



Carrie Newcomer **"Betty's Diner: The Best Of Carrie Newcomer"** Rounder/Philo Records

Newcomer launched her solo career in 1991 with **"Visions And Dreams"** an album that was subsequently reissued by Rounder/Philo in 1995. **"Betty's Diner"** doesn't feature any cuts from the latter recording, and, in fact, the earliest of fifteen previously issued songs on this retrospective hail from Carrie's 1994 Rounder/Philo debut **"An Angel At My Shoulder."** One of three **"Angel"** songs, "Only One Shoe," is based on the [well-known] phrase *"waiting for the other shoe to drop,"* and in Carrie's lyric the narrator illustrates the analogy with the anticipative line *"I'm not looking for darkness to strike."*

This album opens with a trio of previously unreleased Newcomer compositions. "Toward The Horizon" is an optimistic glimpse of the future, as well as glancing at the present and past and is underscored by the line *"Chances are we'll live to see the new moon rising, But I believe the likes of you I'll never see again."* Within the four walls of "Betty's Diner," Carrie has created a self-contained universe. By way of introducing the establishment, Newcomer's first character is Miranda, the late-night waitress. Then there's the aspiring musician who is going to leave the production line at the local saxophone factory and head for Chicago or New Orleans, the recently bereaved husband who is still dealing with his loss, the recovered woman alcoholic, the guy who runs the local crisis centre and more. This community is embraced by *"Here we are all in one place, The warts and wounds of the human race,"* while their shared communion is the diner's food and drink *"Let her fill your cup with something kind, Eggs and toast, like bread and wine."* Fact - "Betty's Diner" is pure, undiluted, classic Newcomer. By way of substantially *lightening the load* and engaging the listener's smile, "Bowling Baby" is a wild rockin', humour filled romp, complete with *sixties style* chick singer chorus. It's also a slyly worded *unrequited* love song, *"She has a pink bowling ball and oh man can she throw it, It makes my knees get weak just to see the way she h-o-l-d-s it"* and *"Maybe someday she'll turn around, Smile and put her ball back down, And say "Hey buddy, sometime let's bowl a r-o-u-n-d"."*

One of many powerful themes in the deeply spiritual world of Carrie Newcomer is that of family. Cut # 4, "I'll Go Too" is one of a trio of songs taken from her most recent original work, **"The Gathering Of Spirits"** [2002]. The latter lyric opens with a young child, who is frightened of the dark and the *"ugly things beneath my bed,"* running downstairs to the familiar comfort and *"safety of Dad's easy chair."* In subsequent verses, while learning to swim, on her marriage day and at her mother's graveside, Carrie fondly recalls the blood relative who has always been there to reassure with the familiar and lifelong *"I'll go too."* The studio version of "Bare To The Bone," follows, which appeared on **"The Age Of Possibility"** [2000]. The lines *"Time will wash these footprints, And we'll leave without a trace"* preface the conclusion *"What we do in love and kindness, Is all we ever leave behind."* Linking the foregoing sets of lines is the crucial pronouncement to make every second count here on Earth - *"Between here and now and forever, Is such precious little time."*

Further pursuing the theme of family, this collection closes with the pairing of "My Father's Only Son" from the 1996 collection of the same name, and from **"An Angel At My Shoulder,"** "Three Women." In the former Carrie recalls the lifelong and joyous friendship she has enjoyed with her father - *"My father had three daughters, So I became his only son,"* while the latter is by way of a eulogy to her late mother. **"Betty's Diner"** draws material half a dozen Newcomer albums, and so far I haven't mentioned **"The Bird Or The Wing"** [1995] and **"My True Name"** [1998]. "The Yes Of Yes," a love song, is the only cut from the former title, while from the latter I clearly recall first hearing the memorable "The Moon Over

Tucson” in a local concert hall during June 1997 when Carrie toured the UK with Alison Krauss. The latter song was inspired by novelist Barbara Kingsolver’s book “**High Tide In Tucson.**” In 1998 Newcomer issued a *live charity* album titled “**Bare To The Bone,**” and in terms of the songs performed therein it was, of itself, a retrospective, while a couple of years later when Rounder issued the *in concert* video “**The Age of Possibility/Live At The Indiana Theatre**”[#], they supported it with a *free* soundtrack CD. No cuts on “**Betty’s Diner**” are drawn from the latter pair of recordings.

If “**Betty’s Diner**” proves one thing, it is that Newcomer has, in just over of a decade, created a catalogue of material of which any self-respecting contemporary songwriter would rightly be proud. In the process Carrie has steadily built a faithful audience that understands the mental and spiritual sustenance acquired by attending a Carrie Newcomer concert. While I feel that Newcomer has truly hit her stride as a composer, I also believe that, to date, we’ve only seen the tip of what she is capable of creating. So, here’s to the retrospective “**Betty’s Diner,**” but the road goes on forever and Carrie’s song has far from ended.....

**Note.**

[#] – The video featured some cuts from the album of the same name, as well as songs from previous Newcomer releases. The *giveaway* CD featured the same songs as the *in concert* video.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood  
Kerrville Kronikles 01/04