



Nanci Griffith **"Clock Without Hands"** Elektra Records

On one level, Nanci's latest album could be construed as the maudlin musings of a woman whose sell by date has come and gone. That, I honestly and totally believe, is to totally miss the point of this recording since it is truly the finest body of work that Nanci Griffith has ever placed on disc. It is a tapestry of significant snapshots from Nanci's America [and Other Earthly Places] 1953 – 2001, and is chock full of the wisdom that age brings. Our human imprint at twenty rarely matches the same person three decades later. Hopefully we become less angry, can assess the victories, constructively rebuild upon the losses – become wiser and, hopefully, better individuals. This is not a coming of age album, it is a woman proclaiming that she knows what a life lived well truly means. Interpreting John Stewart's "The Ghost Inside Of Me" she sings of that evolution.....*"I'm not who I ought to be."* Using another man's words, this is Nanci talking of a knowledge that, given admission, can be a boundless treasure.

If wars are what divide the nations of our planet, and most assuredly one recent war – Vietnam - is indelibly imprinted on at least four of Nanci's compositions in this collection, there is most assuredly one event that once unified mankind, if only for a few moments – maybe a day. I'm talking of the 3.56 am **[B.S.T.] giant leap** on 21st July 1969, when Neil Armstrong became the first man, as far as we know, to walk on another world. "Armstrong," a 1972 composition from the John Stewart *back catalogue of smash hits*, is complemented here by a third work from that bard, "Lost Him In The Sun." Apart from the closing cut, which we'll return to much later, the only other cover here is Paul Carrack's tender "Where Would I Be." Once upon a time Nanci was the girl for covering songs by fellow Texan scribes, but time has yielded an international perspective.

So let's get down to the nitty gritty of **"Clock Without Hands,"** aka Nanci's contributions. Apart from the vocal on the subjectively edgy "Shaking Off The Snow," her new work is nigh faultless. The melodic opener, and album title cut, introduces the concept of time, one of the themes that underpins this disc. The *you* in "Travelling Through This Part Of You" is Nanci's former husband, Eric Taylor. During the last two years Nanci has been heavily involved with the Landmine Free World campaign, on behalf the Vietnam Veterans Of America Foundation, and has visited that once war ravaged land. *"Where were are you amongst this madness on the streets of Saigon, Where were you in 1969 when I was but a youth"* and *"You were an American boy whose innocence was lost here in the war, And I wear your scars"* are the finest words about memory and survival that she has ever written. This song proves, whether vague or startlingly clear, second hand impressions can never replace first hand familiarity. War photographer, Georgette "Dickey" Chapelle, who was killed in Vietnam, circa 1965, a landmine casualty, is remembered in "Pearl's Eye View." "Roses On The 4th Of July," a duet with Michael Johnson, pursues the post-Vietnam years through the evolving story of a husband and wife. He's a disabled veteran, and a draughtsman, who meets his war buddies every Thursday night. He sends her white roses every 4th of July, *"and you never ask why."* They had a son who died and a daughter who *"is an actress, she's strong and she's bright."* With personalities that their friends say are like *day* and *night*, each, in their own way, is a survivor. We are all survivors.....

"Midnight In Missoula" a gentle, image filled, love song *marries* locations that may be climatically *hot* with ones that may be *cold*. In the process it cleverly employs references to international time zones, Gershwin songs, Samuel Barber melodies, winter snow, frosty windows and views from *the road* of Rio's

Cristo Redentor and the late night lights of Liverpool. Subjectively “Truly Something Fine” pursues the same vein as “Midnight....,” while “Cotton” is a wry folk flavoured reflection on Southern life that melodically draws references to the well-known “Dixie.” The title of the penultimate “Last Sing For Mother,” warrants no analysis since it already perfectly captures the reason for its existence. A celebration, a homecoming, a looking back, a forgiving, a universal everything – and a loving daughter’s gift.

Book ending the closing section of this collection, and, in effect, as perfect Epilogue to the foregoing cut as one could imagine, is the Mann-Hilliard song “In The Wee Small Hours.” It was the title cut of a half-million selling Frank Sinatra album forty-six years ago. It became her mom’s favourite song.

Recorded in Nashville at the Steve Earle/Ray Kennedy facility, Room And Board, apart from the Peter Collins produced “In The Wee Small Hours,” Kennedy worked the sliders on the remainder of this collection. As ever, the compact Blue Moon Orchestra furnishes the musical support to Ms. Griffith’s lyrics. On “Where Would I Be” and “In The Wee Small Hours” you can detect a new, deeper, huskier voiced Nanci.

Didn’t someone once say, *“To have loved once and lost, is at least to have lived.”* Hell, the precise words don’t really matter. Someone has learned the lesson well.....goodnight, Father Time and Mother Nature. Life will go on, see y’all again tomorrow.....after all, time is a man made concept and, it never did have hands ?

Note. [B.S.T.] means British Standard Time, also known as Greenwich Mean Time.

Arthur Wood.
Kerrville Kronikles 07/01
[900 words]