

Following the departure of founding member John Starling to the world of medicine, Naomi Sommers' father, Phil Rosenthal (guitar, banjo, mandolin), was recruited as lead singer of the famed Washington DC bluegrass band the Seldom Scene. During his DC sojourn, 1977 – 1986, Phil toured nationally and internationally, recorded six albums with the five-piece and a seventh in 1991 when a reunion of all the members, past and present, took place at Gary Oelze's Alexandria venue, the Birchmere—the band's favourite venue. The concert celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the group's formation in Bethesda, Maryland—SCENE 20 was subsequently nominated for a Grammy.

Naomi Sommers was born in Washington during 1978, and eight years later the Rosenthal family relocated to Phil's hometown of Guilford, Connecticut where they still reside. Aged six Miss Sommers made her stage debut, at the Birchmere, on a bill featuring Jonathan Edwards and the Seldom Scene and sang *You Are My Sunshine*. The genetic connection aside, from the outset Naomi was aurally cocooned by the sound of music. Visiting musicians would often engage in impromptu sessions with her parents, so it was hardly surprising that at the age of seven Naomi began classical piano lessons. A few years later she moved on to violin and then the flute. In middle/high school Naomi played the latter instrument in the school orchestra. Naomi was also a member of the New Haven Youth Symphony and then the Connecticut Youth Symphony Orchestra for one high school year in each case.

Having constructed a recording studio in the basement of his Washington home, and later in Guilford, Phil founded the record label, American Melody, which specialises in bluegrass and folk recordings for children and families. At the age of five Naomi's first harmony parts were recorded in the home studio. In the years since, her voice and flute have appeared on numerous American Melody releases. Those recordings have won honours and awards from associations including Parents' Choice, the American Library Association, and the National Association of Parenting Publications.

By her early teens Naomi was avidly listening to recordings by Nanci Griffith, Greg Brown, Iris DeMent, Jonathan Edwards and, later, Bob Dylan. Her younger sibling, Daniel, and Naomi were hell bent on becoming professional



musicians, but at this stage writing did not form part of her plan. Concurrently Naomi, guitar and vocals, and Daniel, trumpet, become integral components of the four-piece Sommers Rosenthal Band, performing at clubs and events locally and throughout the New England region, as well as at summer festivals. Phil had given Naomi a guitar when she was aged five. Her high school years almost over she dabbled with word and melody—Naomi recalls: "I have always loved writing, poetry and stories, so writing songs was a natural progression, and a combination of two things I was deeply interested in. In college, I became serious about writing songs and about pursuing a career as a performing songwriter."

The college to which Naomi referred is the University of Connecticut where she enrolled as a music education major, but subsequently swapped courses to English. In parallel with those English studies, and with renewed intent, Naomi once again tackled songwriting. *It'll Be Alright* which closes the recently released GENTLE AS THE SUN dates from that period. Sommers went on to perform her originals as well as cover songs in coffee-houses on, and local to, the campus, appeared with the family band during vacation time and dreamed of life as a touring songwriter.

Prior to graduation Naomi began recording her songs, a process that was to take two years to reach fruition

with the 2002 release on American Melody of the thirteen-song album FLYING THROUGH. Co-produced by father and daughter, it featured a dozen Sommers' originals and a cover of Jesse Winchester's *Lay Down The Burden Of Your Heart*. Moving to Boston, Naomi resided for a couple of years north and south of the Charles River, respectively in the suburbs of Somerville and Jamaica Plain. Through periods of popularity and decline nationally, folk music has maintained a foothold in the Bostonian psyche. Naomi undertook a series of mostly one-off open mic appearances at city venues, including Club Passim in Cambridge. Passim's, the mother church of folk music, lies yards from the gates of the Harvard University campus. "I was then invited to perform at Passim's bi-yearly Campfire Festival, and at Songwriter nights were I would play a song by a well-known writer. Eventually I became an opening act and then a featured Passim performer." Naomi also performed at the Paradise Lounge, the Milky Way and similar acoustic venues. For a time she co-hosted the monthly Boston Songwriter Showcase at the Zeitgeist Gallery.

Her sophomore solo outing, another family co-production and American Melody release, similarly contained thirteen tracks. In this instance a decade of Naomi originals mingled with the traditional numbers *Foggy Mountain Top* and *Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss*,



Naomi Sommers

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plus a cover of musician friend Noam Weinstein's *All My Love*. The same year that *HYPNOTIZED* was released, Naomi was chosen as a finalist in the annual Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Songwriting Competition. Having attended the event, my clear recall is that Slaid Cleaves, Ruthie Foster and Eric Schwarz chose six winners, but judged poorly. Naomi didn't figure in the six. During 2004 Naomi relocated to Northampton in delightfully rural Western Massachusetts, another hotbed of acoustic music.

While still a Boston resident billing themselves as Broken Dreamers, Naomi and Noam Weinstein (guitar, vocals), began touring locally and nationally. During 2004 they released an EP. Sommers met Weinstein at a Passim function, and at another venue met Lisa Bastoni (guitar, mandolin, vocals) with whom, during 2005, she formed Gray Sky Girls. Recorded during August that year and August 2006, soon afterwards American Melody issued a self-titled set by the duo. Performing what they described as slowgrass, the fourteen track album featured half a dozen originals—composed separately—plus covers of the traditional *Shady Grove* and *Bury Me Beneath The Willow*, the Hal David/Paul Hampton penned 1961 Don Gibson pop-country hit *Sea Of Heartbreak*, and from a century earlier a duo arrangement of Stephen Foster's *Oh Susannah*. Currently, both projects are hibernating. "We'll perform together again occasionally, but for the moment logistically it's difficult, as I am focusing on my solo career."

Having cut three albums in her father's studio, Sommers took something of a quantum leap with *GENTLE AS THE SUN*. Recorded in Nashville, mainly at Signal Path Studio, a few sessions took place at the Butcher Shoppe. The latter facility is co-owned by her session engineer David Ferguson (Johnny Cash, John Hartford) and John Prine. While many of the usual suspects were involved—Al Perkins (Dobro), Dave Pomeroy (upright

bass) and Pat McInerney (drums, percussion)—as had been the case previously, there was input from family and friends. Her father (recovering from a stroke at the time), brother and pals Lisa and Noam all contributed.

Committed to the life of a professional musician, Sommers had moved to Boston with the dream of one day headlining at Club Passim. By the time Naomi left town, she had achieved that goal on a number of occasions. The fact that *GENTLE AS THE SUN* was cut in Nashville with the players I mentioned is testament to a career on the up and up. Furthermore, Naomi performed a miracle by tempting producer Jim Rooney out of retirement to helm the project. With a pedigree second to none in all aspects of the music business, during the early/mid 1960s Rooney managed Club 47 the predecessor of Club Passim, and in 1993 produced Nanci Griffith's Best Contemporary Folk Grammy winner *OTHER VOICES/OTHER ROOMS*. "He heard my CDs and wanted to come hear me play. I had a show at the Space in New Haven, where my parents, brother, Noam and Lisa sat in with me at various times. Jim drove down from Vermont. It was definitely something he did of his own volition. After that show he was totally excited and agreed to produce my album."

Housed in a tastefully designed gatefold card case, American Melody issued *GENTLE AS THE SUN* late last year. "In a certain way I think of *Gentle As The Sun* as my debut album, and included what I considered my best songs to date. I hope to share this album with a much broader audience. Investing time and money in a recording of this calibre was an exciting and wonderful experience for me, but also a risky endeavour in today's market. Jim and I chose what we felt were the strongest songs in my repertoire, plus the production on this album is sufficiently different from those early records to warrant revisiting songs."

In the April 2009 issue of *Maverick* reviewer Alan Taylor penned an appropriately glowing review of the album. It contains a handful of

previously unrecorded Sommers' originals, reprised the same number from *HYPNOTIZED*, and two songs each from *FLYING THROUGH* and *GRAY SKY GIRLS*. Here's a few of Naomi's thoughts about the recording. "*Come Home* is totally true. One of my best friends joined the army and went to Iraq. I was trying to write him a letter and wrote a poem instead. Then it became a song." When I pointed out that an upbeat melody supported the rather grave subject matter, she added: "I definitely wanted it to be that way, with some cheerfulness to it."

Now He's Gone celebrates the life of the family pet Sasha, a larger than life character to be sure. "He was a whiney, very jealous dog that followed us around all day and got upset if people hugged each other, or if you talked to the cat. He wanted to be a person, and was very involved in the family life—but was very sweet too. Whenever we played music he was totally quiet." Set in New Orleans, *Mama's House* alludes to America's long struggle with Civil Rights in the lines: "A kid in this town with its shady past, From slavery to poverty, Wouldn't you still be angry?" Naomi added: "I intend tackling more social awareness issues in future, particularly ones that people need to be aware of. Not only from a political angle, but providing information about the times we live in." Without raising the spectre of certain scenes in the movie *Ghost*, a tangibly sensual feel pervades the poetic *Watershed Song* lyric. "Watershed is a ceramic arts centre in Maine where I spent a few of my college summers, and where I had those experiences."

I wondered what the future held in store for this young musician. "Next year I'll record the new songs I've written, plus I have an album of Bob Dylan covers which is nearly ready. I'm not rushing to release it, because I want to devote at least the rest of this year to touring and promoting *GENTLE AS THE SUN*. Recently the album was picked up by Continental Record Services for European and UK distribution." CRS being the European arm of Rounder Records, that's a major step forward for this talented writer.

Naomi will tour the UK during a three-week period in October. Can't happen soon enough for this old scribbler.

Arthur Wood