through what you know you're going to have to go through. That's the gist of it. It's a picture of something unraveling. People are strangely polite when they know it's over and I was attempting to portray that. It's weird considering your lives have been so intimately intertwined and you've been, presumably, the closest that two people can be. I think that anyone that's been there will recognize it. It's very odd to get to a place where you are actually trying to be polite with each other.

FW: In the closing verse of the final song, "To Say Goodbye," there's mention of "ghosts" and "angels." We'll stick with "ghosts." What was the title of the opening track on the album?

GP: It was "Ghost." [laughs] There are a lot of ghosts on this record.

FW: The opening verse of "To Say Goodbye" is very much couched in terms of "mom, pop, and apple pie," then the subject matter becomes more serious. There's a background vocal on the track where you don't expect it. It sort of hangs back.

GP: Well there's a delay - there's a ghost vocal. That was all Doug. I started that track in Florida, but I wasn't sure about it. When I brought it to Doug it all sounded like the first couple of verses, before the drums kick in. It was all finger-picked guitar. The vocals I put on the song demo, is what you hear on the record. Doug really liked it, but thought he heard this Coldplay drum thing going on over it. He did a lot of different things to my track then took it into the studio with the band and let them play on it. In other words, put real bass, real drums on it. It went through three permutations before it ended up being what it is. It goes from the very, very stark acoustic guitar

thing that I started with, all the way to full-on drums and bass in that high verse and then all the way back to nothing.

FW: In terms of the twelve songs you cut, was "To Say Goodbye" the obvious album closer?

GP: It seemed right to me because for one thing it was a goodbye and while there's finality in that, there's no bitterness. There's no accusation or bitterness, it's simply an acknowledgement of the fact that saying goodbye is a process that takes time. All through the song it says, "I'm not leavin', I'm just goin'/'Cause you're not ready to say goodbye." It's an acknowledgement that we have to get through it - it's not a point, it's a process. I didn't want the album to end on a bitter note, but rather with a raised perspective, a raised consciousness. Something that was philosophical.

FW: Optimistic even. Acknowledging that there is a future.

GP: Yeah, I think so.

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