

Carrie Newcomer – Bio

Carrie Newcomer was born in Dowagiac, Michigan on May 25th 1958. Her father, a school-teacher, eventually became a high school principal and she grew up in Elkhart, Indiana. As she told me in Kerrville in 1996, *“My family wasn't real musical. My paternal grandfather played the fiddle, but I really don't remember seeing him play. My mother is first generation Italian and they liked music, but more the music of their homeland.”* Elkhart was home to Selmer, Conn and Armstrong three of the biggest instrument makers in the States. Carrie again - *“As a result, they had a wonderful music programme in the public schools. Everybody played an instrument by the age they were eight. I started playing music because of that programme, but I quickly fell in love with doing music. As a kid you have different experiences - and you find things that you just love. I loved making music.”* Newcomer played the flute – *“I loved the sound of it. The melodies were so pretty”* - in her school orchestra. Elkhart wasn't far from Detroit, Michigan and Carrie also grew up with a love for soul music. *“I attended an inner city school and Tamla Motown was the music that you would listen to. At lunchtime, we'd spin 45's in the gym and dance. It would be like, Aretha Franklin - well, she was Stax and not Motown. The Temptations. All those wonderful soul bands of the early seventies.”* By her mid teens Newcomer had discovered the music of Joni Mitchell, Janis Ian, Leonard Cohen, Bruce Cockburn, and aged fourteen she picked up her first guitar. Although a self admitted *“painfully shy”* person as a youngster, Carrie was performing as a solo act in bars before she went off to College.

In College she studied the visual arts, rather than music, although it was her earnings from bar gigs that helped put her through College. As she told me *“I always played some of my own material. At least half-and-half. Especially when I was playing bars. You need to be able to play things that people like, and know, and can sing along with.”* Initially Carrie attended Ball State, then moved on to Goshen, before graduating from Purdue University in 1981 with an art education degree. Rather than pursue a career in teaching, Carrie decided that playing her music was more important. She went on to work as a waitress, taught guitar and performed as a solo act in bars and clubs. One night guitarist Larry Smeyak asked if he could join in, and later when drummer/percussionist Dennis Leas joined them they took the name Stone Soup. The trio had a very traditional sound, and Carrie played dulcimer as well as guitar. She recalled *“I was really interested at that time, in learning more about folk music and traditional music and ethnic music. I didn't really come from that background. I came from the pop poet area - and Motown [Laughs].”* Leas and Smeyak had day jobs, so the band was limited to local touring. During their lifetime the band released three recordings on the Windchime label – Newcomer had chimes on her front porch – all of which contained material composed by Newcomer. Newcomer also acted as the band's office and business manager. Between 1984 to 1986 Carrie also worked in the Aluminium Singers, a trio that featured Susan Denton Staley and Fran Berman. Leas and Newcomer were married for a short time, but when they split up Stone Soup dissolved.

Newcomer launched her solo career once more and in 1991 released **“Visions And Dreams,”** a collection that had begun life as the next Stone Soup release. The album allowed Carrie to perform further afield, but from the outset she preconditioned her touring schedule *“I did unusual tours - I had a daughter and was a single mom. I didn't do long tours, where people go out for a couple of months at a time. I would do these short, out and back deals. I got to have a life and be a mum and see my daughter grow up.”* The album went on to sell 10000 copies, and having engaged the interest of Ken Irwin at Rounder Records, Newcomer signed with the label in 1994 and recorded her sophomore solo album **“An Angel At My Shoulder.”** The *angel* being her, then, ten year old daughter Amelia Rose. By this stage Newcomer had met and worked with Robert Meitus – her second husband - who was in a band called The Dorkestra. All of Newcomer's subsequent album releases have appeared on the Rounder Philo label. In 1995 Rounder reissued **“Visions And Dreams”** augmented by a couple of bonus tracks. Initially a limited edition, mail order release, **“Bare To The Bone”** was a live album, with the proceeds from sales going to Planned Parenthood Health Centres in the States. In Y2K Carrie released a solo album - **“The Age Of Possibility,”** and a concert video of the same name recorded at The Buskirk-Chumley Theatre in her hometown of Bloomington, Indiana. A free CD version of the video soundtrack accompanied initial copies of the video. Her most recent solo album **“The Gathering Of Spirits”** was released in September 2002. In early 2003, Carrie was voted Folkwax Artist of the Year for 2002, while **“Gathering”** picked up the Album of the Year award. Drawing on material taken from six of her solo albums, and featuring three previously unreleased tracks, the eighteen song retrospective **“Betty's Diner : The Best Of Carrie Newcomer”** was issued in late January 2004.

Inspired by the song **“Betty’s Diner”** which first appeared on Newcomer’s 2004 retrospective, in the late summer of 2005 Newcomer released a song collection titled **“Regulars And Refugees.”** **“Wilderness Plots”** Scott Russell Sanders 1988 book of short stories charted the settlement of the Ohio Valley, circa 1780 through 1850. Based on the contents of Sanders book, the Bloomington, Indiana based group of songwriters – Carrie Newcomer, Michael White, Krista Detor, Tim Grimm and Tom Roznowski – separately penned the songs, and then collaborated on the nineteen-song recording **“Wilderness Plots.”** Accompanied by Holly Near and Bernice Johnson Reagon [founder of Sweet Honey In The Rock], and recorded at the “Mix in ‘06,” a gathering of 4,000 women from the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church, Newcomer contributed to the ‘in concert’ DVD **“Light Of Change.”** Newcomer’s **“The Geography Of Light,”** her tenth collection of original material for Rounder Records, appeared in February 2008.

Discography :

with Stone Soup - **“Sampler”** [1982] ; **“Long Fields”** [1984] ; **“October Nights”** [1988] :

with Michael White, Krista Detor, Tim Grimm & Tom Roznowski - **“Wilderness Plots”** [2007] :

Solo - **“Visions And Dreams”** [1991/1995] ; **“An Angel At My Shoulder”** [1994] ; **“The Bird Or The Wing”** [1995] ; **“My Father’s Only Son”** [1996] ; **“My True Name”** [1998] ; **“Bare To The Bone”** [1999] ; **“The Age Of Possibility”** [2000] ; **“Live At The Indiana Theatre”** video and limited edition bonus CD release [2000] ; **“The Gathering Of Spirits”** [2002] ; **“Betty’s Diner : The Best Of Carrie Newcomer”** [2004] ; **“Regulars And Refugees”** [2005] ; **“The Geography Of Light”** [2008] :

Video - **“Live At The Indiana Theatre”** [2000] :

DVD – **“Light Of Change”** with Holly Near and Bernice Johnson Reagon [2007] :

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 11/02, 01/04, 07/05 & 12/07
[1075 words]