

Grey DeLisle – The “Iron Flowers” Interview

Part 1 – The Serendipity of Meeting Marvin

*The interview with Grey DeLisle took place in the early morning of Monday 23rd May 2005, Pacific Time. Grey was at home in Los Angeles, California and I was at home in Birmingham, England. Grey recorded and self-released her debut album “**The Small Time**” in 2000, and in mid-June Sugar Hill released “**Iron Flowers**” her sophomore disc for the label, and her fifth recording to date. Many thanks to Lynn Lancaster at Sugar Hill for setting up the interview.*

Folk Wax : Your answer may very well go back to the very beginning of your life, anyway, when and why did you become interested into music.

Grey DeLisle : I guess I was born into it, because my mom and grandma were singers. My grandma sang with Tito Puente during the 1940's, and my mom was in bands the whole time I was growing up. During family gatherings my uncle would play guitar and all the girls would sing. It seemed like that was what you were supposed to do. I began writing songs to myself that I just kept in my head. “**The Small Time**” album was the first time I'd recorded anything. It was pretty much the first time I'd sung any of my songs for anybody. I'd always dated musicians and been around musicians, but I'd never played music in public. Finally, when I sang for my friends they said, “*You know you really should record that – like tomorrow*” [Laughs]. So I did. I booked a studio where I'd been doing cartoon voices. That was when I met Marvin [Etzioni], because I wanted some fiddle on the album but didn't know any players. Someone said “*Our friend plays mandolin, and was in Lone Justice.*” I was like, “*I loved that band.*” It's funny because I wasn't allowed to listen to secular music when I was growing up. We were Pentecostal. I didn't hear Gram Parsons until I was in my twenties. Now I'm listening to The Byrds for the first time. I fell in love with the Kinks a few years ago. I'm playing catch up. My music is influenced by the stuff I heard growing up. My mom was into The Beatles before she was born again in the church. My grandma sang Spanish Boleros, and we listened to spiritual musicians at home, like Mahalia Jackson. That was all I heard growing up, and that's what influenced my writing initially. I was five when I wrote my first song.

FW : During your pre-teen and teenage years, did you have any lessons on musical instruments.

GDL : None at all. When I made the “**The Small Time**” I had to sing the songs and let them figure out the chords. Those players said, “*If I'm going to help you figure out the chords I want to have partial credit.*” Eventually I got an autoharp because I really loved The Carter Family when I was growing up. I thought, “*I'll write the songs in my head and sit down with the autoharp and figure out the chords.*” Initially it was a means of getting the songs from my head on to paper. I began to love playing it and thought it sounded so pretty so I decided, “*I'm going to play this while I'm onstage.*”

FW : Did you take autoharp lessons.

GDL : I went to McCabe's to take lessons, probably about a year and a half after I started playing it. The guy there said, “*You're playing it completely wrong. You're holding it upside down. Your strumming patterns are very strange.*” Then he said “*You know what, keep doing what you are doing because you have your own style.*”

FW : You mentioned earlier that you were a voice actor, or is it a voice actress. I don't know which it would be -

GDL : Either or.

FW : So you had been doing that for a few years.

GDL : Maybe four years by the time I made my first record.

FW : My understanding is that you had become fairly well established in the cartoon voice over field. Why did you decide to record your songs.

GDL : It was strange – I felt I had a lot of songs that I needed to get out. It wasn't like I had a goal in

mind. Things sort of took off because Marvin, being the wonderful producer that he is, started mailing the album to friends. I had no plans for it, other than for my grandchildren to hear it one day. Miles Of Music, the online distributor, got a hold of it and asked *"How are you distributing your music right now?"* and I said, *"I'm not a recording artist, I'm just an actress who made this little thing."* There are only nine songs on the record. They said *"How are you getting it to people?"* and I said, *"I'm not, I don't sell it anywhere."* They said *"Would you mind if we sold it for you?"* so I said, *"OK."* It did well on their web site, and people started calling and interviewing me. I never thought of myself as a musician until I made **"The Graceful Ghost"** and was on Sugar Hill and playing live. Even now, I don't make records so I can be a singer, or so that people can know who I am or come see me play. I feel like I have this responsibility to get these songs on tape because - sometimes I feel that it's not even me writing them. They usually come to me all of a sudden, and I record them because I feel I have been given that responsibility.

FW : You mentioned going to a voice over studio to make the album, but the only one mentioned on the **"The Small Time"** liner is Salami Studios.

GDL : Yeah, Salami Studios. That's the place that records **"Clifford The Big Red Dog"** and all the cartoons that I do [**Ed. Note.** Grey is also the voice of Daphne in the **"Scooby Doo"** television series, and Yumi in **"Hi Hi Puffy Ami Yumi"**]. Those guys helped me cut that first album in two days.

FW : And they knew Marvin.

GDL : No, they didn't know Marvin. I called some friends who were musicians and asked, *"Do you guys know a fiddle player?"* They said *"No, but we do know this guy Marvin Etzioni."* Marvin and I got along so well that he said, *"I want to make another record with you."* I said, *"I don't have any more songs."* He said, *"When you write another song, let me know."* A week later while driving my car I began writing *"Beautiful Mistake."* I called and sang it to him. He said *"OK, let's record it this weekend."* The way that **"Homewrecker"** came together is that every time I wrote a song we'd schedule a recording date. It took about a year to make that record.

FW : Marvin Etzioni plays on the session, and ends up producing your debut disc. That seems kind of quick.

GDL : I know [Laughs]. All the vocal and guitar tracks were recorded the first day. Then I called Marvin that night and said, *"I have these tracks will you come down and play mandolin on them."* That's so not the way that I work now. Marvin has taught me so much about music and that you should all record together. You shouldn't record things separately because it strips away the sound. I gave Marvin the producer credit because he helped me press the record and I thought he added a lot to the tracks. It wasn't the way he normally works.

FW : Who came up with the label name, Hummingbird.

GDL : Me, because my grandmother raised me, and she loves hummingbirds.

FW : In terms of meeting Marvin what contribution do you think he's made to your life.

GDL : He completely changed my life. He turned me from a girl who recorded nine songs and did cartoons to a musician. He taught me the right and the wrong way to make a record – an organic way of getting together with people and getting an organic sound. And vibe. He taught me about vibe, because really and seriously, the **"The Small Time"** is fine for what it is and a lot of people like it, but it's real innocent.

FW : You said that **"Homewrecker"** took about a year to put together. I would loosely describe that recording as your *"Big hair country album."*

GDL : Yeah I know [Laughs], although there was a lot of country styled songs on it, it's also a very eclectic record. The front cover looks like a Bobby Gentry album, but there's a funk song, as well as folk, country and Spanish songs on there.

FW : Did you record **"Homewrecker"** at Marvin's house.

GDL : No, we did it with a guy named Paul Du Gre. Marvin said *"I don't know a lot of people who do analog recording, but there's one guy in the Valley that I've worked and he's a real nice guy."* We would go to Paul's studio every time we wanted to record something.

FW : Now I'm correct in thinking that **"The Graceful Ghost"** was recorded in your house.

GDL : Yeah, it was.

FW : Can I move straight on to **"Iron Flowers,"** which I believe was recorded at yet another location. Why record each album in a different studio.

GDL : I'm not somebody who wants to work with a different producer or different musicians on every record. I like to have the same core group of people, but I also wanted every album to have it's own, sort of, feel. I don't want to repeat things on my recordings. I thought if we changed the location, every record would have its own unique stamp and signature.

FW : **"Iron Flowers"** was cut at The Carriage House in Silver Lake.

GDL : It's our bass player Sheldon's studio. He told us, *"I'm putting together a studio in my garage. Come and check it out, it would be great if we could make the record there."* I thought, *"I love Sheldon, I don't want to give my money to some stranger. It doesn't have to be really super fancy."* When we got to Sheldon's, it was actually a really, really nice studio. And yes, he's into the whole analog thing like we are.

FW : Some of the album was cut at Camp David.

GDL : That's our friend David Vaught's place, he's the engineer we always work with. We cut some stuff in his garage, and then went to Sheldon's studio. We mixed the tracks at David's place. We recorded "Sweet Little Bluebird" and other songs at David's, to send to Dave Mattacks because he wanted to be familiar with the songs before flying over. That version sounded so good that we thought *"We won't beat that."* That's why that track was cut at Camp David. It's pretty much a garage with a booth added and a board inside the booth. As I said, we mix all our records there, so if we get a good idea while we're mixing we just go in the booth and record it.

FW : You've already mentioned the tight little circle of musicians that you use on your sessions, and basically that's Murry Hammond [Grey's husband and bass player in Texas band the Old 97's], Marvin Etzioni and Sheldon Gomberg. How did you meet Murry.

GDL : About ten years ago, I went to an Old 97's show, but didn't have the money to get in. His friend asked Murry, *"Grey can't get in, can you put her on your guest list?"* Murry said, *"The guest list is full, I'll tell them she is my wife."* So he took my arm and we went in. We didn't date till many years later.

FW : Dave Mattacks has been around for over four decades. How did you know about him.

GDL : I loved Fairport Convention. He played on "Matty Groves" which I thought was the original roots fusion song. We contacted him and he said, *"Send me some of the stuff that you've done, and I'll see if I'm interested."* We sent him everything, except for the **"The Small Time"** because that album didn't have any drums on it. He came back and said, *"I'm in. Let's discuss details."* We also have Don Heffington from Lone Justice, the other half of my dream drum duo.

FW : How did the deal with Sugar Hill Records come about.

GDL : They read an article about me in Billboard because **"Homewrecker"** gathered a lot of local attention and actually had attention overseas, in the Netherlands particularly. They called Marvin and we had a meeting. Then Marvin got the call saying they wanted to sign me, so he took me for a coffee and said, *"Open up your organiser to that page with the labels that you said you'd sign with."* I said, "OK," and he just took a pen and circled Sugar Hill. He said, *"They really want to sign you."* I was happy, but I was

also really scared. I thought, *"Is this the beginning of the end?"* but it's been great. They're really music loving people.

FW : How did Mick Rock the photographer become involved in this project. Was it purely because of his connection with Queen.

GDL : My manager has been friends with him for a long time. When I covered "Bohemian Rhapsody" he said, *"This makes complete sense, we'll get Mick Rock because he did the original Queen cover."* He had mentioned him before, but it really didn't make sense. I'm not one to do something, just because someone is famous. We sent Mick the CD and he really loved it. We met in Austin during the South by South West Festival in March, and went to the park and shot all the photos.

FW : You said at the outset that you made the **"The Small Time"** with no real intention of pursuing a career in music. Marvin Etzioni was the first catalyst in that change, followed by Sugar Hill. How many gigs do you currently play annually.

GDL : Probably about thirty. I have this full-time job as a voice over actress, so I have to be there during the week. It probably won't increase all that much. I have been taking half-days off on Friday and flying someplace, doing a gig on Friday night and Saturday night, and flying home on Sunday.

to be continued

Arthur Wood.

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Part 2 – Songs About Iron and Flowers

In last week's episode, Grey talked about her early recordings and about the making of "Iron Flowers." Many thanks to Lynn Lancaster for setting up the interview. This week we talk about the songs on "Iron Flowers."

FW : **"Iron Flowers"** opens with "Bohemian Rhapsody." When they conduct music polls here in Britain for All Time Favourite Song, it invariably wins. It's nearly thirty years since it was a chart hit. Why did you decide to record it.

GDL : When we were on tour in the Netherlands, we were on this long train ride, and Marvin and I were talking about it being a country song. It's got country lyrics. It sounds like it could be a Johnny Cash song, if you take that operatic part out. I thought, *"We should cover that."* We were already doing "Wish You Were Here." I played that on autoharp when we went to Europe, and it sounded like a country song, so I thought, *"A lot of things sound good as country songs."* We thought Freddie Mercury's lyrics sounded country, and decided *"Let's give it a shot."* We did, and it sounded great. A lot of people don't even know that we are covering the song. They think we really are playing a country song, but there's something about it that's familiar to them, and you can see them thinking, *"What is this? This sounds so familiar?"* A few minutes into it they go, *"Oh my gosh, I can't even believe that I didn't realise what that was."*

FW : In the album review that I've written, I've pegged it as the modern day equivalent of a folk murder ballad, except that I've called it a *closet murder ballad*, because it never knew that it was a folk song, it thought it was a rock song.

GDL : [Laughs]. That's true. Marty Robbins could have written it. I think that's a good way of putting it.

FW : I believe that the second track "Joanna" was subjectively inspired by your mother. Has she heard the song.

GDL : Yes. She doesn't like my music very much, because my parents are still really very religious. When I was young she was not around very much – she had a wild streak in her, and so it's about that – I think she feels guilty about her past. I don't think she appreciates it very much, but I can't really decide what I am going to write, and what I'm not going to write, it just comes out. It comes out the way it comes out [Laughs]. She still loves me though.

FW : Was it out of a sense of fondness and love that you wrote the song.

GDL : Yes it was, but I think it hurts her feelings that she wasn't there, and she feels that I'm reminding her about that. It's not her favourite thing. She really didn't care for my music at the outset. She thought it was too secular. When I put out "**Homewrecker**," she said I was going to go to hell. She is gradually coming to be at peace with it a little more. She loved "**The Graceful Ghost**," because she thought it took a little bit more of a Christian approach.

FW : "Right Now" takes place in a night club, and from the outset the narrator is in a sorry state – no doubt induced by drink or drugs. I think the lyric captures the utter desperation that the narrator is experiencing. Was that scenario something that someone had related to you.

GDL : I was never an alcoholic or anything, but I was a member of a 12 step programme that dealt with people that are affected by alcoholism. I've had a lot of alcoholism surround me in my life, so I was thinking about addicts and alcoholics – you know, how they reach out to God, and how I need to reach out to God in my own way, when I'm feeling low. It's always my last resort, when I think "*Oh yeah, I should ask for help.*" It's weird because I usually write story songs. It's the first time I've ever written sort of a conceptual – I mean not a conceptual, but sort of like a -

FW : A situation piece. I don't know what you'd call it.

GDL : Yeah. I don't know either. To me when I listen to it, it doesn't sound like my writing voice. The thing is, at the time, I was listening a lot to Sam Phillips' "**A Boot And A Shoe**" record. I love Sam Phillips. I wrote "Right Now" about a day before we started recording "**Iron Flowers**." I feel my writing is changing a little bit. You completely got it, that it was about the desperation of a situation, and reaching out to the last thing that you can think of.

FW : What emphasises the situation, is that you think the track is finished - and after a short pause, the drums kick in again.

GDL : That was Marvin's idea. He said, "*If we're doing "Bohemian Rhapsody" we really need to have a call back to the whole Queen style,*" particularly when we did "Bohemian Rhapsody" so differently. He felt we needed to add a little nod. In addition we had two drummers, so we kind of got carried away.

FW : The next cover song "Who Made You King" was written by Marvin and Sam Lorber. You've covered one of their songs before. Was the whole rockabilly presentation there from the outset.

GDL : No, we played it sort of straight in the beginning, but it was missing something. We couldn't figure out what that was. Finally Marvin goes, "*You know what I'm going to do, I'm going to put a low rockabilly groove on it.*" That was added at the last minute, and really brought it to life. It made the track jump a bit more.

FW : When they were writing "Who Made You King," do you know who Marvin and Sam were writing about.

GDL : I have no idea. I don't know what the back-story is on that, but I have been in very controlling relationships and that's the way I took it. When I sing it, I think about that.

FW : I wondered if it was some obtuse reference to George Bush.

GDL : [Laughs]. That would be very apropos. Maybe I'll think about George Bush, when I sing it in future. That will make me angry.

FW : The next track is also a cover song. On this album, you never know which direction the next track is going to take musically. There are two tracks that I describe in my review as primal sounding. "God's Got It" is gospel primal, but I'd like to know where you found the song.

GDL : My husband loves finding old, rare gospel recordings. He picked up this reissue on the Case Quarter label. They release records by people that you've never heard of, from a long time ago. This musician's name was the Rev. Charlie Jackson, and when I heard his CD I flipped out. I loved the "God's Got It" song. It was fantastic. We were rehearsing that night, and when Marvin and everybody showed up, I said *"You guy's have to hear this song."* I played it on the autoharp but they didn't get the full effect of it, so I played the CD and they loved it. Marvin said, *"We've got to put it on the record."* That's how that happened.

FW : I wondered if way back in the mists of time, the Rev. Charlie Jackson and Mahalia Jackson were related by blood. Now that's a real teaser, but does anyone know the answer.

GDL : That's a good question. You're full of good observations. I don't know. I'll ask the guy at Case Quarter because I wrote to him and sent Rev. Charlie Jackson some money. He's sick and lives in a trailer. I sent him some money, as his song is not registered with any publisher.

FW : The first piece of music by Grey DeLisle that I heard was "The Bloody Bucket" at the Kerrville Wine & Music Festival early last fall. You mentioned earlier that it was an older song.

GDL : Yeah. I wanted it to be on **"Homewrecker"** but we could never get the right recording of it. It never sound right. Finally we managed to record it the way we wanted it.

FW : The scenario you paint in the lyric is one of the deliberate seduction of a man by a woman. Where did the storyline come from.

GDL : I heard about it at one of those 12 step meetings that I went to. This lady has this wonderful story. She lived in Lubbock, Texas and would go to this bar called The Bloody Bucket to pick people up. This was during a really low point in her existence. I thought she was so captivating, and I loved the story, and I loved the name of the bar. I thought *"I've got to write a song about that."* I gave her a credit on the record. I ran into her a while back – she's an older lady – and I said, *"I made a song about your story."* She said *"As long as you put my name on it, that's all that matters."*

FW : The next track is a collaboration with your husband. Have you written many songs together.

GDL : No. We were on a road trip together through Texas and I looked up and saw windmills and I said, *"Gosh, those windmills look like big iron flowers."* Murry goes *"Oh, I love that line, I'm going to write a song about that."* I said *"No, I'm going to write a song about that."* I wrote it that day. We got to where we were going and he got out his guitar, and figured out the melody with me. Nobody is a better sweet loping country strummer than my husband – it always sounds so open and nice. He sat down and did that, and I sang it and that was it.

FW : During that day, how long had it taken you to pull the lyric together.

GDL : Probably about half an hour. It's weird I never spend a bunch of time on songs. Even Murry – he'll get like a chorus, and then the lyrics will come to him after months and months of working them out in his head. I've never had a song like that. All my songs have been written in under an hour. That's why I feel like I don't have a lot to do with it. It just comes out and I don't know where it's from.

FW : Was there a reason why you called the album **"Iron Flowers."** Did you feel that "Iron Flowers" was the pivotal song on the album.

GDL : No. I've always written from a very female point of view on my other records, but this time I really felt like there was a masculinity coming out. I don't know if it was in terms of strength or whatever, but the songs I covered are typically male songs. Plus the new songs I wrote, those songs could be sung by a man or a woman. Usually my songs are very, very female. You couldn't sing "Borrowed And Blue" if

you were a man. You couldn't sing "Sharecroppin' Man" if you were a man. I felt like there was a strength to it, and I thought "**Iron Flowers**" really summed that up.

FW : Next up is the second primal sounding track, "Blue Heart." It was recorded at Camp David, the most technologically advanced studio on the planet, and features The Amazements.

GDL : [Laughs]. Marvin's son is in this band that I think is so phenomenal. They're young – only something like seventeen, eighteen and nineteen. They're just kids. We had done "Blue Heart" with the whole band at Sheldon's studio. It was good, but it wasn't a great version and so Marvin said, "*Would you consider doing this song with Elon? You know, bring his band in?*" I said, "*Let's just do it.*" He said, "*Do you want a rehearsal?*" I said, "*No. I want them to come in, I'll teach them the song, and then we'll let them do what they do.*" I didn't want to clean them up, because they are so original. What you have on the record is the very first take.

FW : Subjectively the lyrics are very bitter, and the distorted sounds made by The Amazements instruments further enhance that bite in the lyrics.

GDL : Yeah. In terms of presenting the song, my thoughts ran to that fact that I'd never heard an Appalachian field holler type lyric with a garage band playing in the background. I'd never heard anything like that before. I thought we came up with an original sound.

FW : In "Sweet Little Bluebird" the narrator is facing execution, yet is facing it with great courage.

GDL : I was going to play at The Bluebird Café in Nashville. It wasn't really my scene. I thought, "*Maybe I'll write a sweet, happier song for the Bluebird,*" because that crowd is used to Nashville music and they probably aren't going to be so excited about the really, really gutbucket stuff that I write. "*Maybe I'll write a song about The Bluebird Café.*" I started writing about The Bluebird Cafe, but of course it couldn't last. I couldn't do it, and it ended up being this song about a man that's about to be hung [Laughs], whose only friend is a bluebird on the other side of the prison wall. That's always where my head goes – toward the darker side of life.

FW : What about this love song "Inside Texas" that closes the album. The lyric doesn't even contain the word "love."

GDL : I wrote it for Murry as a Christmas present. We had been dating for less than a month and I was afraid to put anything about love in it, because you know, early in a relationship you are sort of afraid to tell the other person that you love them. It was funny because after I sang it to him, he told me that he loved me, which I thought was very sweet. That was the very first time we told each other that we loved each other.

Arthur Wood.

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