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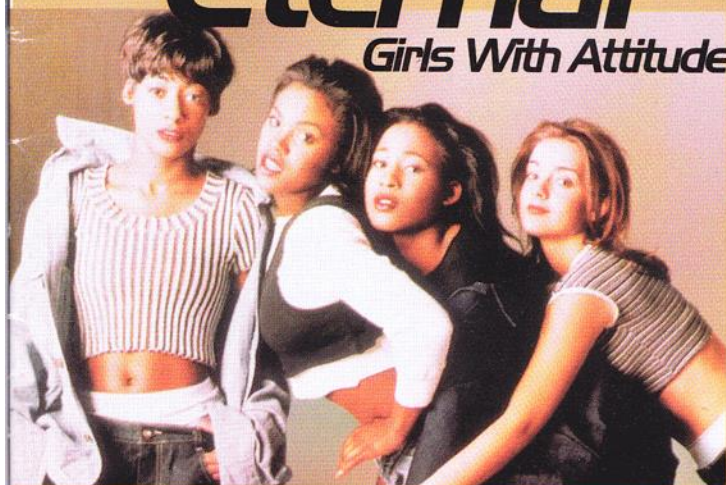
The Midlands Music Monthly and more!

BEAT

NOVEMBER 1994

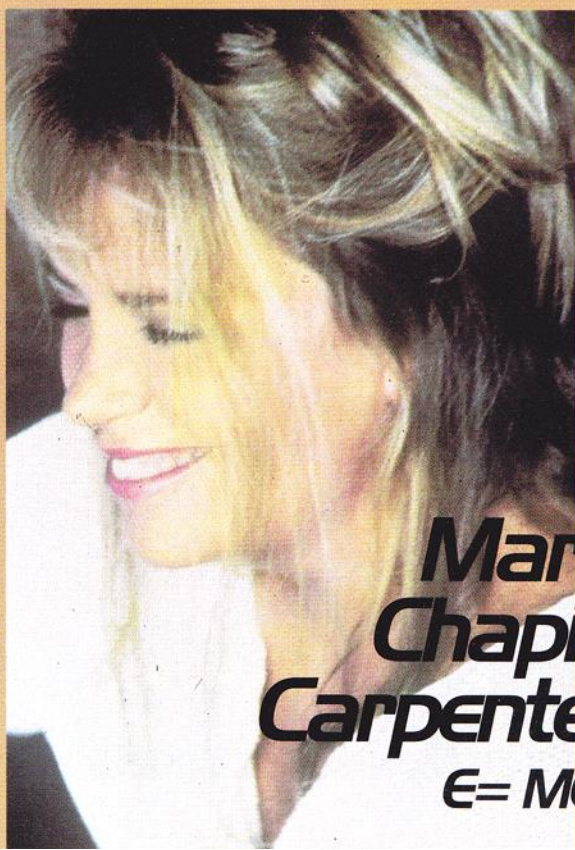
ISSUE: 166

Eternal Girls With Attitude



Black Crowes

*"Mystery Adds
To The Music"*



*Mary
Chapin
Carpenter*
E= MC²

Plus: Dodgy ... The Gig Guide...
News... Reviews ... and so much more

Where 'E' Equals Excellence

E=MC²

Arthur Wood Investigates The Equation

The original plan had been for a face to face meeting. Within days that arrangement had been commuted to a telephone interview. The reason - Mary Chapin Carpenter's US calendar dictated that she return home earlier than originally planned. It's busy, busy, busy, when your new album is about to be unveiled to the public.

So there I was sixty minutes from the pre-agreed revised deadline, flipping through - yet again - a transcription of the thirteen cuts on Mary Chapin's fifth Columbia masterwork, *Stones In The Road*, when the phone rings.

"If we rang back in ten minutes, would you be comfortable with interviewing Mary Chapin now."

Hell, I'm a flexible kind of guy, I've attended all those proactive training courses. I know the answer. After all, how can one man kick at the dictates of the Trans-Atlantic time zones and come off a winner.

Thing is, the confusion had only just begun. Introductions over, I'm thinkin'; Hell, I'm sure MC² is using a mobile telephone' and sayin'.

'When it comes to writing new material, how do you approach the process of drawing fresh water from the well?'

"Gosh, I don't think it's any different from album to album, other than just the songs themselves are different. The process and the search for inspiration remain the same. I took a lot of time off in order to write and really enjoyed that period away from pretty much everything - just so that I could concentrate on my writing."

Do you ever write while you're on the road?

"No, not at all."

Does the search for a new angle to your songs become harder with each succeeding album?

"No not at all. I mean, sometimes it can be really hard, but it's not like it gets more difficult. It's a creative process. It's not something that I look at negatively."

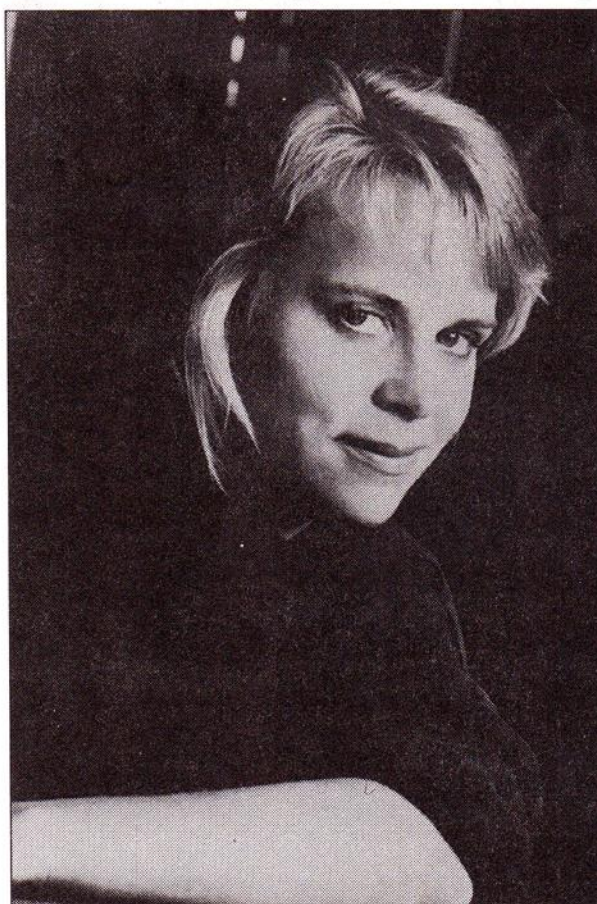
Thus far in the conversation dear reader, I had detected an odd sound in the background, at Mary Chapin's end of the line. It resembled the rushing of air. Conclusion? We really were dealing with a mobile telephone. All of a sudden the line went phut. Five seconds later,

"Hi, it's Mary Chapin, sorry we got cut off. We're in a car."

Just before the connection was re-established, it felt like I was entering the Twilight Zone. For a few seconds I was regaled with the theme from *The Archers*.

But not to worry ...

Who plays on the album?



"I used my band, plus people like Kenny Aronoff, Benmont Tench and Stuart Smith. Don Dixon on bass. Branford Marsalis is playing soprano sax on one song. Matt Rollings plays piano, Tricia Yearwood is singing harmony. Shawn Colvin as well, so there's a lot of different people in there."

And presumably the producers were ...

"Myself and John Jennings, as usual."

I moved on to ask Mary Chapin about the inspiration for some of the songs on *Stones In The Road*.

Is *House Of Cards* an attempt at subjective self catharsis?

"I think that most songs tend to fall into that category in some way, so that's somewhat accurate I suppose. It's a song about a relationship. Sort of dealing with problems that you feel like you've seen before. You've felt these problems before and you try not to repeat the same mistakes."

Was the opening track *Why Walk When You Can Fly* inspired by the charity work which you've become involved in, in the last couple of years?

"The album begins and ends with that song for

a reason. That's because I think that while the album addresses certain feelings and hardships and troubles - at the same time, I still believe in the point that you should not look at life as a burden. Rather it is something which you should celebrate."

Was the character Lewis in the song *John Doe No. 24* a creation of yours?

"No, I read his obituary. The story in the song, I created around the few facts which were contained in that obituary. He was a deaf and blind and mute person who was found as a young man in Jacksonville, Illinois in 1945. They had no idea where he came from. He spent the rest of his life known as John Doe No. 24, because he was the twenty fourth unidentified person in the State Mental Health System. The song is my imagination at work in some ways."

The song *Jubilee* has a Celtic feel to it ...

"Absolutely. There's those tin whistles. Oh, I forgot to mention Paul Brady plays on that track. I've always loved Celtic music and it was a thrill to have Paul be part of the record. I've been a fan of his for years."

You have a fairly extensive back catalogue of songs you've written, which you've never recorded. Do you ever intend recording *Girls With Guitars* for instance?

"I don't think so. I mean, who knows. At this point in time, Wynona (Judd) certainly did a beautiful, beautiful job on that song. That makes me happy. I don't feel a need to cut the song."

Considering the degree of commercial and critical success which you've enjoyed in the last three years, do you ever look back in awe at it all?

"Oh sure. Absolutely. It's not something that I ever really thought would take place. I feel very fortunate and very blessed. I think in all of our lives, whatever our profession, we just hope to be able to continue doing something that makes us happy and fulfils us. Beyond that we can't complain."

Are there any plans for another UK tour?

"I expect to come back in December. I don't know how many gigs that might entail, but there are also plans to return in May next year with the band."

Of any singer /songwriter, whatever the gender, who has scored major success in the last decade, Mary Chapin Carpenter is the artist who I believe thoroughly deserves every accolade which has come her way. She has never once strayed from her personally focused, musical path of pure magic and delight. May she forever remain the writer who, is a keeper of the flame. And, by the way, why the hell haven't you purchased a copy of the truly fine *Stones In The Road* yet?

haunted by the melody ghost of Trouble In The Fields.

There's also a growing confidence in broadening the sound palette and drafting in friends from U2, Peter Buck and Counting Crows' Adam Duritz to this end.

The rough edges that made Nanci Griffith so refreshing way back when, may have given way to a more refined FM friendly finish which may alienate early converts. It would, however, be folly to presume that her powers are in any way fading. Now if she'd only take a long look at her stage show ...

★★★ Steve Morris

ASHLEY HUTCHINGS

The Guv'nor / Big Beat Combo (both HTD)

Two new albums from the man regarded as the founding father of folk rock. The Guv'nor is, in essence, the first part of his diaries starting with The Ethnic Shuffle Orchestra from 1966 before offering a handful of songs from the hugely influential band they evolved into - Fairport Convention. From Fairport Hutchings moved on to found Steel-eye Span, represented here with a couple of tracks including an, unusual for them Dylan cover. The rest of the album collects work from The Albion Band, which in essence is the trading name for the fluid line ups that Hutchings has used over the years to express his muse.

It's often been broadcast that Ashley Hutchings left both Steeleye and Fairport in some sort of folk purist huff. That's somewhat belied by The Big Beat Combo on which he calls on the likes of John Kirkpatrick and Richard Thompson to add a certain rural burr to such traditional material as The Shadows' FBI and The Tornados' Telstar. It's all brilliant stuff that rather eloquently says what I suspect Hutchings has been saying all along - it's all music however you voice it.

★★★★ (each) Steve Morris

ROBERT EARL KEEN

Gringo Honeymoon (Special Delivery / Direct Distribution)

A deceptive album from Keen. The smooth surface hiding the barbs that make him folk / country's prime storyteller. Maybe it's just that the production is possibly the most assured yet on one of his albums, though once you listen beyond that you find tales populated by the 'interesting' folk that Keen peoples his songs with. They're the people of saloons in small dusty towns and the occupants of long stay motels. And Keen brings them to life with narrative lyrics that relish the storyteller's attention to the all important, illuminating detail. There's humour too, Barbeque and Merry Christmas From The Family containing some wonderful lines. It's the major pieces though, Lonely Feeling and The Raven And The Coyote where he excels, creating new works with the dust of classics already applied.

Good to see a new Steve Earle song included too.

★★★★ Steve Morris

CHRISTINE LAVIN / VARIOUS ARTISTS

Follow That Road (Rounder/Philo - Direct Distribution)

Follow That Road is a two CD set of acoustic recordings made at the second annual Martha's Vineyard Singer / Songwriter Retreat held at The Wintertide Coffeehouse (circa 9/93). Kind of like a September long Camp Granada for America's folk songwriters. The organiser, Christine Lavin. Last year, around this time, Philo issued the series debut, the Lavin collated Big Times In A Small Town - The Vineyard Tapes, it was probably the best songwriter compilation ever released!

This time around, Lavin has attempted to balance contributions from the new artists, with a selection of tunes from middle field and old timers. Sad to say, many of the latter fail to shine. A handful or so of the Vineyarders reappear among the three decades of cuts on this, set two. Pete Nelson's

Summer Of Love, from last year's release, set a standard of penmanship which has yet to be surpassed. Ellis Paul's Kind Of Seventh Avenue being the best contribution here, while Barbara Kessler's Deep Country has a commercial feel which Nashville would do well to exploit.

Finally. After a decade and then some, recording for the Philo imprint, Christine Lavin recently signed for the Shanachie stable. What price, the release of further, quirky song compilations from this gifted and amusing lady?

★★★ Arthur Wood

CHRIS LEDOUX

Haywire (Liberty)

After sixteen albums, the man mentioned by name in a Garth Brooks song gets a UK release. And guess what he proves to be everything Brooks would love to be if he didn't feel the need to be loved by every living thing.

Yup. Ledoux sounds like he's seen the worm in the mescal bottle. His band sounds a might rowdier (at times) and you get the impression that they'd be huge bar room fun. And yet the album has too many smooth bits that suggest that Ledoux would like a slice of mentor Brooks' market.

★★ Steve Morris

CHRISTY MOORE

Live At The Point (Newberry)

Christy Moore is simply one of the most charismatic performers you'll ever see. Witnessing him live for the first time is, even after loving the records, a revelation. It goes, then, without saying that any live album is going to be a pale, by comparison, affair.

It's good to report then that this fourteen track distillation captures a fair bit of what the man's about. And that's a vitality and humanity that can move from lifting ballad to twinkling humour. Listen to Ride On back to back with Delerium Tremens to get that measure.

★★★★ Steve Morris

WILLIE NELSON & WILLIE NELSON JR

Peace In The Valley (Promised Land)

Gospel and spiritual given the Nelson simple rootsy touch. With versions of Hank Williams I Saw The Light, his own Family Bible and the moving story song My Body's Just A Suitcase For My Soul (co-written by Heartbreak Hotel's Mae Axton), it's an affecting collection whether you're a believer or not, given an added poignancy by the fact Nelson's son committed suicide shortly after the project was completed.

★★★ Mike Davies

SHARON SHANNON

Out Of The Gap (Solid)

Live Sharon Shannon can, regardless of her and her band's unquestionable virtuosity, be a might one dimensional. The sound of accordion and fiddle alone becoming a little wearing. It's a problem avoided here by both fleshing out the band with extra instruments and the inspired employment of reggae veteran Dennis Bovell as producer on a clutch of cuts. Recommended.

★★★ Steve Morris

SMALLTALK

Smalltalk (Greentrax)

Iain MacInnes and Stuart Morison are former Tannahill Weavers, Billy Ross was a founder member of Ossian, so it's no surprise that this collection of Scots/Gaelic tunes and songs should bear an authentic stamp. Fiddles, cittern, bodhran, dulcimer, Scottish smallpipes, whistles and guitar provide the instrumentation on a selection of airs, jigs and ballads that range from the haunting salt mists of Over the Sea To Nova Scotia to the lovelorn 18th century Gaelic love song Fil O Ro to expectantly rousing The Bee In The Knickers.

★★★★ Mike Davies

MICHAEL SMITH

Time (Flying Fish - Import)

In a performing career spanning three decades, Smith has only released a handful of recordings. They're as rare and precious as do-do eggs. Indeed this is the first release since '91's CD coupling of his two mid-eighties albums; a promised '92 live set failed to appear.

Question is, was the wait worthwhile? Well, we're talking total bias here. After all, planet wide this guy is probably my favourite songwriter. Has been for nearly two decades.

Produced once more by fellow folk performer, Anne Hills, Time is set in a landscape of Michael's acoustic guitar and vocal. Stark as that may appear, his (eminently humble) melodies take flight, while his awesome skill as a guitar picker is allowed to shine with purity, shade and light. He has always had a penchant for including unusual female names in the titles of his compositions. Lady Susquehanna is no exception. In execution, it's an anthem. In the vein of epithet, elsewhere there's The Ballad Of Elizabeth Dark, Lily And The Blackwater, Gracie and Lee Remick. The mythical merges with real life. Then again, we mustn't forget Michael's paean to folk colleague Mr. Rogers, Gamble's Guitar. Track thirteen, the spiritually founded We Become Birds brings the set to a fitting climax and finale. A recording which deserves to be heard.....time after time; time and time again; all of the daytime, all through the night time, in fact - all of the time. In execution, Time is a timeless triumph.

★★★★★ Arthur Wood

VARIOUS

Tulare Dust - A Songwriters Tribute To Merle Haggard (Hightone)

It's a fair bet that the mass knows little of Haggard's legend and that that modicum is Okie From Muskogee. It's tempting to see this Tom Russell / Dave Alvin produced set as being a deliberate response to that, though Haggard is probably better understood in their native USA.

Certainly the collected cast:- Iris DeMent, Peter Case, Dwight Yoakam, Joe Ely, Robert Earl Keen, Marshall Crenshaw and other respected notables know the score.

But what is fascinating is just how much of the tradition that Haggard has been guardian of, they have absorbed into their own work. It's no imaginative stretch to see their individual takes on Hag's catalogue as parts of their own. For example Robert Earl Keen's cover of Daddy Frank reveals it to be exactly the kind of narrative song you associate him with, whilst Joe Ely's take on White Line Fever could be a classic Ely written song.

The well known Haggard has shied away, there's no Okie, no Lonesome Fugitive but the material illustrates well both the justification of his legend and just what a strong claim he has to be revered as a writer rather than a C&W cipher.

★★★★ Steve Morris

VARIOUS

A Woman's Heart 2 (Dara)

The original A Woman's Heart remains the biggest selling album ever in Ireland which is I guess a measure of how much the Irish value good songs and good voices over transient fashion fads. Good on 'em for that. It's also a fine reason for compiling more of the same for a second shot. So we find Frances Black, Mary Black, Maura O'Connell, Dolores Keane and Mary Coughlan offering consummate interpretations of fine songs. Sharon Shannon offering the instrumental shades and Sinead O'Connor adding the maverick cry, albeit with the traditional sounding Three Babies.

Worth noting that the bulk of material is penned by men, which negates any simpleton interpretation of the collection and that Nanci Griffith has two songs included, which demonstrates how revered she is in Ireland. If you love fine songs sung with heart by fine voices, this is for you.

★★★★ Steve Morris