

## Pierce Pettis – The “Great Big World” Interview

### Part 1 – Making The Album

*The interview with Pierce Pettis took place by telephone on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2004. Pierce was at home somewhere in Alabama, and I was in Birmingham, England. Many, many thanks to Michele [Pierce's wife] for stepping in and fetching the kids from school when the interview ran over time.*

**Folk Wax :** This is the second [consecutive] album that Garry West has produced. Was he the obvious choice for the job.

**Pierce Pettis :** He was, both personally and professionally. On a personal level Garry stood by me, while others ran, when my publishing deal came to an end. Frankly, a lot of people who were real interested in working with me, all of a sudden, weren't so interested anymore – because I didn't have this big publishing deal. I felt that I owed Garry a personal debt once I got back on my feet. I was very pleased with the job that he did on “**State Of Grace**.” So, he was the obvious choice. Since the songs on this new album pursued the same vein a little further, it seemed like a natural progression.

**FW :** When precisely did you loose your songwriting deal.

**PP :** Shortly before we started recording “**State Of Grace**.” In 2000. At the time, I had a couple of albums projects in the works – or at least, in the planning stages. All of a sudden I found myself without a producer, and didn't know if I would be making any more albums. At that moment, Garry stepped forward and said, “*Well, I'd like to produce you.*” It was very interesting, because up till that time I had known Garry as the president of the record company. In other words, the guy I always had to argue with about trying to get more money for tour support and things. It didn't occur to me that Garry - that he and Alison [Brown] were big fans. It should have occurred to me, because why else would they have signed me [**Ed. Note.** Pierce's first album for Compass Records appeared in 1996, and “**Great Big World**” is his fourth release for the label]. It wasn't like I was the biggest star in the world. Anyway, Garry said “*I've been wanting to produce you for years*” and I'm going “*Why in the world didn't you tell me.*” That was a whole new relationship, working with him as a producer. Frankly, as a musician - as a bass player, he's as good as anybody.

**FW :** You cut this new album at the Parlor Studio in Nashville. Last time you used Sound Emporium.

**PP :** Part of that was because, frankly, technology has advanced in the past three years. When we did “**State of Grace**” we cut it on a 24 track Yamaha digital machine, the first generation of studio quality, digital workstations, during that transitional period when the whole world was moving from analog to digital. All over Nashville you'd see these beautiful old studios with these huge consoles, and sitting on top of the console would be this little machine, and that's what was actually doing the recording. In other words, the hugely expensive technology of just a couple of years earlier was now being used, basically, as a *coffee table*. Today, three or four years later, most of those analog consoles are gone. All over town, things have changed to digital and we went to a Pro Tools studio that is absolutely, state of the art – the best of the best, and worked with sound engineers who have a real understanding of the technology. Plus they have great ears. The Sound Emporium, where we worked before, has made similar changes. We mixed the album at the Sound Emporium. They still have some of the best facilities in town for that, without a doubt, plus they are great guys. We worked with Dave Sinko, who is sort of the head engineer over there. The tracking was all done at the Parlor, because they had everything we needed to do what we had to do. Plus, I think the Parlor was a little more intimate.

**FW :** You, Garry, Alison and Stuart Duncan all played on “**State Of Grace**” sessions and on this album. The other session players on this occasion were different. Were they folks you knew.

**PP :** No, they were guys that Garry knew, and some of them quite distinguished. In all these years I had never used a pedal steel guitar. I don't know why. I've always liked the sound. It just never occurred to me to use it. We used Dan Dugmore who, you probably know, has been James Taylor's pedal steel guy for decades.

**FW :** I first knew him as “Dangerous” Dan Dugmore when he played for John Stewart back in the early seventies.

**PP** : That's right. In fact that was really cool, because I'm a big John Stewart fan. I said to him, "*Man, did you ever hear that album **“Cannons In The Rain”**?*" and he said, "*Yeah, I played on it.*" I was like "*Really?*" He was unbelievable. He's a great, great musician and added a lot of cool stuff. He's also a real good electric lap steel player, very much like David Lindley. That was great to have. The keyboard player, Reese Wynans – if I'm not mistaken, he was Stevie Ray Vaughan's keyboard guy. He was very good.

**FW** : And you had a British guy on acoustic bass. The one and only, Danny Thompson.

**PP** : That's right - one of the best in the world. We also had Kenny Malone, who, I think may very well be the best drummer in Nashville - by far. This guy is a legend, and it was great having him around. He played on pretty much all the tracks.

**FW** : In terms of recording the tracks how long did the sessions last. Was it a few days, or a few weeks.

**PP** : It was a five or six days spread out over a year. Basically, the way that we decided to record this album made it difficult for us to complete it quickly. We decided we wanted to do the album, pretty much live. I did an album a few years ago called "**Chase The Buffalo**" where David Miner had me stand up in the studio, playing guitar and singing, alongside the rhythm section. People don't do that much anymore. You might have the artist come in and do a scratch vocal or whatever, and then you cut and paste it together. For reasons which will become clear in a moment, we decided we wanted to work with these great musicians – plus, we wanted the chemistry of them playing together at the same time, while doing a live take. A take that we intended using, not something that is going to be thrown away and replaced by another take. Because we decided to work that way, and because of the quality of the musicians we were working with, it was very hard to get them together at the same time. For example, Danny would be on the road with Darrell Scott or something, or Kenny would be out touring, and of course Stuart Duncan works all the time. We kept trying to get everybody together, and then something would come up and we'd have to go "*OK, we'll do it next month.*" That's why it was so difficult to get the thing recorded. Once we got everybody in the same room, it was real easy. The recording part was wonderful. Basically, we rehearsed each song a few times and then cut it. What was great, when you have all these guys working together, was that they began playing off each other. Kenny might call across to Stuart and say "*Hey man can you play this thing right here, while I do this.*" That's something that can't happen when everybody is coming in and playing their parts piecemeal. I think it made for a much more organic sort of record, plus when we added things later, like we brought Dan in and we brought the keyboards in, they already had something pretty solid to work with.

**FW** : In terms of Garry's contribution to the album, do you want to make any comment.

**PP** : There was an overall sense of calm, that everything was under control – sort of, "*Don't panic*" – and I was ready to panic I'll tell you, because we had session times booked many times and then they didn't happen. I was like "*When are we going to do this record?*" Garry would always say, "*It will happen. Don't worry. Give it time.*" In the long run, Garry was right. In other words, rather than force a session back in say August of last year, when the people we really wanted weren't available, and just work with whoever we could get – instead of doing that, his attitude was "*No. Let's wait.*" He knew Danny was going to be in the country around late October/early November. Danny's a guy who is worth waiting for. That contributed a lot, not only outside the sessions but also, inside the sessions. Garry's a very calm, calm guy, which is really funny, because if you know him, when he's wearing his other hat – running the record company – he usually has three phones in his hand at the same time. When he's in the studio, he's a real Rock of Gibraltar. He holds everything together. He's very patient. He doesn't ever push you, he doesn't force you – but he brings out a good performance. He has a good sense of when you've got a better one in you. You hear that term a lot "*I think you got a better one in you.*" He's usually right about that. He's a real good producer.

**FW** : I'd like to speak about the album artwork next. You've used paintings by artists on the front of this and your previous album.

**PP** : You know it's funny, I went to my website last night because I was updating the calendar, and I looked at the discography page and noticed that the artwork seemed to go in two's. I'd never noticed that before. My first two albums were done by the same artist - a fellow named Steve Vance, and they are almost cartoon like. The next two, on Windham Hill Records, in terms of colouring have these, sort of,

earth tones – the “**Chase The Buffalo**” and “**Tinseltown**” albums. The latter has a sort of burnt looking cover, and they go together visually. The first two for Compass Records were photographs that were tinted, using sepia tone or whatever. The last two have been paintings. The painting on “**Great Big World**” is the work Terry Cannon from Chattanooga, Tennessee. I met Terry a couple of years ago. I was performing in Chattanooga at a place that was also a gallery where they were exhibiting his paintings. I looked at his paintings and just loved them. Terry happened to be at the show that night, but had never heard me before. He had a similar reaction, I guess, to my music. We both loved each other’s work. It turns out we grew up not too far from each other, in the Lookout Mountain area. Terry, it turns out, was also a big fan of Howard Finster. Howard was an untrained artist [Ed. Note. One of Finster’s paintings appeared on the cover of Pierce’s 2001 album “**State of Grace**“]. I guess Howard is what you’d call a primitive artist. Terry is very well trained. Howard Finster was a big influence on his work, nevertheless. At any rate, Terry, I guess on impulse said “*I want to give you a painting.*” I was like “*Oh don’t do that.*” This is a guy whose paintings sell for quite a bit of money. He insisted, so I said “*Well OK.*” One thing led to another and I didn’t see him for maybe a little over a year. It came time to start recording the album and I remembered his paintings and thought one of them would make a great album cover. I called him up, and the first thing he said was “*Hey, I owe you a painting.*” I said, “*Well, you know, I don’t want to take advantage of you, but if that’s the case how would you like it to be an album cover.*” He said “*Fine.*” He then sent me, by e-mail actually, a whole bunch of his work – all of it good, all of it just stunning. There was one painting that, when we came across it, we knew was the cover. I had that reaction, and then I showed the paintings to Garry. I didn’t say “*Hey, what do you think of this one or that one.*” I just said, “*Look at all these and tell me if one jumps out.*” Every person picked the same painting. It was like “*That’s the cover.*” Terry was very gracious and let us use it. He sent us another painting of angels flying over a city that we used for some of the internal graphics in the liner booklet. Terry really came through for us, because this was really done, sort of, at the last minute. We were really, really fortunate that Terry – was one, available, and two, had the goods – and three, was gracious about letting us use his paintings.

**FW** : Backtracking a little to the stage where you were showing Garry and others, Terry’s pictures, did you actually have the album title at that stage.

**PP** : Yes, we did.

**FW** : Was it a case of the picture’s subjective matter selling itself, because if you’re in a sailing boat, you are capable of reaching many places on this great big world.

**PP** : Exactly. One of the reasons I wanted to work with Terry was that, if I gave this to some regular graphics guy somewhere, I’d have gotten a cover with a bunch of worlds or something, or an atlas. I told Terry “*I want something that doesn’t just “ape” the term great big world. I want something that is maybe even in contrast. Something that gives it more life.*” Sort of the way Bob Dylan would take a line, just any line, and insert it at the end of a verse and somehow it always made sense. This one painting seemed to be the right statement. It defined what we really meant by the album title. We weren’t talking about the world so much, but you have this kid in a boat – the innocence of it – do you remember the early Cat Stevens albums “**Mona Bone Jakon**” and “**Tea For The Tillerman**,” they had a whimsical quality to them, and that’s something that really came across in Terry’s work, and I thought in that painting in particular. To me that was fitting because the title song is a lullaby. There are also couple of songs on the album that, sort of, see the world through child’s eyes – “Alabama 1959” is through the eyes of a five year old, and so there was something cool about that. Having the kid wear a paper hat, and be in a boat, it seemed to work.

**FW** : In the rear of the “**Great Big World**” liner booklet there are literally pages of liner credits.

**PP** : [Laughs]. Yeah.

**FW** : I reckon, all in all, you have just about thanked the world.

**PP** : I have thanked the world many times over. That’s one of the few indulgences I really allow myself with these albums. It’s not often I get a chance to communicate something to – hopefully, a fair number of people. There are people who have done me a lot of favours, and have been very kind. When I start adding them up they turn to be in the hundreds, so I try to thank as many of them as I can.

**FW** : Let's close on a humorous note. Considering your comment, *"Thanks to Apple Computers just because I love their products and who knows, maybe they'll read this and send me something cool,"* have they been in touch yet.

**PP** : [Laughs]. Yeah, I wish they would. That would be great. I put that comment in almost as a joke and also as a dare, wondering if somebody over there would read it and go *"Let's send him something."* I did a show in Monte Sereno, California, a little town not far from San Francisco, where John Steinbeck once lived. A lot of the Apple staff live around there because it's fairly close to Cupertino where they make the computers and all. My host was a computer engineer who worked for another company – a software company or something – a really nice guy, fairly well off. His former roommate in college is the Vice President of Apple, in charge of hardware. He tried to get me to thank this guy, by name, and was going to try to get the CD to him, and see if that would work. I decided that was maybe kind of a cheap shot.

**FW** : The direct approach might have been too obvious, but I still think the door is open.

**PP** : It's really just a joke. I could just as well have thanked Lexus, or Rolls Royce. On the other hand, if they want to ship me an iPod I wouldn't turn it down.

*to be continued*

Arthur Wood.  
Kerrville Kronikles 09/04 & 10/04  
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