



Gretchen Peters with Tom Russell **"One To The Heart, One To The Head"** Scarlet Letter/Frontera Records

If Tom Russell had not written Gretchen a fan letter after hearing **"Halcyon"** [2004] this recording would not exist. In the late 1980's Peters arrived in Nashville town, by way of New York State and Colorado. It was in the latter state that the teenage Peters came to understand this world and begin writing and performing. By the time 'the letter' arrived, Gretchen had penned major Country Chart hits and songs that activated listeners tear ducts – they're not necessarily one and the same. Ostensibly recorded in a few days at Mark Hallman's South Austin, Congress House studio last summer, Peters/Russell produced **"One To The Heart, One To The Head,"** while the performance credit reads *Gretchen Peters with Tom Russell*.

A first, not a single Peters composition appears among the fourteen cuts. Russell contributes the previously unrecorded "Guadalupe," while the collection is tantamount to bookended the instrumental "North Platte" penned by Peters' musical partner Barry Walsh. Back in 1986 Ian Tyson set the standard with **"Cowboyography,"** and in the ensuing decade Russell contributed **"Cowboy Real"** and **"Song Of The West,"** while, early in the new millennium Katy Moffatt, Tom's one time writing partner, delivered **"Cowboy Girl."** Apart from Tom's input to "Navajo Rug" Tyson's disc was self-penned, while the others merged performer penned originals, co-writes and covers. So wither **"One To The Heart, One To The Head"**? – while not a cowboy collection per se, it acknowledges the American West, in times past as well as the present.

Peters the songwriter understands, intimately, the genetic code that guarantees the song will touch the listener. As a song interpreter, she knows how to measure and deliver the words. Separated by seconds, Walsh's piano on the one minute long wistful, nay melancholic, "North Platte" flows seamlessly into Mary McCaslin's "Prairie In The Sky" – that is for the opening verse, then in a move approaching genius Barry switches to pump organ – an old worlde instrument supporting a lyric that reflects upon the west as it once was. David Henry's sonorous cello is a similarly inspired addition. McCaslin's "Prairie," penned back in the early 1970's, closed Russell's sophomore western album and of it, in the supporting liner notes, he wrote *"A western prayer, Ian Tyson credits Mary with rekindling his interest in Western Music."* Music is, the circle game. What Peters achieves with "Prairie" sets a sparkling tone for this collection.

Bob Dylan portrayed 'Alias' to [James] Coburn's 'Marshall Garrett' and Kristofferson's 'William H. Bonney' in the Pekinpah directed **"Pat Garratt & Billy The Kid"** [1973]. "Billy 4," penned by Minnesota Bob appeared on the soundtrack album. Here, Russell supports Gretchen's lead as they sing of love and death in the old west. Tyson's wonderful melodically lilting "Blue Mountains Of Mexico," a memory of love lost, appeared on **"Lost Herd"** [1999] and Peters version is goose bump raisin'. The late Tom Dundee [d. 2006] hailed from Corrales, New Mexico but established a reputation as a folk musician of substance in Chicago. Dundee's "These Cowboys Born Out Of Their Time" offers contemporary snapshots of the west, while the narrator in the ensuing "Guadalupe" is on a pilgrimage to a holy shrine and, suffused with contrition, discloses *"I am the least of all your pilgrims here, But I am most in need of hope."*

Having already contributed to a few cuts, Joel Guzman's accordion adds a Mexican flavour to Nan O'Bryne's borderland waltz "Sweet & Shiny Eyes." Set in winter, Stephanie Davis' "Wolves" reflects on the hardships and sacrifices of ranching life – the loss of livestock, and, sadly, livelihood. When a near neighbour/friend's farm is foreclosed, in the vein of Guthrie's *"Some will rob you with a six-gun, And some with a fountain pen"* the narrator [subtly] reflects *"Then I spent a long time thinkin', 'Bout the ones the wolves pull down."* There's nothing to add regarding Townes' Colorado/New Mexico 'end of year'

travelogue "Snowin' On Raton" which doubles as a contemplation on life and the hereafter. An arrangement of the traditional "Old Paint" follows, appropriate somehow, since the Townes regularly traversed Raton on horseback during the summer months.

Penned by Rosalie Sorrels, the twilight years of our Earthly journey are the focus of "My Last Go Round," the song opened her 2005 Grammy nominated 'live' album of the same name. The instrumental "North Platte (Reprise)" is followed by "If I Had A Gun" and "Prairie Melancholy" – a western epilogue I'd say. The former penned by Nashville n' Colorado based song-smith's Rebecca Folsom, Celeste Krenz, Elizabeth Barnez and Diana Jones, their lyric furnishes this album with its title. Stripped down to the massively effective framework of Peters' voice and a lap steel, the unexpurgated title of this stark observation on guns and their control is "If I Had A Gun (You'd Be Dead)." Jennifer Warnes' album "**The Well**" [2001] – a collection inspired by Jacob's Well in Wimberley, Texas - featured her Nancy Bacal co-write "Prairie Melancholy." Immediately prior to the closing verse – which begins "*Somewhere on the prairie, A cross, a rose, a shrine, Standing for true love, Gone before its time.....*" - Walsh's piano and Henry's cello intertwine evoking cherished memories of David Ackles' "Montana Song" and Peter Ostroushko's "**Sacred Heart**," which similarly echoed time and memory, and portrayed people who in their allotted three score n' ten lived, loved then left.

Here's a turnaround. Could an album composed of, mainly, previously released material be worth 10? This one, I'd say 10 and more.

Folkwax Score 10 out of 10.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 01/09.

[905 words]