



## Carrie Newcomer **"The Geography Of Light"** Rounder/Philo Records

**"The Geography Of Light"** was recorded at Airtime Studios in Bloomington, Indiana and the collection was co-produced by Carrie and studio proprietor David Weber. It's their third consecutive collaboration and in total Newcomer's eleventh solo release [+]. It seems appropriate at this juncture to mention Hugh Syme's widescreen 'almost surreal' artwork. On this occasion, Newcomer's lyrics furnish rich portraits of how humankind traverses night and day [and other borderlands], so it's appropriate that Carrie should be standing by the margin of land and sea, a location from which during the inevitable hours of darkness, seamen are guided and reassured by those structures that emit cyclical, magnified light. And on the left margin of this panorama stands a lighthouse. Overhead the daytime sky appears dull and stormy, while a shaft of vivid heaven-sent light strikes the ground in front of a smiling Newcomer, in the form of a large multi-paned window. To the extreme right, in the far distance stands safe refuge - a two-storey family home - while to Carrie's right, loaded with risk and uncertainty, plates spin precariously on thin rods – two such plates are visible, but there's the possibility that more lie beyond the limits of this scene. As for duration this song collection tops fifty minutes, while the fourteenth and closing song is listed as a Bonus Track...and for good reason. One that will eventually become apparent.....

Last week I reviewed Beth Nielsen Chapman's album **"Psalms"** and it included a track titled "This Life That's Lent To You." Adopting such an approach to life in **"The Geography Of Light"** Newcomer takes the listener on an exploration of the garden of delights – natural and manmade - in which we dwell, and then for good measure contemplates 'the beyond.' "There Is A Tree," the string – acoustic guitar, violin, banjo etc. – and percussion driven album opener, possesses a rootsy Appalachian feel. Lyrically couched in the first person, the narrator reflects on her connection with 'the spiritual,' offers the 'bare to the bone' insight *"I've always lived inside my head, And often utterly alone"* and adds the self-deprecating *"I'm the fool whose life's been spent. Between what's said and what is meant."* "The Clean Edge Of Change," based on a poem Carrie wrote after reading Parker J. Palmer's **"Let Your Life Speak: Listening For The Voice Of Vocation"** [Jossey Bass, ISBN-13: 978-0787947354, 1999], reflects on how we overcome problems that crop up in our life journey, and concludes that resolution is best achieved by proactively working ones way through the problem. Night and day, light and dark, heaven and hell are all mentioned in "A Map Of Shadows," as Carrie waxes poetic with *"It's four in the morning, the last dregs of the evening. I sit and rock on the front porch swing, 'til the morning sky starts bleeding."* The lyric also references those devilish 'no beginning, no end' graphic creations by twentieth century Dutch artist Maurits Cornelis Escher. It appears that geologically speaking Indiana is littered with "Geodes," rocks that outwardly look plain and ordinary but when broken open reveals intricate crystalline structures. Assuming that you possess an awareness of America's contemporary folk songwriters, Carrie's "Geodes" - *"miracles clothed in the commonplace"* – fulfil as sacred a role as the [ten-pin] bowling ball cruciform in Kate Campbell's "Heart Of Hearts."

"Two Toasts" is a lyrically reworking, with musical setting, of one of Parker Palmer poems that praises the mystery that unfolds between us humans each and every day - *"To Words and How They Live Between Us... To Us and How We Live Between the Words..."* With "Where You Been" Carrie envisions the second coming, the venue being Chicago not Jerusalem, while the humble donkey is exchanged for a gas guzzling "borrowed El Camino" pick-up of unspecified vintage. Last year Carrie and four other Bloomington area songwriters participated in the nineteen song Rosehill Records release **"Wilderness Plots,"** a work that captured in verse [and melody] episodes from Scott Russell Sanders' 1983 short story collection of the same name. Based on fact, Sanders stories painted portraits of life in what is now Indiana over the period from the discovery of the Ohio River through to onset of the American Civil War. Carrie reprises her frontier tale of loss and longing "Biscuits And Butter," and it's presented here in a

longer form supported by electric instruments, while, set to an up-tempo melody, based on another Sanders story she delivers the steely portrait of "One Woman And A Shovel." Where "A Map Of Shadows" focused on the transition from night to day, "A Mean Kind Of Justice" draws our attention to the fine line that separates vengeance and justice and takes as its maxim the Ghandi quote "*An eye for an eye and we all go blind.*"

Carrie launched her solo recording career over a decade and a half ago with "**Visions And Dreams.**" In the ensuing years her vision has become pinpoint sharp, and she has actively drawn attention to the work of evangelist/political activist Jim Wallis, writers Philip Gulley and Barbara Kingsolver, and musicians Holly Near and Bernice Johnson Reagon. In addition to the latter and others I have already mentioned, in most instances she has also collaborated with them in public performance or as a co-writer. For me "Leaves Don't Drop [They Just Let Go]," co-written with her Seattle based friend Mike Mains, is the latest chapter in an ongoing song cycle that has given us "My Father's Only Son," "Three Women," "Amelia Almost Thirteen," "The Rooms My Mother Made" and more, and yet this new creation also works in a universal context. If only for their own satisfaction and to keep their fans on their toes, artists consistently reference or reassess erstwhile subjects, albeit viewed from a fresh aspect, and "Leaves Don't Drop [They Just Let Go]" displays the thought processes of a mature woman who has lost parents and whose own offspring has now reached adulthood.

"You'd Think By Now" finds the narrator shaking his/her head after learning, for the umpteenth time, one of life's lessons. While "Where You Been" approached the subject of faith obliquely, "Lazarus" – "*the one that he raised*" - reflects on this Biblical character's life post the miracle. A book by James Hollis that, paraphrasing Carrie's words, "*characterized our journey into adulthood and beyond not as a "crisis" but rather as a "passage"*" was the inspiration for "Throw Me A Line." By way of confirming that she's a million miles from a finger wagging, scowling, "*Now listen to me,*" purse lipped schoolmarm, Carrie closes this superb collection with the light hearted, amusing and slyly worded [Bonus Track] "Don't Push Send" a cautionary tale that reflects upon the speedy delivery of electronic mail and the art of "*pausing for a moment and checking the text and the named recipient[s] before hitting send.*" The moral, *act [even react] in haste and repent at your leisure*, appears to apply.

Many songwriters peak three or four albums into their solo career, but Newcomer broke that mould a while back and has consistently topped her previous effort. "**The Geography Of Light**" screams that year-end it's a 'shoe-in' for Folkwax Album of the Year, as Carrie is for the Artist title. I'd say both are cast iron certainties...and if there was a whit of justice in this world, a February visit to Los Angeles would be the real and fair reward.

#### **Note.**

[+] – Excluded from the head count is the soundtrack CD that accompanied initial copies of Carrie's in-concert video "**The Age Of Possibility/Live At The Indian Theatre**" [2000].

Folkwax Score 10 out of 10

#### **Arthur Wood.**

Kerrville Kronikles 01/08.