

## *Nashville Scene*

### City Songs

Gretchen Peters' latest explores the intersection of urban and inner life

by Edd Hurt

### BURNT TOAST & OFFERINGS

Gretchen Peters

(Scarlet Letter Records)

Quite possibly the finest New Urbanist divorce record a Nashville performer has yet released, Gretchen Peters' *Burnt Toast & Offerings* gets the artist out of herself. It spruces up Peters' preoccupations in ways that usually elude the country artists who cover her songs, and it's as relaxed as a Sunday morning when children and husbands are still asleep. With rich, distanced sonics from co-producer Doug Lancio, it's far more adventurous than her four previous records, but works as a classically self-involved singer-songwriter statement.

*Burnt Toast* worries the edges of its ostensible subject—Peters' divorce, and the personal and professional challenges the event raised—while veering off into examinations of the way cities and towns can enrich or diminish human relationships. Just as '90s compositions such as "Independence Day" and "Let That Pony Run" displayed Peters' feel for the colloquial and the heroic, her latest songs toy with the attractions of rootlessness, and acknowledge melancholy, dislocation and loss in ways that seem just as tenuous and complex as the average person's experience of American life.

Now 49, Peters grew up in Pelham, N.Y., in what she describes as "a lovely John Updike community of the Westchester County suburbs of Manhattan." She moved to Boulder, Colo., in 1970, and came to Nashville in 1987. With her husband Green Daniel she wrote "Chill of an Early Fall," which became a 1991 No. 1 country single for George Strait. "Independence Day," a 1994 Martina McBride hit, won Peters a Song of the Year honor from the Country Music Association, and The Neville Brothers, Faith Hill and Trisha Yearwood have covered her songs.

Although she's been remarkably successful as a songwriter, Peters maintains that she's an atypical Nashville tunesmith. "The Music Row mainstream country thing I don't relate to," she says. "I don't know if I ever did. Certainly, there was a time when I was writing hit songs. And maybe I'll get a song cut by the hot new artist, whoever that might be, and maybe I won't. It's not hugely important to me."

During her years living in Boulder—ground zero for folkies in the '70s, neo-bluegrass and jam bands today—Peters absorbed an aesthetic that she

continues to summon. “I was weaned on Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon,” she says. “Those were all people who played and sang and toured and made records. That’s all I ever wanted to be.”

On her previous solo recordings such as 1996’s *The Secret of Life* and 2004’s *Halcyon*, you can hear folkiedom being strained through Daniels’ lush, somewhat middle-of-the-road production techniques. Like Faith Hill’s 1999 hit cover of “The Secret of Life,” Peters’ earlier work had a panoramic effect, but her original recording seemed almost genteel by comparison, and she often sounded swamped by the arrangements.

*Burnt Toast* had its genesis in a couple of tracks Peters had recorded in Florida. “I just take my guitar down there and mess around, and started writing these songs,” she says. This was in late 2004, just as Peters was in the process of leaving Daniel. (They were divorced a year later.) “I was in the midst of great upheaval and lots o’ drama,” she says. “I knew I needed more time to write, so [Lancio and I] did these two tracks, and I took quite a bit of a break.”

One of the Florida tracks is “Summer People,” an exquisite character study of a woman who complains, “I been waitin’ tables all summer at this place on the strip.” Lancio provides a spare arrangement that builds gradually, and a cello figure merges with vibes and resonator guitar. “Tired of these summer people / Wish they’d all just go home,” the narrator sings. It’s sun-dazed and tired, and a great summer song that puts a curse on the season.

“Sunday Morning (Up and Down My Street)” describes an urban idyll familiar to anyone living in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. “Where the sidewalk’s broken / There’s a café open / People spilling out the door,” Peters sings. “This Town” compares the narrator to a town “with a hole in the middle where no one goes,” but the effect is optimistic, not defeated.

“That was definitely my New Urbanist influence coming out in that song,” Peters says. And while Peters professes interest in the way politics and culture collide, *Burnt Toast* carries a tremendous undertow of pain.

“One thing that I’ve never been able not to do is to tie in what’s going on on a personal, emotional level with the greater world,” she says. “And that includes the surroundings, the geography.”

On “England Blues,” Peters gets away from home, courtesy of John Gardner’s swinging drumming, which recalls the work of jazz drummer Sid Catlett. It’s a credible slice of up-tempo rock ’n’ roll, and serves as a reminder that Peters is something of a country star in England, where she tours often. “They actually know me over there as a singer-songwriter, not as a songwriter,” she laughs. “That blows my mind.”

Burnt Toast ends with “To Say Goodbye,” which sums up the record’s preoccupations and illustrates its musical virtues. Beginning with Indian-flavored strings that sound slightly faded, the song is measured and deadly. “Ghosts and angels on my street now,” Peters sings. “There but for the grace of God go I.” A breakup song that takes into account its subjects’ reluctance to leave a place they shared, “To Say Goodbye” is amazingly evenhanded, since Peters seems as concerned about the inner lives of her peripheral characters as she is about the agonies of her alienated protagonists.

If Peters has a feel for how places shape our experience, she has specific ideas about how working in Nashville can influence songwriters. “I think that when you operate in this world, in Nashville...there are certain things you almost become color-blind to,” she says. “In other words, you hear records a certain way because of what’s around you—the same sort of production values. Your ears haven’t truly opened.”