

Folkwax Review (4/11/07)

Well Written, Beautifully Performed

Burnt Toast & Offerings, **Gretchen Peters'** fourth studio outing and fifth album overall, finds her breaking new ground, while retaining a grip on familiar terra firma. The main element of "new ground" is guitar whiz and album co-producer **Doug Lancio (Greencards, Matthew Ryan, Patty Griffin)**. Former husband **Green Daniel** produced her previous releases. With the exception of one cut that I'll highlight later most of the recording sessions took place in Nashville at new locations - mainly **David Henry's** TrueTone Studio, with overdubbing at Lancio's basement studio. **Paul Hart**, who worked on Peters' *Halcyon* [2004] and live recording *Trio* [2005], shares the engineering role with Henry (album producer for **Rod Picott, David Mead, Slaid Cleaves**). The latter reinforces this wedding of familiar and new. Henry's contributions on cello are simply stunning and he also plays euphonium and trumpet also. Pursuing further the familiar, Peters retains her established studio back line of **John Gardner** (drums, percussion) and **Dave Francis** (bass), plus recording/touring companion **Barry Walsh** (electric piano, organ, glockenspiel). A Nashville resident since 1988, during her first decade in the Country music capital, Peters established a second-to-none reputation as a talented songwriter, although her songs, like "On A Bus To St. Cloud," were far from typical Country music fare, and in 1996 Peters launched her solo recording career. While Peters' initial albums were filled with favourite songs drawn from her vast pool of original material, *Burnt Toast & Offerings* finds her thematic approach to making albums move on apace.

Unlike the 1990 Patrick Swayze/Demi Moore movie (of the same name), Peters' "Ghost" is very much alive, although, sadly, the flame of love no longer burns strong and bright in her life. Rather, it has been extinguished by time, familiarity, and the progression of indifference - it happens! Launched by Henry's ghostly sounding cello, early on listen for the perceptible exhalation of breath as the narrator recalls one of life's remaining pleasures "*soaking in the bath.*" The latter is Lancio's opening gambit in this marriage of musical and occasional, spot-on, ambient sounds. The narrator's words are resigned rather than bitter, that is until the closing "*But would it have killed you to say my name?*"

"Sunday Morning (Up And Down My Street)," set on the traditional day of rest, is pretty much a portrait of domestic bliss. Pursuing that vein there's mention of Sunday papers, a sleepy neighbour, a cat curled at your feet, breakfast frying, a baby crying, and more, although the lyric ends with the cautionary "*And the day is comin'/When we won't be sad no more.*" The latter cloud apart, Peters' melody is as bright as a sunny summer day and her counterpoint vocal in verse three is one of this album's many musical delights. Remaining seasonal, the narrator in "Summer People" is a harassed holiday resort waitress with attitude, as evidence by "*I've got a long list of reasons and a very short fuse.*"

Peters' "Jezebel" is a fallen angel, while, for me, the lyric hinged on the line "*your pride's your gift, and love your only sin.*" Peters employs a Jazz-inflected melody to underpin the five verses of "Thirsty." The opening verse is chock full of negatives: "*What makes your heart so bitter*" and in the next there's mention of the devil at the bottom of the whisky glass. Whereas the focus in the foregoing is "*you,*" in the ensuing pair (of verses) it's "*me,*" and in the final verse "*we.*" The question arises, is the narrator's thirst actual or fantasy; is it a craving or an aspiration? Listen and decide! As I noted at the outset, Peters' recording career began just over a decade ago and in this new millennium she has regularly toured the U.K. Respected and loved here, "England

Blues" is quite simply a personal thank you full of insider nods and geographic references wrapped up in a fun Rock 'n' Roll road song. If you were paying attention, you'll recall that I've already mentioned David Henry and David Mead. Henry produced Mead's 2004 album *Indiana*, a recording that Peters rates highly. Peters and Mead have co-written a number of songs including "The Lady Of The House." Mead contributes a harmony vocal to this fictional tale in which a door-to-door salesman calls on "The Lady Of The House." As the verses unfolded and I became familiar with the protagonists, the thought occurred that this lonely lady could be the "Ghost." Wary at the outset, by the close she (silently) reflects, "*It's not unthinkable/That you might love me.*"

While hardly a shoo-in, Peters has been known to cover songs by other writers. Having attended the West End (London) musical *The Rat Pack*, which included the 1943 **Johnny Mercer/Howard Arlen** composition "One For My Baby," Peters began including the song in her live shows. The version featured here was recorded at her song publisher Sony Tree's Nashville Studio A and was produced by **Barry Walsh** and Peters. "Summer People" and "The Way You Move Me" date from 2004 and are the oldest songs here. The theme of the latter is the indefinable spark that ignites love, while musically speaking the cut, their first production collaboration, only features Peters and Doug Lancio. "This Town" is Nashville and Peters' lyric acknowledges the changes she has witnessed/experienced while living there. Another Lancio production curve ball, **John Mock's** concertina and pennywhistle imbue "This Town" with a Celtic flavour.

The lyric to the penultimate track, "Breakfast At Our House," references "*burnt toast and offerings*" and this bittersweet number reflects, for one couple, upon the fading of passion and the death of love. It happens! The track closes with a long instrumental break, a reflection, possibly upon the lyric? Track two, the words "*bells*" and "*breakfast*" feature in the "Sunday Morning (Up And Down My Street)" lyric. Both resurface in the penultimate cut, one via the song title, the other in the ambient sound of bells that follow the aforementioned instrumental break. Such symmetry! "To Say Goodbye," the closing cut, opens with a mom-pop-and-apple-pie-verse before taking a subjectively sharp and serious left turn. A paean to change and survival, further ambience lies in the tracks' ethereal time lapsed backing vocal, while Dave Henry's cello work is to die for. Referencing the past as well as the present? The closing verse begins "*Ghosts and angels on my street now.*" Considering the title of the opening track this could be accidental symmetry or, simply the presence of an enchanting spirit in the music.

Currently available in the U.K., *Burnt Toast & Offerings* will be released in the States during July. All told this is a memorable collection of well-written, beautifully performed songs. And that's more than enough.

Arthur Wood is a founding editor of FolkWax