

Gretchen Peters
Burnt Toast & Offerings
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Since she released her last record, Gretchen Peters, a Nashville hit songwriter with a seemingly charmed and easy life has been through the wringer.

Accused at one point of having a midlife crisis, she thought about it a little while and then, despite the negative connotation, said, "Hell yes, I'm having a midlife crisis. Midlife is when people should be reassessing. By the time you've reached that age you've realized that it ain't endless. It's going to end. And it's going by faster and faster. So, by god, make the most of it!"

"A midlife epiphany" is perhaps a better description of what Peters had one day in 2004 on a tour bus somewhere in the U.K., where she's enjoyed a thriving, decade-long career as a performer on top of her American songwriting success. It was a realization that she needed to take control of her own life, and it would turn her world upside-down and inside-out before culminating in *Burnt Toast & Offerings*, a deeply personal coming-to-terms record that both reveals and transcends the specifics.

It's not like the best-selling, Grammy-nominated songwriter needs drama in her life to write a song that rings true. Peters hadn't personally lived through domestic violence when she gave life to "Independence Day," one of the most powerful and empowering women's anthems ever recorded by a country artist (Martina McBride). Nor did she really know "The Secret of Life" when she took a stab at it in that feel-good Faith Hill hit. And she's certainly never been a circus girl or a Brooklyn cabbie, just a couple of the more memorable characters from her own previous four albums--songs from which, along with others she's written over the past 20 years, have been recorded by artists as diverse as Etta James, the Neville Brothers, Bonnie Raitt, Neil Diamond and Bryan Adams as well as country queens Trisha Yearwood and Patty Loveless.

So she didn't need drama, but drama is what she got when she divorced her husband—and manager and booking agent and producer—of 23 years.

"Professionally, I was looking at, essentially, abandonment. You can be this empowered woman, and write these empowered-woman songs, but there were a lot of times, after leaving, I could not believe how scared I felt. There was a huge wall I had to get over in terms of thinking, OK you can do this."

As always, Peters went to "the well," as she calls it. That place deep inside her where she accesses the emotions that allows her to create. But this time, that place was scarier. "Often what feels like the scariest thing is the right thing," she said. "For me, that was getting more personal."

Burnt Toast & Offerings kicks off with the frustration and anger of "Ghost": "There was a girl who used to live here.... / But you let her beauty go unnoticed/ You let her music go unheard/ You should have listened when she told you/ You should have hung on every word." And it ends with the painful reality of making a change in "To Say Goodbye": "We are dreamers slowly waking/ We are shooting stars across a midnight sky/ We are strangers in the making/ But we're not ready to say goodbye."

On the tracks in between, though, Peters not only says goodbye to her old life, she says hello to a new love, a band mate of 16 years, and to a relationship that inspired what “might be the first flat-out, unrepentantly guileless love song I’ve ever written.” (“The Way You Move Me”)

A self-described folkie and hippie chick despite her mainstream country creds, Peters co-produced the record with Doug Lancio, whose work with Patty Griffin (*1000 Kisses*) she admired, and whose atmospheric guitar playing and intuitive production helped her achieve the layered, mysterious, feminine sound she was looking for. Her enchanting voice is perhaps the only crystal-clear part of a record that’s a bit murky by design, a complex, multi-hued sound that befits the lyrics of a woman who knows that life isn’t simple and it isn’t black and white.

For years, she said, “I wasn’t ready to take control and say it’s my life, my career. It took a huge upheaval for me to come to grips with the fact that I wanted to design my own life.”

Part of her master plan now is performing more often. The problem with being a successful songwriter, Peters said, is that you don’t have to tour, and in fact are discouraged from the less lucrative job of playing live in small clubs. “But going out and playing is a critical part of writing a song for me, to have it live and breathe. It’s almost like they’re not really done being written until you’ve lived in them for a while.

“There’s a spiritual aspect to performing,” she continued. “It’s the only time you’re completely in the moment. Writing is very cerebral; in the studio there are lots of choices you have to make; but when you perform, it’s the only Zen moment. For me that’s hugely important.”

Nowadays when she performs these songs, she can even joke about it all, telling her audience, “This is my divorce album, and as such there are a lot of really happy songs on it.”

But of course it wasn’t always that easy. At first she asked herself, how am I going to write about this? How am I going to talk about it? “But I thought of other writers,” she said, “like Joan Didion, and the book she just put out. How incredibly personal it was. She put her whole thing out there. And I thought, Yeah, that’s what writers do. Showing your humanity is probably the bravest and best thing you can do artistically.”

Burnt Toast & Offerings is proof of that.

--Taylor Holliday

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