

Currents

the contemporary roots scene with Arthur Wood



Dave Carter & Tracy Grammer

Soon after releasing his debut solo recording, *Snake-Handlin' Man*, in 1995 Dave Carter formed a partnership with a stringed instrument-playing genius named Tracy Grammer. Following their 1998 self-produced, self-financed collection, *When I Go*, this mid March saw the duo release a breathtaking new album, *Tanglewood Tree*.

Dave Carter was born in Oxnard, California, and grew up on the northern boundary of the Lone Star State and Oklahoma's southern counties. His mother Nadine Carter (she succumbed to Alzheimer's disease three years ago) was a religiously committed woman. "A mystic, in the best American sense," recalls Dave. "There's a down home, magical approach to Christian fundamentalism that a lot of people still

have in this country. I grew up swimming in stuff like speaking in tongues."

Life in the Carter household wasn't entirely hymns and homilies, however. "My mother's guilty pleasure was listening to Elvis," while Dave's father was a Kingston Trio fan. "My father read us poetry when we were kids. I started life with an unquestioning interest in poetry. I thought that it was part of life."

As a youngster, Dave took piano lessons but switched to guitar at the age of 12. His grandmother introduced him to the music of Hank Williams and Dolly Parton, and he also took an interest in Buddhism which, he says, is bound into everything he does, along with Christianity.

During his late teens, Dave worked in a band travelling around Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma before he entered the University of Oklahoma studying for a fine arts degree. He later gained a Masters in Music Theory, followed by qualifications in Computer Science and Mathematics: "To understand Music Theory you have to go into Mathematics," he states.

In 1991, he moved to college in Portland, Oregon and later earned a certificate in meditation and shamanism at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in California.

"As I studied, it became clear to me through a series of profound experiences that I should be writing songs. I literally had visions. Songs came to me in dreams."

Seeking validation for those songs, in 1995 Carter undertook a Jack Kerouac styled journey. "I drove my old car, an '85 Cutlass, across the desert with no map in the general direction of Nashville."

During a stopover in Music City, Carter performed at Douglas Corner. "It's a songwriter's hangout. They let me play at the writer's night. My hands were shaking. I could barely hold the guitar and my voice was querulous. I sang *Grand Prairie*, *Texas Homesick Blues* and *Long Black Road Into Tulsa Town* and got an extremely enthusiastic reception."

Enthused, Carter returned to Oregon and began performing at open mikes. "For the first time in my life, I knew exactly what to do. I never stopped writing songs. I don't want to sound conceited, but I was aware that the songs were strong. After Nashville, I made the commitment to drop everything. I'm deeper in debt and more sleep deprived than I've ever been, yet I've never been this happy."

Dave was soon entering and winning songwriting contests. Success at a monthly Portland Songwriters Association contest preceded his win at the Sisters Folk Festival. At a party he met Portland songwriter Dana Denton

who had just built a recording studio in his home. Carter's first album, *Snake-handlin' Man*, was produced by Denton in 1995.

Carter met Tracy Grammer in February 1996; she had moved to Portland a couple of months earlier. Born in 1968 in Homestead, Florida, she relocated with her family to California. Aged nine, she took up the violin and led the High School Symphony Orchestra through her teen years. Following graduation, she studied at the University of California; sorely disappointed when she failed to make Berkeley's chamber orchestra, she set her violin aside and focused her studies on Literature and Anthropology. Eight years elapsed before she picked up her instrument again.

"During one of the periods when I wasn't going to school, I lived with my dad. His friend Curtis Coleman had been a New Christy Minstrel during the Sixties. Curtis performed at local coffee houses and one night he got me to sing. At the time, it was terrifying. Obviously there was something that I really enjoyed because I went home and said to my dad, 'Let me have your guitar so that I can learn some songs.' Then I got my violin out and gradually got back into music."

Tracy graduated from Berkeley in the mid-Nineties, and moved to Portland. Soon after meeting Carter, she joined his band, initially playing violin and mandolin. When the other band members couldn't make a gig, Carter was faced with a dilemma.

"What he didn't know," says Tracy, "was when I was really young, in school musicals, I used to get the guy's part because I had a loud voice. The day before the show, Dave asked if I could sing. I said, 'Well, yeah'. I had waited months for this opportunity. I already knew the harmonies. Dave was floored. He thought it was a miracle. It wasn't really a miracle, but he thought it was. From that point on we had this duo thing."

Debating in early 1998, by September Dave and Tracy had won songwriter contests at the Wildflower, Kerrville and Napa Valley Folk Festivals. By this time, the recording of their first album together, *When I Go* (Red River Records), was in full swing – in Tracy's kitchen, using second-hand equipment.

On *When I Go*, Grammer's violin, mandolin, guitar and vocals augment Carter's voice, guitar, banjo and bass; the only, and occasional, embellishment is Eric Park's harmonica and accordion. The sound landscapes painted draw seamlessly on traditional and contemporary folk forms: myth, mysticism and magical events permeate

the images, events and story lines of the ten Carter originals.

The opening title cut, underscored by Grammer's mournful fiddle, draws heavily on spiritual Native American images as Carter eulogises death. In *Elvis Presley*, the narrator recalls a dream in which the rock'n'roll icon surveys, with concern, locations ravaged during the American Civil War. In another song, a man's wife has become a harridan: a fresh start involves changing his name from *Frank To Valentino* as "he's headed south, the close-range victim of her sawed-off mouth".

The theme of unrequited love is revisited in *Lancelot*, an Arthurian western. Lest you fear that the album is poetic and dry throughout, fantasy and humour pervade the energetic, acoustic trucking anthem, *Little Liza Jane*.

Their contest wins and press plaudits for *When I Go* brought Dave and Tracy to the attention of national audiences. Which brings us to *Tanglewood Tree*, their first recording for Jim Olsen's Signature Sounds label.

This studio-cut collection features 11 Carter originals. Continuing to draw on diverse melodic sources, Dave's lyrics are poetry for the soul. The opening *Happytown (All Right With Me)* is an uptempo paean to the pain and pleasure of love. Partway through the title track, *Tanglewood Tree*, Grammer delivers a searing twenty second violin solo that is the stuff of legend; like the myriad of roots that lie entwined beneath a tree, during the closing verse of the song, their voices hypnotically fuse into one.

Tracy's sassy vocal on *Crocodile Man* is delivered in the first person singular (male gender), while the narrator in *Cowboy Singer*, dreams of a paradise where "the labels don't care if you're old or you're young, and the Martins are cheaper". Carter, it should be noted, is a wicked humorist.

Stateside scribes have compared Carter's music to that of Lyle Lovett. Considering the spiritual and mystic bent of Carter's writing, his music sustains comparison with Jimmie Dale Gilmore's and that of Townes Van Zandt. It's Carter's perception that there are no borders in music.

"When you're a kid, you don't think about categories. It was all music to me. It all made sense. It still does. I don't see any problem with blending music. It's not that I make an effort to do it – it's just the way that it works."

What's more, Dave and Tracy make it work, beautifully. (For album availability, contact www.songs.com/daveandtracy or Signature Sounds, POB 106, Whately, MA 01093, USA) **CMP**

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