

Tracy Grammer – The Past And The Future, But Mostly The Here And Now

The “Flower Of Avalon” Interview – Part I

*The interview with Tracy Grammer took place on the afternoon of Tuesday 5th April 2005. Tracy was somewhere in Western Massachusetts and I was at home in Birmingham, England. In this three-part interview as well as mostly talking about her first full solo album, we will touch on Tracy's past career and also look at how she views the future. Many thanks to Flora Reed for the disc and to Jessica Byers for setting up the interview. I began by asking Tracy about the first recording sessions for “**Flower Of Avalon**”.....*

Folk Wax : The liner booklet states that the basic tracks were recorded by Mark Thayer at Signature Sounds studio. Was this at the label's old Whately studio.

Tracy Grammer : Yes, but it was actually located in Palmer, Massachusetts. It was an old barn and Mark lived in the bottom half of it, and the studio was in the top half. A cosy space. We recorded there in December of 2003. We found ourselves a day short because of a snowstorm, so maybe our timing wasn't perfect [Laughs]. During those sessions it was John Jennings, Mike Rivard, Lorne Entress, me and Mark. Right at the tail end Jim Henry was there. We were there for maybe a week – five days at least, I don't remember exactly. We put together the basic tracks in terms of acoustic guitars, a scratch vocal and the rhythm section. Sometimes, if inspiration struck, we would add another instrument. On “Shadows Of Evangeline” I came up with this part on a walkabout dulcimer and Jennings pointed to the microphone and had me go sit and put it down and that was that. Most of the overdubs were done, either by Jim Henry at the end of that week, or, later on, in different studios.

FW : When you cut the original tracks were you using the Wounded Healer.

TG : Actually, no, I was not. I used three different violins on the album. One is the Wounded Healer, the old violin. Another one was a borrowed instrument, that someone in Portland, a violin-maker named Edward Geesner, loaned to me for the sessions at Signature. The third one is the Lovely Vermont, which, of course, is the new instrument.

FW : How did you meet John Jennings.

TG : Let me go backwards to July of 2002 – two days after Dave died Mary Chapin Carpenter sent me an e-mail, just to express her condolences and to tell us - tell me, that she had heard our music and was a big fan. This was revelatory to me, off course, because she's my hero. She's probably my favourite singer and performer and writer, for what - ten, fifteen, however many years I've been paying attention to music. So this was really big for me. Of course I knew John Jennings name because where there's Mary Chapin Carpenter, for the most part there's John Jennings. When we started speaking about the new album, I said to Jim Olsen that I would love to have a co-producer. I know that, for me, I do my best work bouncing off of somebody else. I don't do my best work by myself. I really think that I get more out of interaction, and what I call the ping factor, than I do just sitting in a room making all the decisions [Laughs]. I wanted a co-conspirator, that's what I really wanted. Dave and I had always been very wary of the concept of a producer, because we thought it was evil the way that some producers will go in and lay their sound on top of someone else's songs. And almost render the artist invisible. I didn't want that and I knew that wherever Dave was, he would protest in his own way. I was looking for someone who was accustomed to working with singer/songwriters and who had a light touch, in terms of production. I guess, because of my connection with Mary Chapin Carpenter, I thought of John Jennings. Jim Olsen also thought of John Jennings, and said that he had worked with other people like myself and why don't we call him. Jim Olsen, I think, made the pitch and John Jennings, who was also a fan – I didn't know, but he was – was absolutely delighted to be onboard. That's how all of that was engineered. It was really a blessing. When I finally met John Jennings – we had had several phone conversations, just talking about – you know I had shared the songs with him, and we talked about the approaches that we'd like to take with the album, and the instrumentation of things – but mostly we just talked about life [Laughs] and everything but music. I really knew that I just loved John Jennings and I was going to enjoy the process of working with him. That all turned out to be true.

FW : So from the outset, he was aware of the fact that it was going to be a co-production.

TG : Yeah. I made that clear – I felt funny about it, because I thought “*Oh my God, you know, he’s John Jennings*”- at the same time I knew that I had some ideas, and I knew that I didn’t want to just sit back and you know, let him totally handle it. That’s not the way I work. Neither did I want to handle it by myself. I did sort of frame it with “*Are you going to be my co-conspirator in this adventure?*” He said, “*Co-conspirator, perfect. Let’s go*” [Laughs]. John made charts for everything, and all the musicians had the music in advance. They knew the structure of the songs. They knew how things were going to go. In the studio, we got together in a circle and I would give them as much information as I could about the song. Where it came from. Why it was important. What kind of movie I was trying to film, you know [Laughs], with the music. Then we would play and see how things felt. The first day was a run through and we didn’t record anything. We kind of grooved and got the feeling of things right. Then we started recording on the second day.

FW : Presumably most of the songs that are included on “**Flower Of Avalon**” you had been performing with Dave during the last months of his life.

TG : Some of them. Like “Mother I Climbed” and “Winter When He Goes.” What else? We had started playing “Preston Miller” and “Hard To Make It.” “Hey Ho” we had not played very much at all. “Shadows Of Evangeline” and “Any Way I Do” – those songs were actually from the days when Dave and I had a band. This would be back, like, in 1997, and were not a huge part of our repertoire even then. In fact, “Shadows Of Evangeline” we rarely played. Then there were two songs that had never been played in public, “Gypsy Rose” and “Phantom Doll.” “Phantom Doll” was the last song Dave completed.

FW : I guess for those songs that you had played with Dave, a duo arrangement of the music existed. Did those arrangements evolve and change after Dave passed.

TG : Yeah. Some things changed, because by the end of 2003, I had been playing a lot of things on my own. Testing the material on the road with Donny Wright, my first touring partner. The arrangement to “Hey Ho” for instance, was an arrangement that I came up with in my rehearsals with Donny. It was not the way that Dave would have done it. He would never have had any sort of dramatic ending of the song like we have. That wasn’t the way he wrote it, but that was the way I heard it. So yes, some things evolved as time passed. When I hit the studio in December I was ready to go. As for “Phantom Doll,” I remembered my conversations with Dave about how he would like that song to go, what the feeling was behind the song and where it came from, and who he was trying to invoke and all that sort of thing. In the case of songs that were less familiar to me, I tried to honour his intentions the best I could.

FW : Were there more than ten songs on the list to be recorded.

TG : There were two additional songs, one was called “Walk With Me” and is a duet. I had hoped to sing that with Richard Shindell but it didn’t work out. Then I thought I would sing it with Jim Henry, but as it turned out it, it didn’t fit with the other songs. It was too slow. It wasn’t moving me. It was the track that I would skip over the most on the demo CD of rough cuts, and so I thought, “*Here’s a song that’s not ready to go. We’ll skip that.*” Another one that we considered, but didn’t lay down at all, was a song called “Quick Draw Southpaw’s Last Hurrah.”

FW : [Laughs] That sounds like another of Dave’s gunfighter ballads.

TG : [Laughs] No, it’s actually a very sweet song about a kid who sees a character named Quick Draw Southpaw in the local circus. It’s a feel good song about the cycle of things and about our heroes. An interesting song for Dave to have written considering that he was a leftie. In the end, of course, the guy passes the legacy on to a kid in the bleachers and it’s like – OK. It’s very Dave. We also cut a slow version of “Gypsy Rose.” That song was originally more of a ballad. A slow, finger-picked kind of sad song. We recorded both versions of that, and Jim Olsen really pushed for what we called “Gypsy Rose [Up]” – what we called the *up* version had the fast drumming, and Jennings liked it too. I remained on the fence throughout the process of making the record, but I felt like we probably did need something upbeat and so we kept “Gypsy Rose [Up],” and left “Gypsy Rose [Down]” off the record. What may happen, after people are more familiar with the record is that I may begin to play “Gypsy Rose [Slow]” just because that’s the way that Dave and I demo-ed it. It’s the way I really hear the song.

FW : Can we talk about the additional recording sessions. For instance you did some work at Billy Oskay’s Big Red Studio. That’s where “**Drum Hat Buddha**” was recorded.

TG : Right.

FW : My recall is that you'd previously done the odd bit of recording at Mark Frethem's place in Portland, Doctor Digital, and Bob Stark at Kung Fu Bakery in Portland helped you mix the album. What was recorded during the extra sessions. Was it merely overdubs.

TG : Yeah, like at John Jennings' home studio, which is Chateau Chickadee in Charlottesville, Virginia - it has a different name on every album he works on [Laughs] – we did Jon Carroll's keyboard work there. We did Mary Chapin Carpenter's vocals there. We did the gospel choir for "Any Way I Do," obviously, since those two are singing on it. The choir is Jon, Mary, Jim and me. After recording "Gypsy Rose" at Signature, I decided that the key was too low, and that we needed to come up half a step. Jennings in his little studio, re-recorded the guitars and bass, and brought it up half a step so that I could sing it with more energy. Things like that got done there. I did the "Shadows Of Evangeline" vocal there. I don't remember which other things. At the other studios, we did bits and pieces. The violin for "Preston Miller" was done at Mark Frethem's studio using the Wounded Healer. At Billy Oskay's studio I did additional vocals on "Laughlin Boy" and played the new violin there. I did vocals for "Gypsy Rose" and "Mother I Climbed" with Bob Stark, and then he added a tambourine to "Gypsy Rose." What I was trying to do was, touch base with all the people who had been a part of previous recordings. If I had to do it over again, I just would have gone to Bob Stark, but for some reason it was like I was being called to make these connections with people, partly because I felt the album was a big deal. I wanted their energy, and I wanted them to be involved in it.

FW : So the album was intended to be a reflection of the past as well as the here and now.

TG : Yeah. In addition, I was very sensitive to making sure that people who knew Dave, and who were hip to the mission I was on, were involved in the record. I wanted people who shared the same reverence that I did, and who felt the same sorrow that I did, but who also, you know, were looking forward to this brand new thing and wanted to move on as I did. That's part of the reason I started checking in with all these guys. Bob Stark was new. He was sort of my revelation with my 2004 mini-album "**The Verdant Mile.**" He mixed that recording. I just fell in love with him. People had mentioned his name to me for years – "*You got to try working with Bob Stark. Great engineer. Great mixer.*" We never had, because we didn't know him. Now that I know him, I can't imagine doing anything without him, because we had a great time working together.

to be continued.

Arthur Wood.
Kerrville Kronikles 04/05
[2285 words]

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Tracy Grammer – The Past And The Future, But Mostly The Here And Now

The "Flower Of Avalon" Interview – Part II

In last week's episode Tracy talked about the history of the Dave Carter songs that appear on "Flower Of Avalon," her co-producer John Jennings, plus the various recording sessions. Many thanks to Flora Reed and Jessica Byers for their help with this feature. This week we finish talking about the recording sessions before moving on to other aspects of the project.....

Folkwax : By way of summarising, when did the later series of recording sessions take place.

Tracy Grammer : Charlottesville was February 2004, I think. I don't really remember when the other sessions were – just at different points last year when I wasn't touring. I'd squeeze into a studio and try to get a little more done as time and my budget would allow.

FW : I look upon information like this as history Tracy. Did the sessions go past summer and into the fall.

TG : We finished mixing the album on January 7th of this year. I don't remember exactly when we did Jim Henry's electric guitar and extra acoustic guitar on "Phantom Doll" at Bob Stark's, I think it was November. In fact, I may have sung "Mother I Climbed" for the last time in December of 2004. This album was really stretched out, compared to anything else I've ever done.

FW : Did you feel comfortable or uncomfortable with the sessions taking all that time.

TG : I wouldn't want to do it that way in the future, because a person can drive themselves crazy by listening and listening and listening. And tweaking. You could spend a bazillion dollars doing it that way, which I certainly didn't want to do. I think one needs to remember that an album is a snapshot of the *here and now*, and if the *here and now* stretches out [Laughs] over the course of fourteen months – I don't know what that is, but it's not a snapshot.

FW : It becomes the *never ever*, because you never reach 100%. You keep closing the gap, but you never reach the goal. In fact, you eventually forget how to stop.

TG : That's true. I have to remember also, as everyone should, that you put something down on tape and then it's gonna change in the live situation. It changes depending on who you are playing for, and what size room. What the instrumentation is. That's OK, because songs are alive. They are these living breathing things. An album is not like – what's that place – a wax museum. It's not like that. It is a picture of this song, doing this thing with these people. You lose track of that when you have so much time. Next time I would like to go into the studio, having worked a little more with the band beforehand and having a better idea of what all the parts will be. Of course I'd still lay down as much as I could simultaneously, with all the players involved, because you can't replace that live energy.

FW : I'd like to talk about some of your support players on the sessions. Was it John Jennings that suggested you use Jon Carroll for keyboards.

TG : Yeah. Jennings brought in Jon Carroll. He thought that was a good idea. I was open to it, and glad for it. Mike Rivard was also his recommendation. I had worked with Richard Gates, and I was sort of interested in using him, but as far as I know he doesn't do upright bass, so we got Mike Rivard. He was great. Very serious in the sessions, but pretty silly once you got him out of the studio [Laughs].

FW : How about Rob Schnell.

TG : He is a friend from Portland and he came out to Billy's studio to record the hand percussion. The udu and the conga on "Evangeline." We recorded a whole pile of other stuff that didn't get used. He added the guiro to "Hey Ho." When he still lived in Portland, he was my hometown drummer. Whenever I wanted to do a band show, I would call Rob and he'd bring along his good friend Leah. They would be my rhythm section. As I said, I wanted a mix of old and new energy. Rob was one of my favourite new discoveries, kind of like Jim Henry is, so I wanted to get him in doing something on the project. He ended up being pretty pivotal, I think, to the sound of some of those songs.

FW : On "Phantom Doll" you have a guy called Clark Bondy.

TG : Clark was Bob Stark's recommendation. We actually had another person record the clarinet part for "Phantom Doll," but due to some difficulties the studio that was holding those tracks wasn't able to release them, and so we ended up getting Clark Bondy in. This was at the eleventh hour. I thought, "*Maybe I'll just do a violin solo*," but I really felt the clarinet added something special. A whimsical element that the song needed, and the album needed. Clark came in and just nailed it.

FW : I guess Jim Henry was working with you on the road, by the time of the Signature sessions.

TG : Yes, we had hooked up in September 2003.

FW : How did you meet up with Jim Henry, had you seen him play somewhere.

TG : You know, I had not. We had met years before, when Dave was still alive, backstage at Falcon Ridge. I have a vague recollection of us talking about trading lessons on violin and mandolin [Laughs], because he wanted to learn fiddle, and I noticed that he was very good on mandolin. What happened

was, I started a Fall tour with another mandolin/guitarist/singer guy from Seattle. We had some rehearsals and went and played a festival, and I decided that this wasn't the sound or the feeling I wanted on stage. I found myself with a Fall tour booked, no accompanist, and got a little nervous. I asked around, *"Who have you got? Who do you know? Is there anybody you know? This is what I'm looking for."* Donny wasn't going to be able to do it. So who is out there? Mark Erelli, Rani Arbo and Jim Olsen, and pretty much everybody I knew, who knew Jim Henry, kept saying his name to me. *"You've got to get Jim Henry."* *"Jim Henry would love to do this."* *"We have talked to Jim Henry, he's in."* I sent him an e-mail, and said *"This what I do. This is my story. This is what I'm about. These are my dates. Are you available?"* For some reason, I don't know why, he was available for everything except for two dates. So I said, *"OK, if you are willing to try this, I will send you the music, send you my notes, send you some songbooks, and I'll see you"* – I think it was - *"in ten days"* [Laughs]. He learned all this material in record time. I drove across the country never having met this person, you know, that I remembered really well [Laughs]. Never having played with him, just on this total leap of faith, because everybody said he was great and I believed them. We showed up at the Iron Horse in Northampton, on 10th September -

FW : Now that's a real low key place to make your debut.

TG : [Laughs] I know. Nothing like sneaking in. I remember he stepped off the kerb and I realised that was him and gave him a big hug. I was so happy to see him, and he was already feeling like he knew me from listening to the music so much. We went downstairs, ran through the heads and tails of the songs – maybe halfway through every song. We got up on stage and I felt totally at ease. You know, sometimes if I play with a guitar player and he's playing rhythm and I'm supposed to sing over it, if he's unsteady or if there is anything uncertain about him, I'll get really nervous. My voice will break and I won't be able to maintain my composure. Jim Henry was rock solid. I was absolutely thrilled at the end of the show. I was ecstatic, I was beaming, and he was a total nervous wreck [Laughs]. He looked at me with no joy in his face and said, *"I'm glad that's over."* Every gig from that point forward was great. It was very stressful for him just to hop up on stage with someone new and do a full night's worth of music, but we pulled it off.

FW : In the liner booklet I noticed that when listing the musicians on each cut, you have used block capitals and their full names. You've only used your initials, and what's more you've set them in small case letters.

TG : Yeah, I always have. Dave and I both had a thing for being lower case, I'm not really sure why. Whenever I sign things – to my friends or anything, I don't usually write Tracy – I hardly ever do that. So many people just call me by initials anyway that I thought it would be fine to do it that way. I didn't really know how to say it. Like Tracy, or Tracy Grammer – that seemed too obvious. Capital TG seemed a little too bold, so I sort of snuck myself in there.

FW : I wanted to talk a little about the liner artwork. On the inside tray there's a picture where you are peering out from behind a violin with a very impish look on your face. Which violin is it that you're holding.

TG : [Laughs]. That's the new one. That's the Lovely Vermont.

FW : One year on from acquiring the instrument, is it everything you dreamed it would be.

TG : You know, it's more than I dreamed it would be. I wish I could meet the person that made it. I know he's around here somewhere. I love this violin. It sounds better. It's easier to play. People love the sound of it from the stage. I get comments about it all the time. A lot of these people who come to the shows chipped in to buy it, and lot of them remember what the Wounded Healer sounded like. It was a really dark instrument. The new one is very bright. It's very lively. It's this brand new strong instrument, made in 2000, with a really strong back. There are all sorts of metaphors that I could tie in with it, but I think it's an important instrument. It's not muted and it's not sad. On a purely symbolic level, it's an important voice. I love playing it. I'm actually able to do more things on this one, because it is so much easier to play. I remember when I first picked it up, I couldn't forget about it. When this whole thing started happening with the fund raising, I went back to the shop to see if that violin was still there. Between the first time that I played it, and the time I actually took it with me, I probably played around one hundred other violins. I took about twenty of them home to try overnight, but I always remembered this instrument. It was like *"That Vermont violin is really special. Boy, mmm"* [Laughs]. I feel really lucky, and really blessed to have it.

FW : When you first heard the Vermont violin in the store, did you take it out on an overnight trial.

TG : No, I didn't take it overnight because I felt nervous about it. It was kind of expensive, you know. I knew that I liked it. Jim Henry went with me to the violin shop, because he knew the owner. We told the owner what we were looking for, and we tried everything that he had that was in the direction of the sound that I wanted. I just had this knowledge about this instrument – like, that's the one. I think a good instrument sings back to you. It gives you music that you wouldn't otherwise find. That happened to me with a mandola. I had no designs on ever owning a mandola, but I picked one up in a shop in Michigan. Elderly Instruments. A tune came out, in a style that I had never played. I thought, *"This instrument has something to say to me [Laughs]. We have some work to do, I'm taking it with me."* It felt that way about the Vermont violin. I was inspired to play in ways that I hadn't played before. It was nicely set up, and so well taken care of, and had such nice tones I was able to do things that I couldn't do with the Wounded Healer. This is now borne out in the set list, as we do fiddle tunes and things like that. I never would have considered an instrumental before.

FW : Was the reluctance to experiment due to the fact that you knew the Wounded Healer was fragile.

TG : No. You know, the truth is, until I was getting ready for the sessions in late 2003, I didn't know the Wounded Healer was on its way out. I thought it was fine. I played that thing for so long Arthur. I'd had it since the seventh grade, so I had no idea [Laughs] that it was sort of winding down until I heard other instruments.

to be continued

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The “Flower Of Avalon” Interview – Part III

*So far in this interview we have talked about the recording studios, the sessions and the musicians who contributed to “**Flower Of Avalon.**” Many thanks to Flora Reed and Jessica Byers for their help with this feature. This week Tracy talks about the album artwork, the past and also the future.*

Folk Wax : Can we talk a little about the front cover on the “**Flower**” liner. Was the picture specially commissioned.

TG : Yes. Absolutely.

FW : Did you advise Gary Houston, the artist, on the content of the picture.

TG : Yeah. He is a rock ‘n’ roll poster artist and lives in N.W. Portland. He's done all kind of posters over the years, for all kinds of acts. My friend Phil had been saying to me, *“You’ve got to get Gary to do the artwork.”* I remembered that Gary was a real friend to the music, and that he heard it in a way, and was able to talk about it in a way, that Dave and I wanted people to talk about it – in terms of mythology and broader themes. He could really attach it in the real world in ways that we thought were interesting. When it came time to do “**Flower Of Avalon,**” I had the concept of the tarot card for the artwork before I had the album title. I talked to Gary early on, probably in February of last year, when I got back from doing the first set of mixes. I gave him a CD. He said, *“OK, I see it. I see it. Get back to me when you are ready.”* I came back to him in November or December 2004, something like that. I said, *“OK, we got a title. Let's go.”* I gave him the title and the first thing he told me was that he saw a hand coming out of a lake. The first design he showed me was a hand coming out of a cloud, holding a flower. I said, *“What about that initial thing you were thinking.”* We talked our way back to the hand coming out of the water – and how - is the hand coming up out of the water? Or is the hand sinking down into the water? Is it, you know, preserving the flower? Is it going down with the flower? Is the flower dredged up from the bottom? Is the flower being borne across from one island to another? How does it work? We went through a couple of incarnations

and talked about how the sun and the moon and stars are tarot elements. The skull and crossbones appear in many of Gary's pieces, and he is kind of attached to them.

FW : The skull and crossbones was one of the elements I couldn't pin a meaning on. If you say they are his that settles my mind.

TG : I think they are also a reminder of mortality. It's like "*Hey, it's there.*" It's not going anywhere. There are the bones.

FW : Of course "*bones*" turn up in the song lyrics on a couple of occasions.

TG : Right. Yeah. That's definitely Gary's thing there. Of course the blackbird is kind of a nod to "I Go Like The Raven" from "**Drum Hat Buddha.**" The dragonfly is a nod to the fans who were so interested in dragonflies and the connection to Dave, right after he died. Everybody sort of went nutty for dragonflies after that, and if they saw a dragonfly thought it was Dave. It was an icon for his, whatever, metamorphosis. There are little things on there for everyone. I wanted the water to be choppy, rather than placid, because the making of the album was difficult. In that it took so long. Gary and I went through a couple of different designs. He really pulled it together beautifully and it's quite stunning I think.

FW : I can get the whole Avalon deal with the hand coming out of the water. The presence of the flower is simply a reading of the title, "**Flower Of Avalon.**" However, I never saw the bird. I thought that was some sort of arty background thing.

TG : It's also a religious thing. What I love so much about the way the hand and the bird work together is that they form a cross.

FW : In the liner booklet below the song title "Phantom Doll" it reads, *dedicated to Byron Isaacs and George Javori*. Byron is the bass player in the gospel band Ollabelle, and Javori has toured with Joan Baez as her drummer. What's the dedication all about.

TG : The reason they are there is that we played this song together, not 24 hours before Dave died. We were rehearsing for our upcoming appearance at the Falcon Ridge Festival and those guys were going to be our band. Byron and George both play with Joan so that's how we met them. The last musical experience that Dave and I had together, was with Byron and George. It was such a pivotal moment in some ways. It was at the end of this long, hot rehearsal in Brooklyn. We were at Byron's house, and we weren't even going to play them this song, which, like I said earlier was hot off the press. At the very end Dave said, "*Should we play them the new one.*" They were like "*What, what, a new one?*" We were preparing a set full of basically Dave and Tracy hits for Falcon Ridge. They said "*What song? We want to hear it.*" Dave played the song and I sang along a little bit. They went crazy for it. They were like "*Oh my God, what a great song.*" Byron said "*Man, I'm never going to remember that bass line, and I don't have time to try it right now. Let's tape it and I will study it and I'll be ready come festival time.*" He got out this little hand held cassette tape recorder, held it up and Dave and I sang it - together for the last time, totally in unison. At the end we all sort of laughed, and the cassette tape goes off and that's it. That's the end of our rehearsal, that's the end of our music basically. This was at 4 o'clock on the afternoon of July 18th, and the next day Dave died. I called Byron and George and said, "*Byron, do you have the tape?*" It was so important to me to have that. He converted it to a CD, and the only reason we have the song is because those guys wanted to hear it again and Byron had the presence of mind to get out a tape recorder. The chords are very tricky, and they're very fancy. There's a lot of ornamentation in the song. I would not have been able to duplicate that, so the song is dedicated to them for sharing that tape.

FW : Pretty well the final piece of text on the inside of the back page of the liner booklet is, "for odc -x-" but I can't quite grasp the vowel "o."

TG : Uhuh. Well, "o" is for Oklahoma [Laughs]. When I first met Dave he was calling himself, Oklahoma Dave Carter. He was handing out business cards that said "Dave Cater, Cowboy Singer." He was very wrapt up in this, sort of, western version of himself. For some reason, in my writer's mind, whenever I dropped him a letter, sent him an e-mail, odc was his nickname. Every now and then I still write him a note, and it's always to odc.

FW : How did you feel going into this project.

TG : Well, let's see how did I feel? Part of me was a little nervous. I wanted to do right by Dave, but I also knew that this album would be important in establishing a voice for myself. A lot of what I'm up against, at this point, is getting rid of the shadow of the folk widow that follows me around. I don't want to be that person forever. I wanted to be really conscious of the appearances of sadness on the album, and how things were played out. I wanted to be sad when it was appropriate to be sad. For instance on "Winter When He Goes," it's appropriate to be sad. Some of these songs, it tore me up to sing, even though I had sung them a hundred times. It was really important to me in the recording process that everyone was on the same page about the songs. "Gypsy Rose" was a really important song to me, which I had never played out with Dave. It was at his insistence that we changed the gender to read the way it does now. I never quite agreed with it, but I found that even if I sung it with him, I couldn't get through the ending because the guy dies, as happens in so many of Dave Carter songs. I had a certain sense of belief in myself that Dave had trusted me as his co-producer on all the other albums. I had good intuitions about the music and I understood where the new songs came from. I felt I was the best person for the job, but there were days when I had to remind myself of all that [Laughs]. There were times when I thought, *"What the hell am I doing? Who do I think I am just getting up and making an album of some else's songs? What right do I have?"* I struggled with those things, but for the most part I felt good and full of purpose. I felt like this was the least I could do for his legacy, to make sure these songs go forward. It was a promise that I made right after Dave died. It was important to fulfil it to the best of my ability. I was full of that mission.

FW : How did you feel about recording without having Dave by your side.

TG : In some ways I missed him on the arrangement side of things, especially on "Phantom Doll." I know that there was more he wanted to do with that song, and I didn't have the wherewithal to get there. I did the best that I could, understanding the song. It's the freshest piece on the album. I think Dave would have done something really wild and crazy with the song. My version is pretty subdued, I think. In some ways it was OK that he wasn't here. It was like *"I understand these songs, step aside son and let me handle this for you"* [Laughs]. Dave had this vision of perfection – and so did I – that neither of us could somehow achieve when recording. We fed on each other in an unhealthy way during the recording process. I didn't miss that. Creatively, in terms of that ping factor, I missed Dave's energy. Luckily, I was surrounded by people with a new energy and I'm delighted with how everything came out.

FW : It's wrong to say that your vocals are a step up from previous duo discs, but every one of your vocals on **"Flower Of Avalon"** is in tune with the subject of the song. Were you conscious of that when you were singing.

TG : Well, I think – yeah. I have to tell you that – and I'm sure it's this way for most people who interpret songs - it's SO not about me, it's about the song. When people hear the song, I don't want them to hear me, personally – Tracy Grammer - I want them to hear the story, hear the emotion, hear the intent, and use me as, like a prism or as a refractor. Maybe things sound good when they come through me and out the other side, but it's not about me. I think I have a rather ego-less approach to singing songs, and it lets me get inside of them. It couldn't be less about my voice [Laughs], except to use it as an instrument to deliver. Does that make sense?

FW : You must however acknowledge that intonation of voice, can magnetically draw the listener in. As much as they are listening to the words, the emotion expressed in the singer's voice is a vital factor in gaining the listener's attention. In addition, as you said earlier, in a lot of these songs the guy dies.

TG : That's what happens in Dave's songs.

FW : Having co-produced the album with John Jennings, I presume that it was deliberate on your part to be involved *"hands on"* in the mixing of the tracks.

TG : We did a first round of mixes at a studio in Virginia. I was not thrilled with the direction, plus I felt I wanted to add more overdubs. The studio was very expensive. The engineer was very good, but I couldn't afford to go back there, because it was on my dime. I hooked up with Bob Stark in Portland and he and I, really, mixed the album. Jennings was not available to come fly out from Virginia to sit with us during those sessions. Plus, we did those sessions, a couple of days here, a couple of days there. We remixed everything except for "Hard To Make It."

FW : Was there a vast catalogue of songs to choose from when you sat down to put together a track list for the album.

TG : Vast. No. There are some half-finished songs. Some that are old. There may be another album and a half worth of material that could probably be pulled together. I think these songs are the best of what was left behind. Dave and I had already begun talking about a new album. A couple of days before he died, we were making lists of different albums that we wanted to make. Our country album. Our pop album. The “**Avalon**” songs featured strongly on those lists.

FW : What can you tell me about the *non-existent* eleventh track “Flower Of Avalon,” a song, which I believe Dave wrote for you.

TG : It has never been recorded anywhere. I don’t know how the melody goes. It was only played for me once, and that was on my thirty-first birthday, at a surprise party that Dave threw for me. He sang the song and gave me a copy of the words later, which I still have. The only thing I remember melody-wise is a snippet of the chorus, and how it said “*If I were a bumblin’ bee, I’d ride that wish across the sea, And fetch for you the fairest flower of Avalon.*” I don’t see myself recording the song. I would have to create a melody for it, and that would feel strange to me, although, it certainly could be done. I certainly remember it being kind of a quaint song. Kind of a chivalrous – he’s going to fetch the flower of Avalon. I really struggled with the album title, but Avalon kept coming back to me. I spent time researching Avalon, and came across all these names of characters who had appeared in Dave’s songs. I know that Dave was really interested in the story of the Holy Grail – maybe he was connected in the lineage somehow [Laughs]. Anyway, Avalon kept coming back to me. I thought, “*What was he trying to do when I was thirty-one years old, telling me he was going to fetch the fairest flower of Avalon?*” He was going to go to the Isle of the Dead, essentially, and bring me back a living thing. What is it that I’m trying to do right now, but exactly that? I’ve been to the Isle of the Dead, and now I’m bringing you back what’s alive, and that’s Dave’s songs. From the minute I settled on “Flower Of Avalon,” nothing else crossed my mind. After Gary had such a strong reaction to the title, in terms of the artwork, I really know that it was the right thing.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 04/05

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