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## Review

by Thom Jurek

When it comes to articulating your own inspiration, sometimes it takes a while. Gretchen Peters is well-known in Nashville and pop circles as a top-shelf songwriter whose tunes have been woven into hits by everyone from [Neil Diamond](#) to [Bonnie Raitt](#) to [Martina McBride](#). She has been able to dig into an aesthetic terrain in second and third persons and come up with topics and stories that are distilled archetypes for every woman and man; they offer metaphors, accidental instruction, and the direct transfer of emotion to anyone who has truly heard them. She's been making her own records for over a decade now and performing live, but she's never been able to completely deliver on tape those beautiful songs she's written. Not until now, that is. Peters' 2007 recording, *Burnt Toast & Offerings*, was written completely in the first person, a change for her. As a writer, she's peered down into her own well far enough to be able to see what's there, and bring out what she sees into her songs. On this set, she's simply jumped off the edge, without looking for a place of safety to grasp onto. She doesn't see around and through the emotions that come up to greet her. Instead, she's immersed herself in them. She's gotten wet and dirty in the center of that abyss and discovered a baptism, in the fountain of her own heart. In this seemingly dark and dank place, where the sunlight above is just a glimmer, she's discovered an inner guiding light, the voice of her own hunger and the answer to prayers and pleadings to earthly and heavenly powers: the revelation of love. *Burnt Toast & Offerings* is a record about the messiest part of love -- the barren desert where it unravels, falls apart, and empties one out, leaving one broken and seemingly alone, in a strange land where all previously known has been spirited away. She reveals that love demands nothing less than total surrender in order to open to it fully and experience its bounty. No matter what it looks like, its promise is enough. With the help of producer/guitarist [Doug Lancio](#), piano and keyboard wiz [Barry Walsh](#), bassist [Dave Francis](#), and drummer [John Gardner](#) (with guest musicians in tow), Peters delivers a set of new songs that is simply searing in its lyric honesty and accompanying melodies, sophisticated enough in musical arrangements to carry them to the listener as a gift. The songs offer an encounter with beauty in all its marred, tragic, and transformative glory. The sound of the recording is pristine; it reveals in clear, wide-open tones and abundant -- though never excessive -- atmospheric ones, the struggles and epiphanies these protagonists experience. The hunger is heard in the set's opening cut, "Ghost," as a single harmonic chord and bowed cello usher in these a cappella words: "There was a girl who used to live here/Sometimes you still can hear her laugh...but you let her beauty go unnoticed/And let her music go unheard/You should've listened when she told you/You should've hung on every word/Now I'm a ghost, I haunt this house/And wait for love to lift this shroud/Take these withered dreams and let 'em go/I'm a

ghost...." The acoustic guitars swell; Lancio poignantly fills the space between Walsh's organ and synths. Peters abandons herself to the maelstrom, which is enveloping. It's one of the bravest opening tracks on a record in an age. Lest things get too dark too quickly, "Sunday Morning (Up and Down My Street)," with its nearly nursery rhyme melody -- thanks to the counterpoint guitars creating "ding-dong" effect -- Peters paints a picture of contentment and stillness, a gratitude that embraces the moment when love is present and abundant. The listener has to wonder if this is a reminiscence of what was, or lives in the present. The temptation is toward the latter, especially as Peters' voice rings so clearly, in a way it never has before, above the Hammond B-3 swells, an emergent cello, and a glockenspiel all sewn inside the slippery guitars. "Jezebel," introduced by a fingerpicked acoustic guitar, is in the protagonist's mirror-imaged, self-referential voice, but it's a manifesto. She confesses that her only sin is love, and that it is the only refuge, all that matters now. She reveals that she became an angel in her way, but has experienced heaven with those wings, too. Though the tune is plaintive and stark, it's a real blow to the gut; it leaves the listener breathless. It's followed by the smoky, film noir-ish jazz blues of "Thirsty," driven by spooky guitars and that wily B-3, colored by Jim Hoke's clarinet. The key line: "I'm always thirsty/But never satisfied." "The Lady of the House," a shimmering confessional pop/rock song with a hypnotic little groove, offers this scandalous truth: "The lady of the house is in and might be so inclined/If you're selling something sacred I might be ready to buy." Her cover of Harold Arlen's "One for My Baby" is a slightly woozy, empty-barroom confessional. The protagonist is feeling painless enough to let it show in front of a trusted barkeep in the wee small hours of the morning. Walsh's piano lines move through the blues and early jazz of the masters, finessing the melody while harmonically engaging history. The trio of strings -- cello, violin, and viola -- rises on the second verse, and brings the timelessness of both the emotion and the melody of the tune itself into the present moment. It's a sad song, but it comes with the weight of nostalgia, and in the acceptance of loneliness, she conveys Arlen's great hidden truth: "...Buddy, I'm a kind of poet/And I got lots of things to say...." Peters could have written that song herself. Peters and her band cleverly follow this with "The Way You Move Me," a straight-up contemporary country love song that is at the crux of the album, and indeed is its hinge. The heroine, after all the crushing emotions and emptying bankruptcy of her spirit, has embraced love again - - totally. She's in its first flush: strong, dizzying, wondrous. The warm, flowing guitar fills, open basslines, and swirling keyboards only underscore the complete tenderness and amazement in the gorgeous grain of Peters' voice. This song is likely to be covered, but it will never sound truer than it does right here. The genuine humility and willingness to open and embrace another on love's tightrope is simply articulated with the most impure and elegant kind of poetry; the tune skips out of the gate and nearly staggers in the delight of the heightened awareness love brings. The last two songs here are truly climactic: "Breakfast at Our House" is a folk dirge about the breaking point, reached in an epiphany during breakfast across the kitchen table. Finally, there is "To Say Goodbye," a song that's tricky, because all the conflict and pain -- gracefully and dramatically carried by a wall of cello, bowed bass, twinkling guitars, and synth -- given as the reason for letting go and for

severing ties is not good enough; true resolution comes in remaining in the cradle of tribulation, in the face of difficulty and strain to see how it plays out. The singer's final words are: "Cause I'm not ready, to say goodbye/You're not ready to say goodbye/We're not ready...." There is no fairy tale ending on *Burnt Toast & Offerings*; in fact, it does not end at all. As another fine songwriter once said: "Sometimes the truth that love brings/Is the hardest one to take." The observations and truths on this album actually feel like real life. This is Gretchen Peters' finest moment as a recording artist, and perhaps her finest as a song-lyric poet as well. Her rhymes and melodies are sometimes stretched here, pushing at the meaning of words themselves to communicate what is clearly beyond them. And it is here, in these grooves, that the strength and determination in her voice -- illustrated by musical accompaniment and production verging on brilliant -- carry these songs from the depths and the darkness of her private well into the open air to be kissed by the light. The flaws she discovers are not merely revealed; they are celebrated. They come to us in the form of a record album of ruddy but welcome gifts, and we can accept or reject them but we cannot ignore them. *Burnt Toast & Offerings* is the most sophisticated and truthful recording about love since *Nick Cave's The Boatman's Call*. It's not the next step for this contemporary singer and songwriter, but a giant leap, an aesthetic milestone that sets the bar higher not only for her but for anyone wishing to write songs honestly about the inside of a life in the process of being lived, a life that holds love as its zenith.