

Gretchen Peters looks to winter with *Northern Lights*
First holiday album to be released October 21
\$2.00 from each CD to benefit Nashville's Room In The Inn

September 18, 2008 - Nashville, TN

If a holiday album is usually little more than an occasion for tossing together a dozen cheery, well-known songs and a few shakes of the jingle bells just to have another product to sell at the prime shopping time of year, then Gretchen Peters' latest recording, *Northern Lights*, is of an entirely different breed.

The CD, her sixth, will release October 21 on Scarlet Letter Records, and marks the first time Peters—an acclaimed artist and hit songwriter, whose 2007 set, *Burnt Toast & Offerings*, is an introspective tour de force—has captured the essence of a wintry season all on one disc.

Peters and her longtime collaborator Barry Walsh took no shortcuts in making the album. As a result, it comes off not as a disposable Christmas-themed compilation, but a deeply satisfying retreat that does justice to the rich range of emotion that winter inspires—not just the joy, but the awe and sadness too.

Northern Lights is built around three Peters originals: “December Child,” a meditative, gracefully-strummed waltz that imagines Mary’s motherly anxiousness for her baby’s future, the ethereally gliding “Waitin’ On Mary”—which features the divine harmonies of Matraca Berg and Suzy Bogguss—and the title track, an aching piano and cello ballad.

“I wondered if I could be honest, as a writer, about the melancholy that many people feel at Christmas,” Peters says. “We all tend to reflect at the end of the year—and our reflections quite naturally include loss and regret, as well as gratitude and happiness. It seems almost taboo to write a Christmas song that makes room for that sense of loss, but that’s what I was going for in the song ‘Northern Lights’ and on the record in general. I wanted to make a Christmas record that you could listen to at night when you’re all alone and not come away feeling depressed, but instead feeling moved by the whole of human experience—not just the happy parts.”

Peters handpicked masterfully written songs by Gordon Lightfoot (“Song For a Winter’s Night”) and by Kim Richey and Will Kimbrough (“Careful How You Go”). Kimbrough lent his voice and bouzouki playing to the latter. Instead of doing typical carols and Christmas songs in warmed-over ways, Peters carefully selected songs with an air of mystery, and, with Walsh, set about giving them new life.

Peters and Walsh gave “I Wonder As I Wander” a unique modal blues tint, and, in an especially imaginative move, they set the austere elegance of the medieval “Coventry Carol” against the more modern sounds of the prelude (reminiscent of trumpets over 1940s radio airwaves) and instrumental interludes (the lapping and receding of Walsh’s B-3 organ). “I was trying to get something that sounded like what you’d hear coming out

of your radio late in December in the hinterlands of England, just after Winston Churchill had given a wartime speech on the BBC,” Peters offers.

The stately traditional carol “Angels We Have Heard on High” became “(Charlie’s) Angels,” a swinging, 6/8 jazz number, interwoven with a jaunty “Skating” riff from Vince Guaraldi’s “Charlie Brown Christmas.” Notes Peters, “We called it ‘(Charlie’s) Angels’ as a little tip of the hat to Charles Schulz and his alter-ego Charlie Brown.” The whole album-making journey began with an impromptu session in a U.K. hotel room that yielded a luxurious, accordion-sweetened take on another Guaraldi tune, “Christmas Time Is Here.”

The entire 12-track affair has an organic, living room sort of intimacy, and for good reason—Peters and Walsh recorded in their 1870s era Victorian shotgun style row house—originally built as a worker’s cottage—at night, after the city noise had quieted down for the day and they’d enjoyed a glass of wine—and without a single time-keeping device to speak of. Adding to the gorgeous textures they got from instruments as varied as Turkish finger cymbals, bamboo chimes and an upturned liquor box are Doug Lancio’s silvery guitar touch, Dave Francis’ smooth upright bass playing and David Henry’s moody cello and trumpet.

Yet another thing that sets *Northern Lights* apart from a run-of-the-mill holiday album is the fact that \$2 from every sale will go to the Nashville-based homeless outreach program, Room In The Inn. After Peters revived “Waitin’ on Mary” from a 1993 demo, she realized that it only made sense to give toward the same need echoed in the song.

From November to March each year, Room In The Inn partners with more than 150 local faith communities and other volunteers to offer clean beds, warm meals, hot showers, and medicine in these houses of worship to more than 1000 homeless men and women during the cold months when they need it most, and thus seeks to reverse that ancient story’s ending by providing Room In The Inn. During the daytime, Room In The Inn operates the Campus for Human Development, Nashville’s only comprehensive site of services, offering literacy and computer classes, addiction treatment, respite care and other essential care to more than 4000 homeless men and women throughout the year.

“On Christmases past I had played benefits for Room In The Inn a couple of times,” Peters says. “I got more excited about the collaboration when I realized that the song “Waitin’ On Mary” was really a perfect fit, the story of two homeless people from centuries ago.”

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