

Greg Trooper

A best kept secret for too long ...



There's little doubt that Steve Earle possesses the skill to spot naturally talented songwriters. It's a testament to Earle's unswerving faith, considering his continuing personal duel with fame as well as that temporary fall from grace, that he has trumpeted Greg Trooper's cause for a decade and a half.

Trooper's 1998 recording, his fourth, was curiously titled *Popular Demons*. Produced by the multi-skilled Buddy Miller, the supporting players include Trooper road band member Duane Jarvis on guitar, Emmylou Harris, Julie Miller and Greg's wife, Claire Mullally. Oh, and on the closing track, you'll find the voice of the man from Copperhead Road.

Trooper, born in 1956, is originally from northern New Jersey, and remembers spending a lot of time in New York City, forty miles away, visiting folk clubs and shows, "everything from Artie and Happy Traum to Van Morrison to The Band. I saw Dylan play at the Garden, at the Bangladesh concert – that was the first time I ever saw him and it blew my mind. I saw The Beatles play at Shea Stadium in 1966."

The 60s were a golden age for radio in America, and when Greg rode in his parents' car, "it was awesome and nothing like it is today. There was R&B, Motown, Stones and Beatles – a great way to learn about music. They didn't have a lot of country music on there. I got interested in country music as I got a little older. I was attracted to singer/songwriters in the 70s, and their influence from a country music angle caught my interest."

By age 14, Trooper was taking his first tentative steps on guitar. He formed a Gram Parsons country rock influenced group called The Ravioli Brothers, although countless mid-teen hours spent practising in someone's garage far outweighed those he spent onstage.

Leaving home at 18, Greg moved to Lawrence, Kansas and later headed south to Austin, Texas where he was joined by Richard Scott, a former Ravioli Brother. They gigged as Trooper & Scott for a while before Greg set out as a solo act. He reflects on his year in Austin as a great learning experience.

"I was drawn there by the artists I was listening to. Townes, Guy Clark and Jerry Jeff Walker were holding court. I saw Willie Nelson playing in a bar."

Returning to Lawrence, Trooper enrolled at the University of Kansas, before the urge to move on saw him return to New York, where he would spend the next fifteen years.

In New York, Greg initially worked as a singer/songwriter in downtown clubs. "I eventually put The Greg Trooper Band together. Larry Campbell was in that band. He's now with Dylan. The drummer was Walter Thompson, and Greg Shirley played bass. Greg has moved to Nashville, where I am now, and still plays for me. We made one record together and toured Scandinavia. We also did some gigs in London."

That 1986 album, a vinyl-only release on the independent Wild Twin label, was titled *We Won't Dance*. It was co-produced by Greg and Carter Cathcart, onetime member of rock band Laughing Dogs.

According to Greg, "Steve Earle got a copy of that album and walked all over Nashville with it trying to get people to listen to it. He even recorded one of the cuts, *Little Sister*." (Earle's version, a live recording, appeared on his 1988 *Copperhead Road* single.)

In 1987, Greg won the New York Music Award for Best New Male Vocalist. Gary Tallent, a member of Bruce Springsteen's E-Street Band, presented the trophy. "Some time later, Steve and Gary began talking about doing a co-production on me. Steve's career took off in the late 80s, and that's when Gary and I stayed together and worked on the album."

That album was *Noises In The Hallway* and, although completed in 1988, would not be released for a further eight years.

During the late 80s and into the current decade, Greg signed a series of song publishing deals.

"There are pros and cons to taking them or not taking them, but I had to because they were offering me enough money where I could keep my career going, and record music and stuff. Earl Shuman introduced me to CBS Songs in New York around 1988. A year later, they said, 'We'll keep you on, but we've bought Tree in Nashville and we think you're more suited there.'"

"From that time on, I was writing for publishers in Nashville although I was living in New York. I would go down there every few months and write and gig. I got most of my cuts – they add

up to maybe fifteen – during this period. I did three years with CBS, and went over to Polygram for two years. Finally, I had a co-venture with Sony Tree and that ended two years ago. I'm trying to put a situation together right now since it's been financially worth my while in the past."

Greg acknowledges Vince Gill's cover of *We Won't Dance* on the latter's 1989 MCA album, *When I Call Your Name*, as his major revenue earner to date: "It was never a single but it recouped all my publishing advances at the time."

Another popular Trooper composition is *The Heart*. Co-written with Tom Russell, Sarah Elizabeth Campbell included it on her 1994 album, *Running For You*, for the now defunct DeJaDisc label. The song also turned up on Lucy Kaplansky's solo debut, *The Tide*, with Trooper sidemen Ken Blevins and Larry Campbell featured on the cut.

Tom Russell's semi-concept album, *Box Of Visions*, included another co-written song, *Hong Kong Boy*.

"I did a few gigs with Andrew Hardin and Tom Russell in Austin during the mid 70s. Tom and I got reacquainted in New York as we lived around the corner from each other in Brooklyn."

Greg's only co-write with Robert Earl Keen is *Night Right For Love*. It was included on Keen's 1993 Sugar Hill recording, *A Bigger Piece Of Sky*.

Over the years Greg has collaborated with numerous other writers including his wife Claire Mullally, Sid Griffin, Willie Nile, Duane Jarvis, Don Henry and Steve Earle. His main co-writer on *Popular Demons* is John Sieger, formerly of Milwaukee bands The R&B Cadets and Semi Twang. Then there's Jon Walmsley.

"I friend of mine in Los Angeles asked if I would do some co-writing with this acquaintance of his, so I agree to meet this guy. I'm talking to this guy, and thinking to myself, 'There's something familiar about him'. Seems he played in this television series. Turns out he was Jason in *The Waltons*. He's a very talented guy. We were thinking about The Band on *Light In The Window*, as it was an influence we shared.

For his 1992 release, *Everywhere*, Greg's band featured Abel Dominguez (guitar), Ken Belvins (drums) and Greg Shirley (bass), and the set was produced by Stewart Lerman.

"I was doing my publishing demos in his (Lerman's) studio. *Everywhere* started out as those demos. We picked some songs, brought them back into the studio and fixed them up, mixed them and put it out as a record."

Everywhere initially saw the light of day on the Black Hole label, then moved to Ripe & Ready Records, and was reissued by Koch with two bonus tracks a couple of months ago.

"Will Botwin and Ken Levitan, my management, were having a hell of a time getting a record company to sign me. In America those companies think I'm just terrific, according to what they tell us. They love me – but to sell Greg Trooper music, that would be difficult.

"Is that true? I have no idea. It might just be an excuse. They created their own label, Black Hole, and put it out. We had a deal with HEAR Music but they had poor distribution. Ripe & Ready had real distribution and they picked up the album after a year."

To promote the album, Trooper and his band toured the States

for two months supporting Joe Ely.

Four years later, the D'Ville label issued *Noises In The Hallway*, Greg's 1988 recording. "Gary (Tallent) was a partner in that label with Ron Lasalle and Tim Coats. They were doing it on a shoestring. The only money they had was what they would dig out of their pockets. It was very hard for them to promote. It was distributed through Rounder and the record started to get out a little bit."

At the time of the *Noises* sessions, Trooper's band consisted of Larry Campbell, Greg Shirley and Denny McDermott (drums). Koch will be reissuing *Noises*, enhanced with a couple of bonus songs, in the near future.

"When D'Ville Records folded, I didn't have a writing deal but I was still touring. I decided to ask Buddy Miller if he would be interested in producing a record with me."

Miller readily agreed, although the *Popular Demons* project only got off the ground 12 months later after Koch offered Greg a deal:

"They were pleased as could be to have Buddy produce it. Steve Wilkison is ... managing the label and is based in New York. He's always been a great supporter, although it was John Porter who signed me.

"I had fun with the title, *Popular Demons*. I call the band Popular Demons now. They're popular, but they're demons. We went to Cincinnati to have the liner pictures taken by Michael Wilson. We took some outside this club that was being demolished. On the outside, it listed the kind of music they had in

the club. It said 'Popular, country, jazz and sacred.' At one stage, I was thinking of calling the record 'Popular'. Later, I felt uncomfortable with that title. Then Steve Wilkison said, 'Popular. Popular what?' That's when I came up with *Popular Demons*.

Released late last year, the album spent over 20 weeks in the Americana chart Top 10. It was also nominated for Folk Album of the Year at the Nashville Music Awards.

In recent years, movie soundtrack recordings have provided many writers with hit songs and that may well prove to be Trooper's route to wider acknowledgement. Billy Bragg's version of *Everywhere*, co-written by Greg and Sid Griffin, is featured on the soundtrack of the new Bob Hoskins movie, *A Room For Romeo Brass*.

A Nashville resident for the past four years, Greg Trooper holds strong views about Music City, USA.

"Mainstream country music is the weirdest thing. It's like they keep writing one song over and over and over again. There was such a boom in the Eighties, and now they're losing money. They're still trying to figure out why. They can't figure out that you've got to have good music to sell it.

"In Nashville you could take a stone and throw it in any direction and you'd be able to hit a man or woman who can write unbelievable songs. And write great traditional country songs. Music Row acts like they don't exist. Doesn't know that they're there. There's such an enormous well of talent there."

On the premise of what goes around comes around, Greg Trooper's own particular take on country music, whether you tag it as roots or rock, has been a best kept secret for too long. ■

