

Carrie Newcomer “The Gathering Of Spirits” Interview

Carrie Cares, With A Passion - Part 1 - Making The Album

*The interview with Carrie Newcomer took place on the evening of 5th November 2002. Carrie was at her home in Bloomington, Indiana, while I was in my den [and Kerrville Kronikle Headquarters] in Birmingham, England. To the sounds of countless fireworks exploding, or shooting skyward, in the immediate locality – it was Guy Fawkes Night in England – we got down to talking about Carrie’s latest album, a rather sublime collection of songs titled “**The Gathering Of Spirits.**”*

*This is the fourth consecutive studio album on which Mark Williams has worked as a producer [the first was “**My Father’s Only Son**”]. Did you, at any time, think of working with any other producer.*

Of course you think about that but you know, working with Mark, I think he has a real understanding of what this music is about, and what I was after with this album. You never know, since it’s always album by album, whether he’ll want to do it and if he really feels like this is a worthwhile project. I was so excited that both of us felt like, “yes” this is another project we could do something wonderful with.

There’s also the point that he had become familiar with your style over three albums, and the direction your writing has been taking.

I think we both have really grown as artists, as musicians, as producers, and that has been pretty wonderful. I feel this album is the best thing I have ever done, and the best thing we have done together.

Is Mark easy to work with in the studio.

[Laughs]. Mark is one of the most easy going fellows you’d ever want to run across. We get along very well. He’s also one of those people – he’s an incredible engineer. He’s one of those engineers who is always doing a lot, but you think he isn’t doing anything. He has this calm, sort of, *one thing at a time*, way of working. He’ll be doing incredible amounts of things, and there is always this feel of being relaxed with Mark. I really appreciate that.

Does Mark come up with a lot of ideas for instrumentation etc.

Well, you know, we both do. We don’t score for the artists that work with us. I think both of us have this philosophy where the most important thing is finding the right players. The people who are going to be able to get the sound that you want – that you are looking for. That’s all important. We don’t score their parts. They write their own parts.

Presumably you have given them a demo recording to work from.

Yes, absolutely. They hear the work and then we ask them to be creative with it. There will be different incarnations. We’ll try this, we’ll try that. It’s very organic in terms of how that works. This is interesting - it’s the first time that we did this – the people who did the strings – Chris Wagoner and Mary Gaines – they live in Wisconsin which is seven hours away from here. We did a lot of preparatory work over the internet, where they would record ideas and put them up on their web site and then I would listen. Then I would mail them MP3’s and things to work on, from a distance.

Presumably they did come to Indiana at some stage.

Oh yes. Everybody came to the studio and we worked all together, but that preliminary work was done before we got to the studio.

How did you find Chris and Mary.

I worked with Chris and Mary before, on another album. They did a couple of songs with me. I also had done shows with the band that they used to be in, a few years back, called The Common Faces, and I just loved their work. They are two wonderful players. I think the attitude on this album that I love, in terms of all the players, is that they are very mature musicians – and I mean mature, not so much in age, but in the philosophy of how they

play. A person who really understands the concept of creating music, knows that what you don't say is just as important as what you do say. There is a certain elegance about sound, in that, simple is not necessarily easy. Simple can also be very elegant. Sometimes you need a lot notes and so you step forward and do that, but sometimes what you need is something very simple.

You need space.

And breadth. It's all about a song – it's not about Carrie Newcomer. It's about what will make this song the most powerful thing it can be, and that may mean getting out of your own way. Putting your own ego aside and focusing on the song.

While we're talking about musicians, Winton Reynolds plays piano on most of this album.

Yes he does, and he's touring with me on this album tour.

How did you find Winton.

Indiana University is in Bloomington where I live, and it's one of the major music schools in the country. There's Julliard, and there's IU so there are always lots of musicians here. Winton was finishing up a doctorate, in classical composition, and that's how I met him. Then he moved to Austin and he's been there for about three years now. He's originally from the Bay Area, near Stanford and Palo Alto. He's a fabulous player, because he is classically trained, but at the same time he's an amazing jazz pianist and has worked with rock bands and funk bands, as well as acoustic / roots players like myself. He brings this whole range of influences, and ability to add flavours to things.

Once more you co-produced this album with Mark. Is it something that you enjoy doing.

Yes, I do. I like being able to be really part of that creative process. It's a whole different art form. Writing is a certain kind of art form. Performing is a certain kind of art form. Creating an album, producing, is kind of like the difference between, say, painting and sculpture. They are both art forms and they come from the same place, in a way, but they are very different.

In the studio, do you ever get torn between the performance of a song, and your role as a producer.

I think it has gotten easier because I have been working with Mark for so long now. I can let go of certain things. When I go into perform, I trust him as a really fine producer, so I don't have to be thinking about that all the time. And when I play – I play my heart out you know. There is that thought - production part - but I trust Mark to be there listening and assessing and helping move things along.

*Since you first worked with Mark on “**My Father's Only Son**,” you seem to have alternated between recording at Reflection Sound Studios in Charlotte, North Carolina and Airtime and Echo Park Studios in Bloomington, Indiana. Any particular reason.*

Well, you know, the studios - a lot of that is logistical. I live in the town where Airtime and Echo Park is located. This last album, I wanted to be closer to home. The person who owns and runs Airtime Studios is a wonderful engineer, and producer, and he's also a really dear friend. That was where all the vocals and overdubbing of instruments was done, and the bulk of time was spent. The rhythm tracks – all the basic band stuff - were done at Echo Park. At Airtime I haven't got to think about being in a studio, it's more like “*I'm over at my friend David's house.*” And that's great. I can go outside and play with his dog and two kids, and then go back in and sing some more.

This is David Weber.

Yes.

Is Echo Park attached to the university, or a local radio station.

No. Echo Park is a pretty major studio. It's owned by Mike Wanchic and Mark Hood. Mike Wanchic is the guitar player in John Mellencamp's band. It has had a lot of major artists come through there. It's a large facility and it has great equipment, and a fine name. I like working there. When it comes down to doing the vocals and the

more intimate things, I really enjoy going to a smaller studio, where I can feel comfortable. I think the vocal performances this time show that.

*How long did it take to put together “**The Gathering Of Spirits.**”*

I would say about three weeks of recording time, and about a week of mixing. The mixing was done in Nashville, at Ocean Way. I added my thoughts about mixing and balance, though I’m not truly a technical person.

You’ve already started touring on this album. How has your audience received the album so far

The album was released in the States on the 10th September. The audiences have been great. The early weeks of sales have tripled anything I’ve ever done. The last album was on Rounder’s Top 10 list for the year, so they are happy. More than anything else, I just feel this album is the truest album to who and what I am, and what I’m trying to do with this music. With every album I try to move along and not repeat myself. You know, if you’re not growing, you’re dying. I’m very much alive as an artist. On this particular tour I’m doing most of it with Winton Reynolds so it’s me, my guitar and a piano. This is a much more intimate album, and I’m really enjoying presenting it in a smaller context.

How did the duet with Alison Krauss on the title track come about. Of course you toured the UK with her in the summer of 1997.

She’s from this area of the country. We met years ago, when she was very young. Then I did that UK tour, opening for her. Since then she has been very gracious and helpful. She just produced the new Nickel Creek album. They are wonderful, and she introduced them to my music. There’s a song on the new Nickel Creek album that I wrote. As for the song “The Gathering Of Spirits,” when it was being recorded, it was like *“this is perfect for Alison. This is just the perfect song for her.”* It was just a matter of sending it to her, and she cut her vocal in Nashville at Ocean Way.

To be continued.

Next Week - Carrie talks about the songs she wrote for “**The Gathering Of Spirits.**”

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 11/02

[1760 words].

+++++