

CARRIE NEWCOMER

That longing for something better...

Carrie Newcomer launched her recording career during the 1980s as a member of Stone Soup, a West Lafayette, Indiana based folk trio in which she played dulcimer, guitar and handled lead vocals. The trio released two albums on Windchime Records—Newcomer had chimes on her front porch—each predominantly featured material she composed. At the dawn of the ensuing decade the threesome went their separate ways. Having begun life as a Stone Soup project, Newcomer's solo debut *VISIONS AND DREAMS* appeared in 1991. A Windchime release it sold 10,000 copies, and attracted the attention of Ken Irwin one of the founders of Rounder Records. Signing with the Massachusetts based label, her sophomore disc *AN ANGEL AT MY SHOULDER* appeared on their Philo subsidiary during 1994. With the addition of two bonus songs, Rounder/Philo reissued *VISIONS AND DREAMS* the following year.

Including the limited edition CD version of her concert video *LIVE AT THE INDIANA THEATRE* (released in 2000), the thirteen song *BEFORE AND AFTER* is Carrie's thirteenth solo release. All have been Rounder/Philo releases, a unique feat in today's music business, and a testament to the consistency and potency of Newcomer's musical vision. In terms of album production and liner artwork, on recent releases Newcomer has

consistently worked with, respectively, David Weber—proprietor of Airtime Studios—and Hugh Syme.

From initially cutting the rhythm tracks to adding lead and backing vocals, overdubbing additional instruments and mixing the songs, *BEFORE AND AFTER* was complete in three weeks. Mainly focusing on the new album, I interviewed Carrie by telephone at her Bloomington, Indiana home late last year. Bloomington has a music school that rivals Julliard,[®] and Carrie relocated to this flagship university town some two decades ago. *BEFORE AND AFTER* is their fourth straight co-production. As recording engineer, Weber first worked on Carrie's *MY TRUE NAME* (1998)—one of four albums she co-produced with Mark Williams. Airtime is located some ten miles north of Bloomington and was opened during the closing decade of last century.

I began by asking Carrie about David Weber. "I met him around 1992, so there was a personal connection before we worked together. I'm the lead producer but he's a huge, huge component in the production of these albums, hence the credit. In gathering a collection of songs I develop a vision for them. I have a little recording set-up so I can make demos at home. Once David has heard the songs we discuss them, including which musicians I'll be bringing in. As far as the creative process goes David has great ears, great musical sensibilities and

wonderful ideas. I come with the general vision, but in the studio there's this wonderful interplay between David, the musicians and myself."

Apart from Nashville based electric/upright bassist Byron House, *BEFORE AND AFTER* features the support players that created Carrie's *THE GEOGRAPHY OF LIGHT* (2008). "I bring in musicians who are open to the creative process of give and take. It's very egoless which I think is incredible, especially where everyone works on honing ideas." I wondered if there was a certain security in working with the same musicians. "It's important to find musicians who are elegant players. What I mean by that is that it's all about song. The musicians—on this and past albums—are masters of their instruments. If you need lots of notes any of them could do that and play them really well and beautifully. An elegant musician plays exactly

the right note perfectly, exactly when it's needed. It's not about being flashy, it's what makes the song most powerful. It's not even about me being the writer of the song, it's about the song."

Hugh Syme is probably best known for his graphic art for heavy metal bands such as Rush. Newcomer began working with the Canadian on *THE AGE OF POSSIBILITY* (2000). Over the years his creations have become progressively more complex and intriguing—*BEFORE AND AFTER* maintains that approach. I wondered how Carrie found Syme. "I loved a cover he did for Indianapolis musician Jennie DeVoe. Hugh was living in Indiana at the time. Now he's in Toronto. He's a musician as well as a visual artist."

Before conducting the interview I'd only seen the album cover picture. I asked Carrie to explain Hugh's latest concept. "The motif is an old style Orient Express kind of train." Creation of the artwork is initiated when Syme receives a copy of Carrie's demos and, importantly, her lyrics. "Hugh interprets the lyrics in order to establish a clear understanding of what the album is all about. Having worked with me for a decade he has a pretty good idea of the themes that run in my music. Next, we talk about what brought about the songs, and my vision for each song in terms of how it will be produced."



Photos by Jim McGuire

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Having worked up a number of initial concepts, Syme's artwork gradually evolves over time. "Hugh has a wry sense of humour and in one BEFORE AND AFTER panel a rhinoceros stands beside a stretch of railway track. The events we mark our lives by—the before and the after—the idea of a spiritual as well as personal journey is very present on this album. I think he beautifully caught that in the images he created."

As a song cycle I asked Carrie how she saw BEFORE AND AFTER. "There are always a couple of themes that run in every project and some I revisit. Most writers have obsessions, things that fascinate them. Finding something extraordinary in what may seem like an absolutely ordinary day. That concept is definitely present on this album. Another theme that's very strong is the idea of the moment. We don't remember days, we remember moments. Our lives are a series of moments."

Carrie went on to enumerate major moments: "The birth of a child. The death of someone we've loved. A wedding or divorce," then added, "There are events we remember that we didn't realize at the time were small moments. We didn't realize we'd remember them always, and that they'd change us. For instance, how did she know that at that exact moment what I needed most in the world was someone to take my hand and say: 'It's gonna be alright.' Or the occasion I happened to be in the right part of the East Coast and the sky was

perfect and I saw so many falling stars it looked like fireworks. So it's both, but often—so often—our very important moments are small. The song *Before And After* is the most direct example of that. A song can infer so much more than it actually says, and it's true of that song. I leave spaces in my lyrics so listeners can relate from their own personal experience." *Before And After* features a guest vocal from label mate Mary Chapin Carpenter.

I Do Not Know Its Name relates Carrie's experience of something greater than herself—beautiful and mysterious. "The opening line of the *Dao De Ching* (aka *Tao Te Ching*) translates as 'The Name that can be named is not the Everlasting Name.' There are moments that we feel something greater than ourselves, moments of transcendence. What is that? We put names to it. Sometimes we use GOD language, but that doesn't always work for me because it seems to put it in a little box—and limit it somehow." A perfect example of concise editing, the lyric relates a number of intensely personal stories. She continued: "*I Do Not Know Its Name* is probably one of the more spiritual songs I've ever written. It's probably my favourite song on the album."

Having witnessed those falling stars, I asked if *Ghost Train* had been inspired by natural phenomena. "As you know I belong to a songwriting group here in Bloomington." Back in 2007 the five members—Carrie, Tim

Grimm, Krista Detor, Michael White and Tom Roznowski—released a thematic collection titled *WILDERNESS PLOTS* that should be a treasured icon in any self-respecting roots music fans collection. "We set each other songwriting assignments or challenges. My daughter suggested one particular song challenge. Go to Wikipedia, hit random shuffle and whatever comes up write a song about it. I cheated by repeatedly hitting the button until something came up that I was interested in. I guess *Ghost Train* confirms my leanings and fascinations. We give these tricks of light fearsome names. They may or may not be real. I found it interesting that we tell ourselves these stories that may or may not be true, and yet they have this power."

Michael White is guest vocalist on *Stones In The River*, a song about changes the narrator wishes to see in the world. "The song came out of a conversation I had with Parker J. Palmer, one of my favourite philosophers and writers. He's seventy and is a Quaker. He has written a couple of education classics, and also founded an organization called *Courage & Renewal*. I wrote it for a performance we were doing. We talked about how we may not see the fruit that comes from the trees that grew out of the seeds we planted. That doesn't make it any less important that you plant the seeds. It was a beautiful conversation and I used some of his language in the lyric, so he's credited in the liner notes."

As last century drew to a close it

seemed to me that Western society had lost its way. True enlightenment is rebuffed; those of whom I would expect better proffer lies as truths. *If Not Now* could be deemed a compelling wake up call. "One thing I've encountered everywhere I've been in recent years, and is present on this album, is a sense of longing. We're at a crossroads in our lives and in our world. It's a time of choosing. I sense people longing for something better, not wanting life to fall into darkness."

good words to come." I wondered if Carrie looked upon such interludes as joyous. "They are. I don't know about England, but in American culture you constantly have to be doing something. You have to be productive. Sometimes the most productive thing you can do as an artist is nothing. Of course the song's sentiment is also somewhat wry."

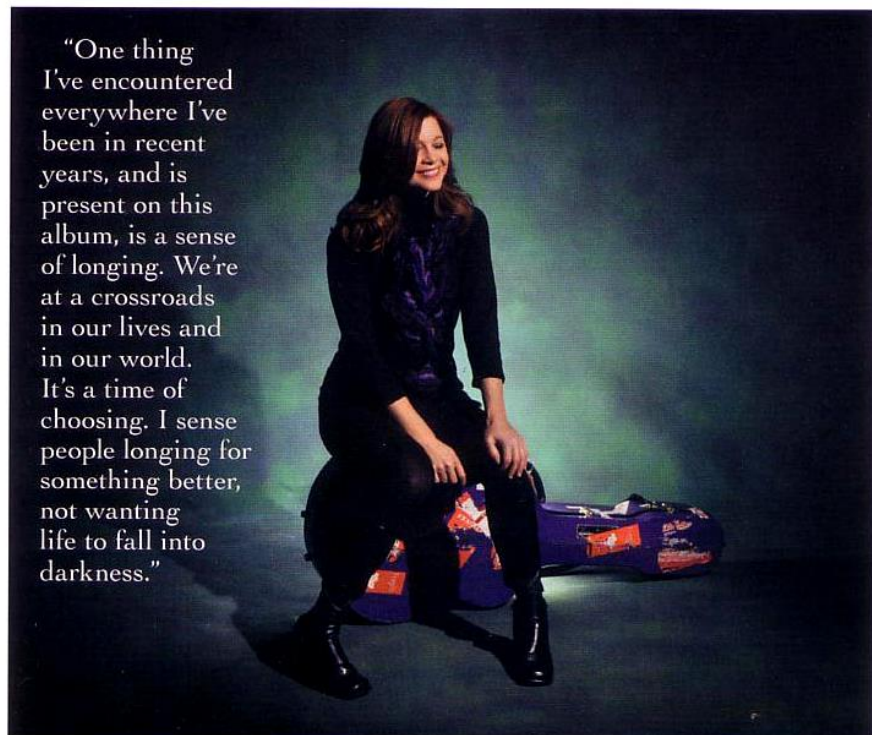
My favourite line on BEFORE AND AFTER is: "The greatest revolution is

If I'm on the road too long, I start yearning for home."

Savages in Scott Russell Saunders' book *WILDERNESS PLOTS* is barely a page long. It recalls the first white person born north of the Ohio River, who went on to live in a Utopian community where, aged ten, he witnessed a massacre. Saunders' story inspired *Do No Harm* a song that features a Krista Detor support vocal. "Some people say humankind is inclined to violence and darkness, while others say its justice and peaceful living. *Do No Harm* indicates that both aspects exist in our nature. We nurture what we choose to nurture."

Carrie closes BEFORE AND AFTER with two instances of lighthearted intricate wordplay, *I Wish I May, I Wish I Might* and *A Crash Of Rhinoceros*. I wondered if they were intended as an antidote to the other songs. "I'm always trying to hold the contradictions of my life and world somehow gracefully. One aspect of living an aware life is that you perceive the contradictions—the light and the dark. Humour is part of how I observe the world, so it gets into songs." It appears that *I Wish I May I Wish I Might* was inspired by Indiana writer (and Quaker minister) Philip Gulley's short story *Bill And Bunny*. "He mentions Indiana county fairs and that set me off on a jag. I researched them and many are hilarious. Some I made up, many are true—like Marshmallow Days in Ligonier. The song was written for a performance I did with Philip."

Late last year Carrie spent a month in India visiting community service projects during the day and performing concerts during the evenings. "It was incredibly powerful and life changing. I took back two things. Cultures are rich and different, and I love that. Secondly, I was so touched by what we share—when I sang about family, love, grieving, struggle and hope, there was this huge recognition relative to what I was talking about. Talk about before and after, I will never be the same." For Carrie's next project I guess it's a case of watch this space. In the meantime—from Chris Wagner's haunting violin on the opening, album title song to the humorous and high speed climax of *A Crash Of Rhinoceros*—I'd encourage you to savour life's imperceptible as well as infinite moments as embraced by Carrie Newcomer's stunning BEFORE AND AFTER. **Arthur Wood**



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Chris Wagner plays accordion at the outset of *A Small Flashlight* imbuing the melody with a Celtic edge. The lyric is based on the premise that we don't know what's ahead for us. "We can make plans, but we don't know what will happen tomorrow or next year. There's lots of change and transition for people right now. It seems like you are walking forward with only a little flashlight to illuminate your way. There isn't a big spotlight revealing the future. The good thing about a flashlight is you've got enough light for one step, and then another step, and so on."

I perceive *I Meant To Do My Work Today* as a very honest and personal song. "This feels like one of the more naked albums I've ever done." The narrator's focus is personal down time in which to embrace life and its mysteries. "It's a personal musing on, what is my true work. I have so many things I'm supposed to do. As a poet my true work is having time to daydream—to be quiet and allow the

a simple change of heart.' It appears in *A Small Change Of Heart* which, subjectively, parallels *If Not Now*. I mentioned to Carrie that I had found BEFORE AND AFTER a delight, but it was also her most challenging set of songs. Where *REGULARS AND REFUGEES* (2005) featured story songs, drawn from a vast well of personal experience BEFORE AND AFTER deftly explores the human condition. "Hopefully I write songs in a way that there's space for the listener to relate to them. I never want to repeat the previous album. I love artists who continually grow and explore, there's something courageous about that." A song titled *Coy Dogs* follows. "It's a cross between a coyote and a domesticated dog—a mix of domestication and wildness. On one level it's about me. I've been a touring musician most of my adult life. I love being at home, but if I'm home too long I start getting restless.