

Patty Griffin – An “American Kid” Interview



Patty Griffin's seventh studio recording, the twelve-song AMERICAN KID which she produced with Craig Ross, was released by New West Records in the United States on 7th May. Whichever way you try to look at it – song content or performance - AMERICAN KID is a classic collection, and in late April I talked to Patty by transatlantic telephone about her latest musical project. I began by asking if she recalled the first song on the album that she wrote. *"I think it might have been Gonna Miss You When You're Gone. I was working on my gospel music record when I wrote the song."* Although Patty couldn't recall the precise date, it could have been as early as 2008.

The AMERICAN KID press release quotes Griffin as stating that much of the new album *"was written to honour my father."* Her songs unquestionably share a palpable connection. *"That usually is the case, it just takes a little while to get to a point where you can see that. I trust that that's usually going to happen. And it did."* In terms of the timescale that brought awareness, she added *"Probably a couple of years into it, and maybe even as late as when we recorded the songs. I knew that a lot of things had to do with my father and his passing away. A lot of the inspiration came from me dealing with that event. I didn't really know how it was all going to tie together."*

With a suite of songs ready to record, I asked if there had been any last minute additions, changes or rewriting. *"No. I usually have a pretty strong dynamic foundation relative to the songs by the time I get to the studio. It's pretty rare that I don't."* Was Patty amazed when the AMERICAN KID songs, an intricate familial jigsaw in words and music, arrived naturally and of their own accord. *"It's always amazing to me that songs show up (laughs)."* She added, *"I've practiced writing songs for a long time. I still am practising writing songs. I'm not really sure how it works. That's a very good way to put that, it is amazing (laughs)."*

Over the years, in conversation with musicians regarding the writing process, it has been alluded to as *'shedding skin,' 'taking out the trash'* and more. *"You know there is something mystifying about it. I don't know how it works. I know that when I was a little girl, I loved to sing. When I sit down to write, I try to feel what I want to sing. That's how they show up. When they're really strong and written quickly, the words and music arrive together. That's very strange, but that's how it works. Then there are the ones that I have to craft. I go for melody that is a little bit beyond my world, and I'll sit there and work at it and shape it up. I love doing that. Those songs sometimes take me months to finish."*

Considering the AMERICAN KID focus on her late father, I enquired about the Griffin family background. *"My paternal grandparents came to America from Western Ireland, so my father*

was first generation American Irish. He was a young man, when his father died. During WWII my father served in Europe.” There’s mention in Please Don’t Let Me Die In Florida of “fight the Japs,” which Patty clarified as poetic licence, since the ensuing line ends “I threw my cap.” “After the war he entered a Trappist Monastery and was really serious about it. Eventually they took him aside and said he wasn’t monk material. He remained friends with the head of the abbey who would visit us with some frequency during the summer. My father was a bit lost I think, he really didn’t know exactly what to do. He was really a poet in his heart. There is something mystical about science - I think that’s how he saw it, and he became a physics teacher in high school. I’m the youngest of seven children, I have three sister and three brothers. My father was very busy during the 1950’s (laughs).”

Once aware of the lyrical connection shared by her new songs, what had Patty done in order to bring them to fruition in the studio. *“During the period that the songs came together, I had been investigating country music. I’d really been digging into it. I’d done a lot of work in Nashville and had been exposed to a lot of country music. This was really my first, intentional, entry into that. I grew up around country music in a rural part of Maine. That was what was around, but growing up I preferred Motown and black artists. When I was young I didn’t really listen to country music. I simply ended up sounding the way I sound - I’ve always been told that I have a bit of country in my voice. All you got to do around here is tell three friends that you want to know more about country music, and they start loading you up with things. That’s what happened. I got all kinds of stuff from many different people. This occurred from 2008 through 2010 and I’d listen to country artists while making these long drives from Nashville to Austin and back again.”*

Despite the Nashville/country music connection, the pursuit of convention was NOT what Patty had in mind for AMERICAN KID. *“I thought it would be good to make this record with the Dickinson brothers who are not Nashville guys, they’re Memphis raised. That brings a whole other flavour to their style. Off all my records, to me, this had the most straight up Nashville sound, but I didn’t want a production that was from Nashville. I actually tried that a little bit, and I think people tend to go for the obvious too quickly, when they try to make a record like that in Nashville. I thought it would be wise to have the Dickinson brothers play on it and then bring in my friend Craig Ross. I think Craig’s biggest influence is probably This Mortal Coil (laughs). He comes from this whole other musical world and by bringing those two worlds together with these songs, that are much more straightforward melodically relative to country music, would be a good way to make a sonic thing happen that wasn’t necessarily what you would expect.”*



Patty met Luther Dickinson (guitar) and Cody Dickinson (drums) when the North Mississippi Allstars’ opened American shows by Robert Plant’s Band of Joy during 2011. Constructed by their father, the late and legendary musician/producer Jim Dickinson (d. 2009), the album was partly recorded at Zebra Ranch in Coldwater, Mississippi – located 35 miles south of Memphis *“Before Bad of Joy, I can’t honestly say I’d heard them play a lot. I’d heard them on the radio. First of all, I think Luther is just brilliant and so versatile, and when I heard him play stripped down it became a lot more obvious to me. His acoustic playing is phenomenal.”* During the Band of Joy U.S. tour, Patty recalled. *“I sat down with Luther Dickinson a few times. I’d get these guitar or mandolin playing assignments, when I’d never played a mandolin before, with two hours to get it right before the show. He would sit down with me and try his best to show me how to do stuff (laughs). That was how I got to really see the beauty of*

his acoustic playing. He would play these beautiful things while we were hanging out.” She continued, “Cody has got tremendous feel and it really is Memphis based. I wanted to have that sound, plus they’re brothers so they have a way of playing with each other which is pretty fantastic – unique – that’s hard to find (laughs). They’re two lovely respectful guys, not only of everyone around them but of each other. They have a great relationship, and it’s great to be around them period.”

Patty continued. “We didn’t plan on recording at Zebra Ranch. They offered that possibility. They have a lot of toys there that they can play with. It was easier to go to them, than have them haul everything up to Nashville where I have a studio. That was just luck for us to be in that place. It was pretty great of them to offer. We did five solid days from late November into early December 2011 in North Mississippi with the Dickinson boys, and then Luther came up to Nashville with us and we finished some acoustic things there. Cody had another project to do at that point.” The other facility used during the recording of AMERICAN KID was Studio G! “That’s the studio I’ve shared with Doug Lancio for years. Doug’s son named it when he was a very little boy (laughs). I don’t know why, we just thought ‘OK, that works. We’ll take that’.” Doug Lancio first played with Patty On FLAMING RED and contributed to AMERICAN KID. “That’s a long time, fifteen years or so. On this forthcoming tour he won’t be with me, he’s got another project that he’s working on.”

Craig Ross produced Patty’s 2004 album IMPOSSIBLE DREAM. Did she recall how she had met him. “Very well. I’ve known Craig since 1995. I was in New Orleans making a record for A&M. The record never came out, but we remained friends. The producer of that record, the Canadian guy Malcolm Burn, brought him in. They were friends and had worked together.” As well as being a producer, Ross is a 2 for 1 deal and on AMERICAN KID he contributes guitar, bass, mandolin, baritone, omnichord and organ. “He’s a really great player. I thought for this project he’d keep a really sharp eye on things getting too tidy. The way things can get when you do them in Nashville. He’s got a real sense of the traditional which is great. There is a mathematical aspect to recording in Nashville that I don’t like. Old bluegrass and old country music was recorded out of tune, even Patsy Cline - I was listening to her on the radio last weekend, and she was out of tune and it was beautiful. I wanted a real loose feel, so between the Dickinson brothers and Craig I thought they’d be able to get that sound. I think they did, in a really beautiful way.”

Patty continued. “Craig’s contribution was huge. I told him from the get go that ‘I want to make a folk record. Everybody has been calling me a folk singer, and I’ve been fighting it – but I am. This is a folk record, these songs are folk songs so let’s go for it.’ I also told him ‘Here’s the deal, I would really like for the songs to have a shine on them and an etherealness to them – some kind of beauty on the record that threads through it, that is other worldly.’ That’s his business, that’s what he does. He took these traditional sounding musicians from different worlds – I guess if you’re British those worlds aren’t that far apart, but here they are – Memphis guys are really different to New Orleans guys, and Nashville guys and Texas guys. Everybody’s got a different thing. In different parts of America, different sounds are generated. I wanted that to be on there, but I also wanted there to be this real delicate way of doing that. That’s Craig’s speciality, the delicate. The little subtle sparkle that goes into it, that lifts you out of normal territory and makes it much more interesting to listen to. Craig is a Houston guy, he played a lot of baritone guitar and bass on this record which you can’t rule out as being a contribution to the sound because when he plays he’s got a genuine black feel.”

In Nashville, on a couple of songs each, John Deaderick contributed organ and piano, while Byron House played bowed bass. “We did almost everything in a couple of days, pretty much. We couldn’t get Byron until the mix week. That came a few months after we recorded. He came in and doctored some things that we didn’t feel we quite had yet. I didn’t feel like I had the Irish Boy vocal, so what you hear on the record was recorded while we were mixing. That one kept

eluding me. When I finally got it, it was the last day of the mix. Craig called me as I was driving away from the studio in Nashville. He said 'Do you know what day it is?' It was St. Patrick's Day. That was pretty funny (laughs). My father has a good sense of humour (laughs)." Patty's vocal is a prime example of musical magic that can't be planned, it simply happens. In the case of *Irish Boy* her heart and soul resides in spades in her interpretation.

Knowing that Patty rarely co-writes I enquired about the two contributions Robert Plant made to *AMERICAN KID*. "While touring with Robert and Band of Joy, I was messing around with some chords during a soundcheck and he started singing over it. We recorded it, and, you know, I wasn't going to not write with Robert when he asked me (laughs). At the time I was working for him and I thought 'He's really good. I should do this. I don't know half of what he knows, and I love what he does so I'm going to try this even though I don't think of myself as someone who is very good at co-writing.' With *Highway Song* we sat down and co-wrote that thing. That was pretty fun to do. Ohio was pretty much finished, and he shaped it in such a way that it became something else."

Had Patty recorded live with the support players, or constructed each song by overdubbing. "We recorded *Ohio* live at Zebra Ranch, and recorded *Highway Song* live in Nashville. We sang *Highway Song*, maybe five times, and got what we wanted. We mostly recorded live. There were a couple of songs, and I can't remember which ones now, that we weren't getting with the band – just dynamically. I was sliding all over the place vocally and so Craig backed the band out and they had to track over my vocal, which I always feel a little bad about but they were great."

Mike Poole, who engineered Patty's Gospel music Grammy winning album *DOWNTOWN CHURCH* (2010), is credited with mixing *AMERICAN KID*.

"I was around for that, there were definitely some directions I needed to give." The liner booklet and album cover artwork is credited to Austin based Mishka Westell. Considering the Griffin genealogical backdrop that inspired this recording, surely Patty's input had been significant. "I did have a concept, but it evolved. I started off with a black and white photograph by Stanley Kubrick the film director. I think he was working for *LIFE* magazine, and he took these incredible photos in New York City of kids boxing during the early nineteen-fifties. I started with that, and then realised if it was to be called *AMERICAN KID* that it could be any face, from anywhere in America. The diversity and depth to that is enormous. An English record cover designer named Mishka Westell did the design, and I said 'Basically it could be anything.' She went with her feeling on it and found the photograph that is the cover." During 1864 New York based Charles Paxson photographed 'Charley, a slave boy from New Orleans' aka 'Freedom's Banner.' Paxson's original is lodged with The Library of Congress in Washington D.C. Toward the rear of the liner booklet, on the lower right hand corner of the album credits page, there's a photograph of a uniformed Lawrence Joseph Griffin, Patty's late father. "Yeah, that's Larry."



The sole cover song on *AMERICAN KID* is Lefty Frizzell's *Mum And Dad's Waltz*. During August 1951, the Texan scored a Country Chart topper with *Always Late (With Your Kisses)* b/w *Mum And Dad's Waltz*. The latter title, penned by Frizzell, peaked at # 2. Had Patty heard the song as a youngster living in Maine. "No that was something that came from the group of people I mentioned earlier, when I wanted to know more about country music. The first record I

got was *THE BEST OF LEFTY FRIZZELL* from Kathi Whitley at my management team in Nashville. I actually had earmarked another Frizzell song, *I Want To Be With You Always*, but Buddy (Miller) asked if we could do that one for the *MAJESTIC SILVER STRINGS* record. I really wanted to sing a Lefty song because there's something about his songs, they're so - you know he's the guy that wrote "If you've got the money honey, I've got the time," but he also wrote these tender ballads. That's pretty vulnerable stuff to write about your mum and dad, when you're a hard drinkin' grown man. I just loved the song. It's really beautiful. I think it's deep in a certain way. It's just so simple and good, and a very rare thing to hear anybody do, so I decided to record it."

The DVD that accompanies the deluxe version of *AMERICAN KID* features an interview in which Patty refers to her late father as "being a very reserved man," one who reluctantly imparted stories about himself to family members. Patty's reply was somewhat lyrical. "For me reading historic novels is deeper and better, in a way, than reading the history. You can read somebody's biography or autobiography and you think "I got it. I got it." And then you read the timeline, and there's nothing there that's even close. It's so hard to describe a life. The only person 'that is inside this story kind of space' is you. Learning about the connection that we have with others is pretty mysterious. For me the best way to connect that anyway, with or without stories that they tell you - which change by the way - you ask them one year what it is, and the next year it's a completely different thing. It's better to go with your own feelings on it and write your own story. That way maybe you'll get closer to something."

For me the opening and closing songs, respectively *Go Wherever You Want To Go* and *Gonna Miss You When You're Gone*, neatly bookend the collection. They celebrate life. Selecting the running order of the songs (for an album) is an art. Did Patty consider them to be bookends, "I never did, not until this moment. That's interesting. Probably is, but I didn't mean to do that. It's just that they worked well." Having become familiar with *AMERICAN KID* over a period of two months prior to interviewing Patty, they also function as wondrous eulogies.

Ohio is the album's first single release. Why of all the possible North American choices did Patty choose the Ohio River, as the setting. "There's a great novelist in America, she's a Nobel laureate actually, so you probably know who she is - Toni Morrison. She wrote a novel called *BELOVED*, and for a huge part of the book someone is hiding on the Ohio River, trying to escape slavery. That's where it comes from." Morrison's 1987 novel is based on real life African-American slave, Margaret Garner, who during 1856 temporarily escaped slavery by fleeing from Kentucky to Ohio - a free state. When a posse arrived to retrieve Margaret and her children under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, confronted with tumultuous choices, she killed her two-year-old daughter rather than allow her to be recaptured. Sonically the melody possesses an Eastern feel. "The melody is mine, I even had the structure of it including the Eastern feel, I just didn't have a shape for it, or the tempo - Robert came up with that. When he slowed it down, that Eastern aspect really became prominent and obvious."

In *Irish Boy*, celebrating the end of war, an inebriated soldier dances with a dark haired girl in downtown Boston's Scollay Square, and, later, recalls an innocent, bygone time in the city's West Roxbury Cemetery where he and his kid brother laughed like hyenas while climbing trees. "That's based on a story my father told me." It's followed by *Get Ready Marie*. At a SXSW 2013 promotional appearance, Griffin intimated that it was "a sexy song about my grandparents. That's a pretty hard thing to write." Lighthearted and humorous (nay ribald) lyrics are not Griffin's 'stock in trade,' yet this boisterous 'kick over the traces' piano/mandolin propelled song is a departure and a delight. I wondered if, once written, Patty had harboured doubts about recording it. "No (laughs). It's kind of cheesy. We recorded that song in Nashville. We required John Deaderick around for that one. I made everybody sing, but I spared Robert. He didn't have to sing on that one. That's my maternal grandmother and grandfather, they were French Canadians."



A conflict stressed “*American kid*” narrates the subtly powerful, penultimate offering *Not A Bad Man*. Five years ago “*signed up when I was nineteen,*” he’s now the troubled victim of a sophisticated contemporary conflict. “*That was one of the first stories I heard about returning veterans. People who were involved in the conflict, that were sent home with some severe mental health issues. This was before the government acknowledged that it was happening and began doing something for those guys. This guy ended up not being able to get out of the military, and his family was pretty*

distraught about that. I wrote the song around that story.”

The top-drawer songs apart, a deal of serendipity brought the five-star AMERICAN KID to fruition. What if Plant had not recruited Patty? What if another artist or band had opened the Band of Joy’s 2011 American tour? Folk and country music has been my chosen listening fare for close on half a century, so my summation is simple. AMERICAN KID is one the finest original song collections, lyrically and musically, that I’ve ever heard.

Brought to you from the desk of the Folk Villager

aka Arthur Wood.

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