

## Carrie Newcomer – The “Regulars And Refugees” Interview

### Part 1 – The Evolution Of Betty’s Diner

*The interview with Carrie Newcomer took place on the afternoon of 9<sup>th</sup> July 2005. Carrie was at home in Bloomington, Indiana, and I was at home in Birmingham, England. Many thanks to Windchime Promotions for the disc and setting up the interview. We began by talking about the song “Betty’s Diner” which first appeared on the eighteen song, retrospective collection “**Betty’s Diner : The Best Of Carrie Newcomer [1991 – 2004]**” .....*

**Folk Wax :** Obviously “Betty’s Diner” is the inspiration that led to the “**Regulars And Refugees**” suite of songs. Can you tell us how that song came about.

**Carrie Newcomer :** I was writing a short story while I was touring “**The Gathering Of Spirits**” album. I’m always writing, even on the road, and I began writing this short story about Betty’s Diner. The song came out of that short story and featured some of the characters I developed in the story.

**FW :** Was there much of a gap between writing the story and writing the song.

**CN :** It took a little while to finish the story, so there was a period of time writing it - maybe a month. The song came pretty quickly after the story was written. I have always written stories and poetry and different kinds of prose. A lot of my songs have come from different kinds of writing, so it’s not unusual that I wrote a story about Betty’s Diner and it became a song. I don’t often write songs on the road, because the timing is so intense I usually don’t have the time to sit down and do that, but you can sit with a notebook anywhere and write.

**FW :** How long did it take to write “Betty’s Diner.”

**CN :** A couple of weeks. It was actually a pretty organic sort of thing. I don’t know if the short story got to a place where I could call it a finished product. I never took it that far into that form. All the material from it - a lot of the characters and situations from it, proved to be great material to work into the song. Once it was finished, I took the song to my songwriters group here in Bloomington. The people in my group enjoyed the song, but basically said “*You’ve got to cut this thing by half*” [Laughs]. It was a really long song, which is an interesting challenge because I needed to make each character come alive in half of the lines that I’d already used. Instead of creating an entire character, or a character that felt real, and have something very poignant happen in eight lines, I had to do it four lines. That’s a great challenge for a songwriter. Do I want to cut characters? Are all these characters important to get across this idea of the community of a diner? I think a lot of what “Betty’s Diner” is about, in terms of creating the story and the characters, is that for years now I’ve been travelling on the road as a songwriter. I see the world pretty close up, and I meet people very close up. I carry around stories and places – people have always been so generous with me, in terms of telling me their stories. People are amazing. They’re noble. They’re bewildering. They’re funny. They’re tragic. I think what happened is, I had years and years of stories about people and places that were so laden with hope and despair and happiness and all the things that you encounter out there on the road if you are willing to see it. I really needed to do something with that experience. Creating the diner was a way of talking about the idea of, what is community?

**FW :** Were you conscious of all those facets that you’ve just mentioned when you were writing the short story.

**CN :** It surprised me what the story became. The short story was something I needed to write. The fact is after the “Betty’s Diner” song was written, the diner characters weren’t done with me and they still had something to say, so I kept writing. That was a surprise to me. I wasn’t expecting that, but every time I tried to write something else, one of these characters would start talking again.

**FW :** Were you concurrently writing material for another record.

**CN :** I never set out to write an album of character songs – this was never a concept album, in terms of “*OK, now I’m going to do an album of diner characters.*” It was never like that. What happened is, about a year and a half ago after the song was written, like I said, these characters had more to say. I found them to be an incredible vehicle for approaching and exploring issues as well as the experiences we have in

life. What happened is that, before I knew it, I had written nearly twenty-five character songs and then I had to decide what to do with that.

**FW** : Subjectively “Betty’s Diner” tells a story about a very specific place.

**CN** : One thing about the character songs that was very deliberate is, once “Betty’s Diner” was written and I had all these characters and was actually developing more characters, they were all written to stand up on their own. I felt like each song, was a song in and of itself. It shouldn’t be reliant upon anyone ever knowing about “Betty’s Diner.” They were all written very deliberately with that in mind.

**FW** : I picked up the fact that each song possessed a theme concerning the human experience, be it loneliness, or faith or whatever. There was a backbone to each song.

**CN** : Yeah, there are threads that go through the songs, that come from the idea of the human experience.

**FW** : Once you had written “Betty’s Diner” when the did the floodgates open as far as the character songs were concerned. Was there a period where there was a lull.

**CN** : No, they came almost kind of immediately. I was also writing things that had nothing to do with these diner characters. It was all really very organic.

**FW** : The “**Regulars And Refugees**” album features thirteen new songs, plus a remix of “Betty’s Diner.”

**CN** : Most of them were written over the course of a year and a half, at the most. You know the characters have been interesting to live with. I feel a little bit like a novelist in that I’ve been living with these characters for so long. You get to know them very well. There’s something pretty wonderful about that, but at a certain point it’s time to move on.

**FW** : How did you get from twenty-five songs to thirteen.

**CN** : It was a case of deciding which songs worked together as a group. That was a very difficult process in that these characters speak in different ways, because they are different people. The music also goes along with that. A certain kind of character will have music that makes sense for how they speak. Trying to come up with a collection that still held together artistically and musically, when you have these very different voices speaking, was a challenge. Also it was lots of fun to do that. Some songs didn’t make it on to the album, not so much because I didn’t like the song or didn’t think it was a strong song, but because this is the grouping that seemed to work the best as a whole.

**FW** : Did you have any concerns about the public misinterpreting this song collection as a concept.

**CN** : I didn’t really worry about it, because I figured people would. Some would think of it as a concept album in some ways, because I’m up front about it starting with a song called “Betty’s Diner” and also including that song on the disc, plus all the songs feature diner characters. The booklet is a very large booklet. I’ve included character studies and poems and things that have to do with the characters. I think if you read what I’ve written in the liner notes, and within the different pieces of prose in the package, that I’ve let people know how it happened, and what it is about. If folks would like to think of it as a concept album, it doesn’t really change it at all. It is what it is. What’s more important is, do the songs work? Do they work together as a collection? That’s really what’s most important to me now.

**FW** : You also explain very well in the liner booklet where the non-diner song comes from, in terms of who Carrie Newcomer the songwriter is.

**CN** : Because it wasn’t a concept album for me, it was fine to put a song on there that wasn’t a diner character song. I think it held together with the rest of the album. If I’d felt that it was a sore thumb, I wouldn’t have put it on there.

**FW** : The original “Betty’s Diner” appeared on “**The Best Of Carrie Newcomer**” which Philo released in early 2004. I guess in terms of timescale, having said that the other songs began appearing soon

afterwards, you must have written a number of the diner character songs by the time the retrospective recording was released.

**CN** : Absolutely, yeah.

**FW** : That being the case, did you approach Rounder at an early stage in terms of where you were going to take the songs.

**CN** : Well, it seems to me that I've put out releases featuring all new material every couple of years. Often I'll do some special project on the *off year*, like the "**Betty's Diner**" compilation. That was kind of nice to put something different out like that. I've also done benefit albums and things like that. Some of the character songs were written by the time "**Betty's Diner**" compilation came out. I was still writing at that point, and during the period I was touring "**Betty's Diner**" I wrote more character songs. Something that I think was important is that, by coincidence, in the Fall before "**Betty's Diner**" was released I took ten weeks off the road, which is the longest I've been off the road in a block since 1990. I actually had an enormous amount of time at home and developed the songs and characters. I spent a lot of time working on it in a very focused kind of way. That was fun and different for me.

**FW** : What was Rounder's reaction when you handed them the outline for "**Regulars And Refugees**."

**CN** : I sent them a demo of a bunch of the characters that I thought would make a good album. They really liked it. They were very supportive. I have to say that about Rounder, they have been incredibly supportive of me as an artist. As an artist if you're not growing you're dying. Every album is different for me, and I push myself in certain kinds of ways. I like to feel every time I make an album "*This is the best work I've ever done*," because, why put it out if it isn't. They've always been very supportive of me stretching and pushing my edges and doing different things. That is unusual in the music business, and I don't take that for granted for one second. In fact when it came down to the artwork for this collection - I mean, a twenty-eight page liner booklet is pretty excessive. It's a huge booklet, and it's a lot for a record company to do. Originally the idea was to include stories, poems and character studies as a PDF file on the album that people could download if they wanted to know more about the diner and the characters, then Rounder said "*No, let's not put this on a PDF, let's do a really nice booklet instead*." That is so unusual, and I'm very appreciative of it because I think it does make for a more interesting package. It's interesting for people to read a little more about the characters, but I don't think a person has to read the whole booklet to understand the songs.

**FW** : Having said that a number of character songs were written by the time you toured the "**Betty's Diner**" compilation album, did you play some of those songs on that tour.

**CN** : Yes, I did. I always play new songs in concert, since some of them make it to albums, and some of them don't. One of the things I found with these diner songs is, people were fascinated with the characters. They liked when I gave a little information when introducing the song. I got a strong reaction to them. You know when songs are connecting, and you know when they are not. You can't fudge that in a live performance. What I found with this collection of songs is that they really were connecting, and people were giving me wonderful feedback on them. I was usually putting in a small handful of these diner character songs, but they wouldn't be the same ones every show.

**FW** : Just to close off this segment of the interview regarding this suite of diner songs, if I said the name Edgar Lee Masters and "**Spoon River**" would you know what I was talking about.

**CN** : Oh I love that. "**Spoon River**" is an amazing collection. There was this interesting thing with the "**Spoon River Anthology**" that each poem really did stand up by itself, but they also interconnected in a way. It's amazing stuff. I've had people who have heard this new album, ask me about that. Spoon River is a Midwestern town, and this idea of a community of people and these different kinds of voices - again presenting something funny, and lovely, and tragic, and confusing, and bewildering.

**FW** : Historically speaking though, it depicts an entirely different era, since it was over eighty years ago that Masters wrote those poems.

**CN** : Yes, they are very much from an era.

*to be continued*

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## **Carrie Newcomer – The “Regulars And Refugees” Interview**

### **Part 2 – Capturing The Sounds Of Betty’s Diner...And More**

*In last week’s episode, Carrie talked about writing “Betty’s Diner” and the suite of songs that arrived in its wake. Many thanks to Windchime Promotions for the disc and setting up the interview. This week Carrie talks about recording the album.....*

**Folk Wax** : These days, in terms of recording sessions, Airtime Studio seems to be your home from home.

**Carrie Newcomer** : It is. It’s literally ten miles away for me. I’ve worked with David [Weber] for years. I’ve worked in a lot of different studios in different places, but with this album I really wanted to keep close to home. It’s a very small studio way out in the woods, but it’s got wonderful equipment and David has fabulous ears. I liked working with him in other contexts, so I just did it all here this time at one studio. I can’t remember the last album where I did that.

**FW** : David has worked on your albums before as a sound engineer.

**CN** : The three new songs on “**Betty’s Diner**,” he was the lead engineer for that.

**FW** : Has Airtime, as a facility, grown in size over the years.

**CN** : It’s pretty much the same size. He has grown in that the technology of recording is changing so quickly, and he’s very knowledgeable about such things and keeps up, so he changes in that sense. The feel of the studio actually is very similar to what it’s always been. As you sing, you can look out into the woods through a great big window. The feel of the place is very rural, very rustic and very relaxed. Excellent equipment. I think some of the best vocals I’ve ever recorded have been at David’s studio. I feel very comfortable there. If you find a place you’re comfortable in, and good stuff happens, don’t throw it away.

**FW** : Does he record analog, or does he use Pro Tools.

**CN** : He does the Pro Tool thing now.

**FW** : At what stage did you decide that the album was going to be a co-production with David.

**CN** : It kind of evolved. I knew he was going to engineer it. David is a wonderful creative force. He has wonderful ideas and I feel very comfortable with that. Going in I knew we would most likely co-produce it, because I had such a great time working with him on the three new songs on “**Betty’s Diner**.” I loved what happened with them. I loved the sound of what we had happen. For songs on “**Regulars And Refugees**” that required rhythm tracks, we brought in a very similar band – a lot of the same people. Dane Clark from the [John Cougar] Mellencamp band, Gary Walters who I’ve been touring with a lot in the last two years. Keith Skoogland my favourite guitar player on the planet - we’ve worked together for years and years. He did fabulous work on this album. A bass player named Jeff Hedback – he’s been on my last four albums. We’ve all worked together now in different kinds of contexts and configurations, so it was really nice to go into the studio with this group of people. We also brought in Chris Wagoner and Mary Gaines who are actually from Wisconsin. I like to call them the Swiss Army Knife of string players [Laughs] -

**FW** : You used them before on “**The Gathering Of Spirits**.” I recall talking about them before.

**CN** : They are just amazing players and bring such as wealth of experience and are able to play in different styles, and combine styles into something really creative and very unique to them. The people

who worked on this album were just, hands down, stunning musicians. When you are producing an album you try to set up a situation to hopefully get the best you can – you try to put the right people together in the right space, with hopefully the right songs. You set up things but you never really know what's going to happen until you all get together and start to play. You rehearse things and you do pre-production, but until you get in there and it happens, that's when you really find out where songs go. There was something about this particular project, I mean every musician I talked to who worked on it, everybody gave their best and then some. We'd walk out of the booth and listen to the take and everybody would look at one another and say, *"Did we do that?"* There was a certain amount of just that incredible magic that can sometimes happen in music, that you can't plan and you can't make happen. That happened on this particular project, so it was very exciting and so fulfilling, I think for all of us.

**FW** : It seems to me that in terms of production and mixing, this is the album where you have been the most hands on.

**CN** : Yes. It is.

**FW** : Was that a personal decision.

**CN** : I think I was just ready. I mean, I've always co-produced my albums and this was the one where I just stepped forward. Of course the three new songs on **"Betty's Diner"** was the beginning of that, and it has always been a vision of mine to really step forward and realise the vision that I was aiming for. It was very much a case of this is the album I feel I need to do this with. And it worked. The last four albums before that, I worked with Mark Williams who is a wonderful engineer and producer. What we did with **"The Gathering Of Spirits"** - I loved working with him on all the projects, but particularly on that one.

**FW** : I mentioned earlier that you had recorded with David at Airtime before. I was thinking of the **"Bare To The Bone"** acoustic project. That was six years ago. Was it always in your mind to do something on the production side with David Weber.

**CN** : I don't think there was any long term plan of action. He has recorded my demos for years. It seemed like the right thing to do, and the right person to do it with at this time. I loved doing the live recording with him several years ago, and I loved working with him and Mark, the three of us. I loved working with him this time. He has really been very present in my music and in the recording of my music for years now. He's also an excellent musician.

**FW** : Would I be assuming correctly that David Weber is a younger guy.

**CN** : Yes he is. He just turned forty.

**FW** : Was he raised in Bloomington.

**CN** : He has lived different places, but he grew up in the mid-west. Indianapolis, Cincinnati, then he lived in Mexico and he was out in Boston for a while, but he ended up back here in Bloomington and went to school here. He started the studio project, gosh, about six or seven years ago. Before he started his studio, he was on the road with circuses as a trapeze flyer.

**FW** : We've spoken in passing about the session musicians, and like you say most of them have featured on your earlier recordings. One person that I thought was new was the drummer Dane Clark.

**CN** : Actually on my first album for Rounder – well, my second solo album **"An Angel At My Shoulder,"** back in 1994, he played on four or five songs. He also played on the three new songs on **"Betty's Diner."** I loved the combination that happened with those new songs and brought him in to play on this album. He has been playing with Mellencamp, as his drummer, for, gosh, maybe the last six or seven years, after Kenny Aronoff left.

**FW** : The one player that surprised me was the piano/organ player Gary Walters, because the last time I saw you play – at Kerrville last summer – Winton Reynolds was still playing piano for you.

**CN** : When I play in Texas, I still play with Winton.

**FW** : I know that Winton now works at the University in Austin.

**CN** : Plus, he can't tour quite as much because he's got a couple of little ones now.

**FW** : So how did you find Mr. Walters.

**CN** : Through David Weber. He had played on some sessions with another performer at David's studio. It was getting harder for Winton to tour, and I was looking for a pianist, and David said *"There's a guy that came into record on this session who was fabulous, and I think stylistically would be really wonderful for you to work with."* I called him up, but it was actually a suggestion from David.

**FW** : I know that Winton's background was in jazz, is Gary Walters' background in rock 'n' roll.

**CN** : No. Actually he has a jazz and classical music background, and plays with the symphony in Indianapolis. He's a hard working, gigging musician, and has played with jazz combos forever. He's also worked with different kinds of bands, doing pop or rock type oriented things. I'm really the first acoustic singer/songwriter that he has worked with this closely. It's been kinda fun for him, because it's stretched him. He was up for the challenge and it's very nice, because it's hard to find a good pianist – especially when there's just the two of us out there, it's a very delicate kind of music, and so it's very easy to overpower. It's very easy to overpower. It's wonderful when you find someone who understands a really beautiful melodic line, and knows when to step forward, and when a lot of notes are needed, and then knows, very much, when it's time to fade into the background. Or even to say something very simply on the piano. I think my attitudes about production changed a lot after I did a tour with Alison Krauss and Union Station in Europe and then a bunch of shows in the States, gosh, that was many years ago.

**FW** : My recall would be that it was 1997.

**CN** : Yeah. Watching them every night – for show after show – the attitude they brought to their music as a group they're all fabulous players and if you need a lot of notes, they're more than willing to step forward and play a lot of notes. And play them really well. If all the song needed to be its most powerful would be an arpeggio and a pause, that's all they would do. What I began to see and feel was this incredibly elegant way of playing. I mean, pure elegance. Sometimes what you need is something very simple. Simple is not easy, simple is elegant. My attitudes about arranging and about recording and working in a band really did change at that point. I like to play with people who get that. Everyone on this project really got that idea of elegance.

**FW** : The other newcomer I spotted among the session players was Krista Detor. It looks as if she also contributed a little piano to the album.

**CN** : She is a wonderful pianist, and that's what she primarily writes on. Krista is in one of the writing groups that I'm in. It's not a songwriter's group, it's a writer's group for prose. She sometimes works with David Weber as a duo. On this new album, she's the voice and the piano on "Alice And Roy." She has a new CD coming out soon, and will be doing a lot of openers for me on this tour.

**FW** : We touched on the liner booklet earlier, but I'd like to look at the photography in particular. Near the rear of the booklet there's a double page picture of the diner frontage, with a truck parked out front. The truck has a very subtle Indiana licence plate.

**CN** : Yes [Laughs]. Hugh Syme was the designer for this. He has designed my last three album booklets. He is such an amazing designer, I love working with Hugh. It's so funny, because I think what he is known for is the early Rush albums. He's got this wonderful, whimsical sense, and is a fabulous designer. I love what he did with that International truck and what he did with the licence plate.

**FW** : It's obvious what the RAR on the plate stands for, but how about the 6 and the 23. As best I can recall you were born on 25<sup>th</sup> May, and that doesn't equate to 6 and 23.

**CN** : The 6 and 23 don't mean anything. We can make something up if we want to.

**FW** : My thoughts ran to that [\*].

**CN** : At the time, if I had thought about it, I probably would have given him specific numbers. At the time when he showed it to me, I loved the R - A - R, and the 6 and 23 just looked nice. Mind you if you multiply the 2 by the 3 you get 6, so it's all in balance.

**FW** : That works. [%]

*to be continued*

**Note.**

[\*] – The conversation ran on for a few minutes where I described to Carrie, Pete Frame's famous musical family trees. Many years ago, when The Sunday Times Magazine ran a feature on Frame's work, he supplied then with a family tree that contained mistakes. Deliberate mistakes. Hence, fiction became fact. Similarly I talked about sixties poster artist Mouse whose trademark was to leave a small mouse hidden – his trademark - somewhere on each poster. Therefore, my figuring was that there had to be some significance about the 6 and 23.

[%] – Further conversation ensued where I explained that the first Signature Sounds release had the index number 1225. This had fascinated me for years, until label co-owner Jim Olsen explained that the CD had been a Christmas compilation. That insight explained everything.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 07/05

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**Carrie Newcomer – The “Regulars And Refugees” Interview**

**Part 3 - Voices Heard In Betty's Diner**

*In last week's episode, Carrie talked about recording the “Regulars And Refugees” album. Many thanks to Windchime Promotions for the disc and setting up the interview. This week Carrie begins talking about the songs on the album.....*

**Folk Wax** : I took the opening track “Angels Unaware” to be a song about loneliness.

**Carrie Newcomer** : Well it's a song about loneliness in a way. The character Gabriel – my idea of this guy is that he looks a little like Harry Dean Stanton, kind of tall and lanky, and a little craggy around the edges.

**FW** : Considering the song title, was the name Gabriel deliberate.

**CN** : Yeah, all the names are very deliberate. I like this idea of a character that has observed the human condition from the viewpoint of a traveller.

**FW** : Is he widely travelled.

**CN** : He has seen the world. You know he talks about “*I don't mind the silence or the Super 8 Motel.*” In terms of my life as a travelling songwriter, that's something I could bring to the character. I like this idea of someone who has seen the human condition in places, very close up as a traveller, some of it pretty gritty. I have a certain affinity with this character. I like also this idea of a character who believes very deeply in something noble about a life well lived. He sees how people struggle, sees what people are able to bear, and what people give to one another, and there's a certain kind of decency that he sees everywhere. The line “*I don't believe that blood alone is the only tie that binds*” is a key phrase for him. He has seen it, and he has experienced it. Family is one of the connections that goes deep, but there are other very powerful communities that we create and maintain. The diner is a community of regulars and strangers. What is that about ?

**FW** : So you are talking about strangers offering someone a helping hand.

**CN** : Something that I have always been very grateful for, is the kindness of strangers. People have been incredibly kind to me everywhere I go and they didn't have to be. It makes you believe. In times like these it's easy to be discouraged or cynical. Gabriel has experienced that, and the song is a conversation between him and Miranda. She lives in the community, and bears witness to it all and she sees it all. In the conversation he offers a little insight into her - “*I know you, I've seen the goodness you do just by*

*being here.*” That’s what the song is about. It’s about loneliness, but it’s actually more about the connections we make as people and bearing witness to the people we encounter.

**FW :** Because Gabriel is so well travelled, is he bearing witness on a grander scale. Is it a bigger picture.

**CN :** It’s a bigger picture, but as a character he’s a little reticent. He doesn’t say a whole lot, but when he does, you need to stop and listen because it’s usually pretty astute.

**FW :** You’ve already said that choosing the names of the characters was deliberate. Olivia, the main character in “Be True,” is a lesbian chaplain. Out in California there’s a women’s record label that has that name.

**CN :** I actually hadn’t thought about Olivia the record label at all. The word Olivia is related to the olive branch. I wanted to connect her with something very active in terms of peacemaking and bonding, particularly radical peacemakers like Martin Luther King and Ghandi. That’s a huge stretch, but Olivia is a gay minister who courageously takes on two thousand years of Biblical misinterpretation. She’s a very potent voice for a more just world. The name Olivia came from that idea of justice.

**FW :** From one viewpoint the lyric addresses an issue that’s currently being debated in the church.

**CN :** It will be interesting to see how this song in particular is responded to.

**FW :** In the next track Miranda counsels Joan that even though her marriage isn’t a happy one “Nothing’s Ever Wasted.” The lyric portrays life as a never-ending learning experience. That also appears to be the case for you, based on what you’ve said about your writing groups. You’re still at school.

**CN :** I’m definitely still at school. In some ways “Nothing’s Ever Wasted” also sums up a lot of this album. It sums up one of the main themes of this album in that, in life, a lot of things happen to us – good things, difficult things - as long as we learn something from it, it’s never a wasted experience. It allows us a chance to be more humble, wiser people, to be more compassionate – it allows us to do that if we learn from it. The idea of “Nothing’s Ever Wasted” is that all these characters are in the midst of their lives learning something. This is the only song on the album that hasn’t been played in a show. It was literally written the day I went in the studio to start working on the album. Everything else, at one point or another, I have played in concert.

**FW :** Have you ever known a Joan, and for that matter Joan’s situation of being a battered housewife.

**CN :** Yeah. The fact is Joan is in a situation where she is doing something incredibly difficult on all kinds of levels, but has reached the conclusion that the best and healthiest thing for everybody is to take this particular course of action. That’s tough. And deal with all the consequences that come with that. I was a single mom for a while. I know about that process. Her situation is different, because she is dealing with an abuse situation, and what is that about? There’s a tendency in a situation like that to stereotype, but she’s a very bright and intelligent woman. She loves her children deeply and dearly. She’s a complex character, and she’s right in the midst of a tough situation.

**FW :** I guess the closing lines “*And I’m well aware what people can bear, When there is a reason for them to face it*” kind of sums up the whole song.

**CN :** People will do amazing things for love. People will do things of incredible strength and courage, because of love. She loves her kids enough to say “*The consequences of this are going to be incredibly tough and difficult, but I love my kids this much that I want a better life, for myself and for them.*” People will brave enormous obstacles when there is a reason to do it.

**FW :** In “I Fly” did you deliberately weave into the lyric the issue of having to survive on minimum wage. It’s not that your lyrics regularly indulge in social commentary, but “I Fly” seems to be particularly aimed in that direction.

**CN :** The song was written right after I read “**Nickel And Dimed : On (Not) Getting By In America**” [£] by Barbara Ehrenreich. It’s a fabulous book, and she really does explore this idea of minimum wage in the United States. You can’t make it on minimum wage in this country. I mean you can work two jobs – in the



book she went to three different areas of the country, worked different kinds of minimum wage jobs and tried to survive, and couldn't do it. It was a really powerful book and opened a lot of people's eyes to what was a real struggle for folks. That was definitely in the back of my head when I wrote this song. Some of it is about a minimum wage, or a living wage, but I think the story is also about being misjudged when you are doing just about the best you can.

**FW :** The main character, Jennifer, is currently an exotic dancer who is trying to raise two kids, and that's where the issue of prejudice comes into play.

**CN :** She has two little boys, and, again, you'll do anything for love. She loves these two kids fiercely and she's going to provide for them in ways that aren't considered respectable in her community. She has made the choice to do that, but also knows that it's a limited one, and there's a line in the song *"Til no one wants to look at me"* – which is a poignant phrase. Jennifer likes to go to the diner because the waitress is nice to her. Miranda asks her about her kids and treats her like a real person. At one point Miranda says, *"Honey, you just do what cha gotta do"* – she's not going to judge her for doing what she feels she has to do to take care of her kids. One of my favourite moments in this entire album, is when the waitress puts her hand on the other woman's hand and in doing so is literally saying, *"You're OK with me."* It's one of the key lines in this entire project. *"You're OK with me, I'm not going to judge you, I see something worthy about you."* I get an interesting response to the song when I play it live. I'll introduce it and there's a little bit of a chuckle when I say she's an exotic dancer, but as the song goes on the audience reaction is *"Oh my gosh, she's a human being."*

**FW :** One thing I mortally hate is to review albums that are carpeted wall-to-wall with love songs, that are full of *"the moon in June"* type lyrics, but in terms of the genre "Alice And Roy" is a whole other vehicle.

**CN :** I love the characters Alice And Roy. None of the characters in **"Regulars And Refugees"** are real people I mean some of them have bits and pieces from real life. The names Alice and Roy, there's an older couple in my Quaker meeting – Roy is gone now - but in terms of seeing an elderly couple who after all these years were still so in love, there was such a joy in that, and yet there's that sense of them knowing that time is short. They'd sit in the Quaker meeting and hold hands. I loved being around them as a couple. The characters aren't their characters, but they are loosely based on seeing a love affair that was beautiful and long term.

**FW :** You put a neat twist in "Arthur B And Bob" because you made Bob the narrator, and he's a dog.

**CN :** Well, you know, the song kind of evolved. Writing the song, I was driving from Indiana to St. Louis for a show and Bob started talking, so I just started sort of singing for Bob. One of the longer prose pieces in the liner booklet is Arthur B and Bob, the good and grateful dog. He talks like a very excited five year old, and everything kind of runs in together and is truly breathless.

**FW :** The song came across as being about companionship, as Arthur B lost his wife, *Libby-dearest*, a while back.

**CN :** It is. He's a widower. In terms of being inspired by a book, I'd read **"The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time"** [~]. The story is told from the viewpoint of a young man with autism who is describing a very, emotional intense situation, from the viewpoint of a person who does not understand emotion very well. It's difficult for him. I loved the idea of telling the story of this widower – his wife died six months ago and they were inseparable. He's got this mutt-dog named Bob who absolutely adores him as dogs do. You adore me, I adore you – it's a very simple relationship. How would a dog, from a dog's viewpoint – someone who sees the world in very simple terms, talk about this situation, and talk unconditionally about his love for this fellow Arthur. What does sorrow look like to a dog, what does grief and grieving look like to a dog, and what do you do with that? How do you help when you are a dog? There was something very nice about being able to tell Arthur's story through the eyes of Bob, I thought it was a different and poignant way of looking at a relationship.

**FW :** "Five Years On," Kevin's song, mentions the Selmer instrument factory, and therefore points to the town of Elkhart, Indiana where you were raised. It very much lifts the piece from a work of fiction into the real world.

**CN** : [Laughs]. Oh yeah. Kevin is the quality control guy in a saxophone factory. The guys at the end of the line who tested these things had to be good players. You had to be able to play well, to be able to find out if it was playing well.

**FW** : But he has a dream.

**CN** : He does and he's a good player, who has got a well paying factory job with health insurance, which is nothing to sneeze at. But he needs to play, he wants to play professionally, and so -

**FW** : He wants to jump off the trapeze, into a place that might not be so safe.

**CN** : He wants to jump off the trapeze and he's struggling with it. You know *"How do I make sure that I'm paying attention to the thing in my life that I love and am passionate about"* - especially in the area of the arts where it's not a secure profession.

*to be continued*

#### **Note.**

[£] – Published by Owl Books (May 1, 2002) it bears the ISBN 0805063897

[~] – This book, written by Mark Haddon, was published by Vintage (May 18, 2004), and bears the ISBN: 1400032717

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 07/05

[2350 words]

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### **Carrie Newcomer – The “Regulars And Refugees” Interview**

#### **Part 4 – More Voices Heard In Betty's Diner**

*In last week's episode, Carrie began talking about the songs on “Regulars And Refugees” album. Many thanks to Windchime Promotions for the disc and setting up the interview. This week Carrie continues to talk about the songs on the album.....*

**FW** : “La Paloma” is basically a conversation between Carlos, the bus boy/illegal immigrant, and Ruthie, the diner cook. The song touches on the subject of illegal labour in your country. Was that intentional.

**CN** : A little bit. Some of it's about that. Again it gets down to a relationship. Carlos and Ruthie. This idea of Ruthie not knowing how she really felt about Carlos at the outset. There's a certain amount of prejudice against people who are working under the radar. Illegal immigrants. Ruthie starts to know him as a person, and that he's got kids at home and a wife. There are a lot of places in Mexico you can't buy yourself a job. What he is doing by coming here and sending his money home is a pretty noble thing, because he really longs for home. The line *“No matter where we go, we still take our own landscapes”* confirms that there's something about Mexico that his soul hungers for. He couldn't provide very well for his family in Mexico, so he's doing this thing. When Ruthie really gets to know him as a person, something changes. The song takes place at a moment where Carlos gets hard news from home. It's a situation where things are all right but he felt he should have been there. Ruthie sits with him, and they don't necessarily say much, but she sits with him. The song was really written with a lot of longing in it. It's about obstacles, it's about opportunities, in some ways, but really more than anything else it's about longing.

**FW** : The song that immediately follows “La Paloma” is “All Saints' Day.” In the former song there's a line *“A whippoorwill is calling and the mourning dove exhale,”* while in “All Saints' Day” there's the similar line *“We breathe it in and then we exhale.”* Was it accidental or deliberate that consecutive song lyrics contained much the same line.

**CN** : It was accidental that they ended up being in juxtaposition like that – the breathing in and the exhale. Those lines weren't written specifically to connect with each other. It was nice that they did. The idea of “All Saints' Day” was a nice one to play around with, and I liked the character of Henry -

**FW** : He's quite relaxed about the fact that his time on Earth is drawing to a close.

**CN :** You know he loves this world, and he's going to miss things about this world, but he also has this real sense of it – leaves bud and then leaves fall. We go from one mystery to the next, and he's come to a place where he's all right with that.

**FW :** “Below The Waves” is the first *dark* song in the pack.

**CN :** It is, yeah – it was a hard song to write. Elaine is a challenging character because one of the things that happened with these characters is, if they are to be real characters and have real substance, they can't have Walt Disney lives. Sometimes you have to take a character to a dark place, and leave them there. You can't make it OK, or else what they have to say isn't as powerful. Elaine struggles with chronic depression. Mental illness is still shrouded in such shame for a lot of people. That situation is better than it was twenty to thirty years ago, but it's still hard for people to acknowledge and talk about it. There are still a lot of misconceptions about it, but for people who live with chronic depression, it's as real as a wall. Someone told me recently that this song was being used at a pastoral counselling class at Princeton, where the professor has been using it to say, *“OK, if you have never experienced depression, and you're going to be working with people who have depression, listen to this song. I want to give you a clue about what you're going to be working with.”* It was like, “Wow,” this is such a really amazing thing to hear. Songs have lives of their own, and they go where they will. To find that out, it's exactly what Elaine would have wanted. Elaine wanted someone to hear, this is what it's like, this is what we are talking about. It's real when you give words to something that there are no words for. It's a short song, but it is a very intense song.

**FW :** I presume that setting the song in and below water, was deliberate. Not that you are using the connection of drowning and water – what you are highlighting is not being able to breathe in certain circumstances in water, and using that situation to highlight how a depressed person can feel. You can't get across the message *“I can't breathe”* by setting the lyric in a room full of air.

**CN :** Yeah. It's the idea of how things sound underneath the water. If you've ever swum at all and gone under the water things are a little muffled. How do you describe something like this? You know, again, in the English language the word depression – there's only one word for two very different things. There's the depression that we talk about like, the blues - *“I've got the blues,”* and then there's depression that's a clinical condition. They are very, very different, so how do you talk about something that there isn't even a good word for - we don't have a good term for it. You have to go to the realm of poetry and metaphor as a way of creating a feeling, and a sense of what it might be like. Elaine says *“The world swims on top of the water, occasionally dipping under. I always swim below the waves, occasionally coming up for air.”*

**FW :** Was water your chosen poetic medium from the get go, or did you have to think long and hard about the setting for the lyric.

**CN :** No, it was very much there from the outset. It's an intense song to put on an album, it's not a happy song but there is hope and understanding in it. What I have found having played the song in concert, is that people have been very generous and talked to me after shows, or e-mailed me, or written me and said *“You know I never had words for this”* or *“My partner has this, and she couldn't explain it to me in a way that I could really grasp, and this song helps me.”* Or *“I experienced this myself, and it was so nice to have someone put it into words for me.”* I've gotten enormous response to it, which makes me feel *“Yes, it was a good idea to include this song on the album,”* even though it's not a happy puppy tune.

**FW :** Can you tell us about the Let Justice Roll campaign during last year's Presidential Election, and about the song you wrote for that campaign.

**CN :** This happened last fall in a number of swing states. Jim Wallis and Call To Renewal got together with locals organisations and had rallies to call attention to the idea of poverty and social justice as being issues of conscience and morality. The political landscape here, in terms of what is considered an issue of conscience, is being narrowed to *hot button* issues – you know, one or two. Many of them were multi-faith gatherings so there was this precedent for social justice, for the care of the poor and people who aren't doing well. Jim is a pretty amazing character and he's got a best seller out right now that's very much about this whole concept [ > ]. As far as the song “There Is A Spirit” is concerned, I wrote the song for that tour. They asked me to do “We Shall Overcome” at one of the rallies, but it has become almost a cliché. It was the first time I'd ever sung it at a rally, and after that I decided to write my own version of the idea

behind that song. My work has a political and spiritual current, though not necessarily a religious current. I feel it rumbling out there and people are talking about these issues. It's something that keeps my hope alive. We hear so much of the lie, we hear it every day in all kinds of media forms - we hear the lie. There are folks out there speaking the truth and it's powerful, so that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to write a song that basically acknowledged that.

**FW** : The character Angela in "A Coal Red Sky" has succumbed to temptation, but she has cried out for help.

**CN** : Well, she's about this idea of addiction. Most of us have, at one time or another had a hard time staying away from something bad for us. Whether it's an obvious drug addiction like in "A Coal Red Sky," or whether it's a bad relationship, watching tv, or eating certain kinds of food – whatever it is, smoking. We've all had to grapple with "*This is not really good for me,*" but you keep doing it. Angela's is more extreme and obvious in terms of a chemical addiction. She's trying very hard to stay away from something that's really bad for her and it's not easy. Especially with particular kinds of addiction, some of them are incredibly hard to stay off of. Crack is worse than heroin to stay off of. She's trying again and it's tough. It's her talking about what that means for her. There's no moral to the story, because sometimes songs about addiction and similar problems moralise. This just presents her situation.

**FW** : From one point of view "A Coal Red Sky" is the second dark song.

**CN** : I would say so. Yeah.

**FW** : Miranda is the main character in the last of the new songs, "Before The Fall." I presume the title has an intentional double meaning.

**CN** : Yeah it does.

**FW** : It's logical that Miranda is the final voice, because she is *the grease that turns the wheel at the diner*.

**CN** : She is, and she's kind of the central character. She's the one that bears witness to it all. Sam Bartlett plays on that cut. He's a world-class claw hammer banjo player. It was way fun to have him come in and work on this, basically kind of rock 'n' roll song, with a claw hammer banjo – not a Nashville pick banjo, but an old time claw hammer style instrument.

**FW** : I'm assuming that Miranda is a mature lady, maybe somewhere in her forties.

**CN** : Yeah, she is.

**FW** : She focuses on time and on memory in the lyric.

**CN** : She bears witness to everybody else, but she also has her own life and her own space and memory in this album. She's a person too, she's not a saint. She's just another person who is here in this community and yeah, with this one, I wanted to do a song about memory – memories are funny. They wash over us at unexpected times, and they are not always chronological. I remember reading the novel "**Beloved**" [<] and I loved how she worked with memory in that book. Memories don't happen often in chronological order, they wash over you, so I wanted to create a song where that was happening to her during a slow moment at the diner.

**FW** : How do you feel about "**Regulars And Refugees.**"

**CN** : Whenever I do an album project I am so close to it and hear it a lot, in such minutia, so it's kind of nice when there is a good lag time between the time it comes out and the time it is recorded. You get a chance to step away from it for a while. I think it's the best writing I've done. What happened in the studio was exciting for me, and I'm so happy and so satisfied with it. I'm still amazed at what everybody brought to it. In terms of the songs themselves, I think it's some of the strongest writing I've ever done. That's a great thing to feel as a writer, you want to feel like you are growing, and as you get older you hope to learn something along the way. I think another thing that has to do with that is, I've been teaching writing a lot in the last six or seven years. I've done a lot of creative writing workshops, songwriting workshops. Articulating what I do has made me a better songwriter. I love the teaching aspect - either you love

teaching or you don't, and I've fallen in love with it. It has really pushed me to articulate what it is I'm trying to do with my music.

**FW** : It's clear that "There Is A Spirit" is not a diner song, but its concept is shared community, and in that regard it totally fits "**Regulars And Refugees.**" I wonder if we are living in a society where places like Betty's Diner will eventually become extinct.

**CN** : Sometimes I wonder. On the outskirts of town there are chain restaurants and stores, and they all look the same. It seems like that's the outer skin of every town nowadays, but if you go inside you'll find the history and the character of a place. In some areas it's getting harder and harder as companies like Wal-Mart come in. It's getting hard for those mom and pop stores and diners to stay alive.

**Note.**

[>] – Wallis is editor of Sojourners Magazine, and the book Carrie referred to is "**God's Politics : Why The Right Gets It Wrong And The Left Doesn't Get It**" [Harper San Francisco ; ISBN: 0060558288].

[<] – Carrie was referring to Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel.

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