

# A TORCH SONG TRILOGY

*It's almost thirty years since a young schoolteacher from Lubbock, an unregarded part of Texas, put away her schoolbooks for the last time, picked up her guitar and toured her first professional album release. That album "There's a light beyond these woods" was the first of a number of early discs to be released by indie imprint par excellence, Rounder Records. Now all those years later Nanci Griffith is back at her "spiritual home" with an album of classic torch songs under her belt and her enthusiasm for music undiminished. Trevor Raggatt finds that the flame still burns bright.*

I've never been much of a one to be fazed by meeting celebrities but the opportunity to chat to Nanci Griffith is somehow subtly different.

I wasn't concerned about descending into fits of schoolboy giggling, but as a fan of almost 20 years, the experience was a little daunting. After all it was *From a Distance*, a song made famous by Griffith, which was sung at my wedding (something which backfired somewhat when hideous versions by Bette Midler and Cliff Richard both crashed into the UK Top 20 a week before the big day – to this day family and friends are convinced that we're big fans of the Peter Pan of Pop!). So it was a huge relief to find the singer as genuine, charming, humble and enthusiastic about her music in person as her public persona would suggest. And enthusiastic she certainly is when it comes to *Ruby's Torch*, an album of torch songs which takes time to explore more deeply a part of her repertoire only hinted at across her previous albums.

Griffith's style is oft referred to as "folkabilly", a genre coined to describe her music. Although often seen as a pioneer of "new country" her distinctive style blends elements of American folk music with country and the Texas rock and roll influences picked up as a child listening to Buddy Holly and the Crickets (to this day quoted as a formative musical influence).

However, at the core of her art rests a gift for narrating a story, drawing the listener in to the emotional heart of a tale. No surprise that some of her best loved songs would easily qualify as classic torch songs.

However, never before has she recorded an entire album in this style. It's clearly something which fills her with a sense of satisfaction. Something she is keen to communicate as we start chatting! 'Oh, I'm just so excited about this record.' She enthuses, 'My fans have been wanting me to make a full record of torch songs and these classic pop-type songs for ages. And it was so much fun to record – I didn't play any guitar, I didn't do any other singing, there's no backing vocals on this record – it's a very unusual project for me and it's been a delight.'

Well, that begs an obvious question. With a genre which ranges from bleak Brecht/Weil compositions at one extreme to wistful Doris Day tunes at the other, how do you begin to narrow down on an album's worth of songs? Her response is practical, pragmatic and deeply personal. These are songs she loves, pure and simple. 'Well the three Tom Waits songs I'd always wanted to record, especially *Ruby's Arms*. Then there's the Michael Johnson hit *Bluer than Blue* – that was a challenge – and Crystal Gayle's hit, *When I Dream*. Both of those songs were real challenges...' she laughs, '...because I'm friends with Michael and Crystal.'

'*Drops in the Faucet* was written by my friend Frank Christian and it sounds like it was written in the Forties or the Fifties. But there's just so many songs... *Never be the Sun*, that was written by an Irish songwriter and my friends Mara O'Connell and Dolores Keane both had hits with that song. So you're following in other peoples' footsteps with these songs – following

other peoples' voices really – and that was quite challenging ... but they're just a great collection.' So does she feel that she's risen to the challenge? The answer is quick and clear, 'Oh yeah! I'm just thrilled with this record.'

One might think that a dozen songs of lost love, wasted lives and regret might be just a little bit... erm... depressing? However, I venture that the converse is true, *Ruby's Torch* is a surprisingly uplifting album, 'Well songs like Sandy Mason's *When I Dream* ...there's so much hope in it. It's like "Well, my heart is broken now but it won't be tomorrow..." You know I think that in all of these songs, well they all have a tinge of hope in them.' That comes with one caveat, however, 'Well except for the Tom Waits song *Ruby's Arms* which I just can't get through without crying... particularly in these times with so many soldiers going off to war and not coming home, and that's really what the song is about.'

I comment that another song on the album, Jimmy Webb's *If These Walls Could Speak*, presented here by Griffith with just bare vocal, piano and tender strings has always had the same effect for me since I first heard Amy Grant's cover many years ago - a guaranteed tear jerker... This provokes a smile and a laugh, 'Awww, Jimmy would love that! Well you know the best torch songs are the ones that make you cry, that make you feel things, that take you right into the moment.'

Changing the subject rapidly we move to discussing the sound of the album which blends Griffith's stalwart Blue Moon Orchestra with subtly luscious orchestral and string arrangements. It also reunites her with producer, Peter Collins, with whom she last worked with on 1995's Grammy winning, *Flyer*. Why call on his services again for this particular project? The response is, again, emphatic, 'Because he's just such a master and he's great with these sort of concept records. He's great with strings and just so knows what he's doing and how he can get there.'

'And he's wonderful to work with! Yeah, Peter's not one of these producers that whatever the artist the record will sound like that producer. You know, I'm not a big fan of that kind of production. And with Peter, he's anonymous... in the best possible way!' Personally, I would have to agree with her assessment. For such lush, complex arrangements it almost sounds unproduced – exquisitely unproduced. This provokes another laugh, 'I'll pass that along! Peter'll like that!'

Another striking factor in Griffith's approach on *Ruby's Torch* is the absence of melodrama, despite the potentially torrid subject matter, giving an emotionally honest feel. 'You know it's all life. Each one of these songs is a place that I've been emotionally in different stages of my life. You just approach it in that context. So

emotionally it's helpful for me to take a song and make it fit into that.' One of the Waits numbers poses the question 'If we exorcise our demons will our angels leave us too?' and this seems apposite to her approach. 'Oh definitely! You know, it's a big question. If I hadn't been through all the things in my life who would I be? So, yeah, it's a very valid question.'



### ...I'm calling this my "Julie London Moment"!

Nestling among the covers are a couple of Griffith compositions, *Brave Companion Of The Road* and *Late Night Grande Hotel*. I wonder why, from three decades of writing, she chose those two. The response is accompanied by a self deprecating chuckle, 'Well, you know, they're my two cents on this record! Basically I wanted to cover *Brave Companion*... because it was on my *Storms* album originally and there were so many songs on that album that got covered that it was the sort of "sleeper cell" on there. You know, I didn't think it got heard enough! And it is a Christmas song and all – one of several that I've written that are Christmas songs – and I like the way it feels. And *Late Night Grande Hotel*? Well, you know, it just fit. It just fit really well.'

Of course, both originate on albums with which Griffith, herself, has expressed concerns about overproduction. It's good to hearing them presented more simply. 'Well it's been great performing *Late Night Grande Hotel* recently. We've been doing it with just [long-term Blue Moons] James Hooker on piano and a little bit of percussion from Pat McNerney – very stripped down.'

I ask how she felt approaching the album purely as the singer of the songs, 'Oh it was very freeing! I'm calling it "my Julie London moment"! Yeah, it's that moment in my career – it's a very adult moment!' A grin breaks across her face followed by a laugh. 'You know, you just walk in there into the studio without a guitar case and just sing... do it live with the orchestra playing. It's a very freeing moment. Tony Bennett said something recently that

interested me about the album of duets he just brought out. He said that most of the people who worked on that record had never worked that way before – where you just walk into the studio and sing the song. You know, you just know the songs. And that's very true. Very true of this record – I just walked into the studio knowing the songs. You know it's such a pleasure to be able to make a record in that way. And it was a very different voice for me because, you know, my hands on the guitar and my voice work in sequence with each other. So that was a very new thing. Very free!'

That brings the conversation round to something usually neglected in interviews in favour of her singing and songwriting. The fact that she's no mean guitar player. 'Yes, I think it is normally a very important part of my music because my guitar style is quite unusual. You know, I really kind of learned to play guitar watching television! Watching the bands on television, Buddy and the Crickets and all, working out what they were doing, and watching public education programming on a Saturday morning with Laura Weber [presenter of PBS show *Folk Guitar* and US equivalent to the UK's Bert "Play-in-a-day" Weedon]. But it's very much a part of my music and my melodies all start on the piano or guitar. And I'm something of a cross between a rhythm guitar player and a lead guitar. So it's like a cross breed style.' But her style goes beyond finger-picked folk acoustic and recent years have seen her rocking out on electric... 'Oh yeah, I really enjoyed that! You know, over the years I so really enjoyed working with the Crickets and that Stratocaster was given to me by Sonny Curtis and I just love playing it!'

Guitar chops and studio excellence are one thing but so often the proof of an album's pudding is in the live shows. 'Well you know people are really liking it and the fans seem so excited to hear it at last. They've been asking for it for so long. You know I've dabbled in it a bit in the past with one or two on an album with a lot of my past records but this is the first time I've done a whole record of them. So they're very excited about it and we'll be touring them in kind of a different way in small clubs and jazz clubs with a sort of small combo, not the full Blue Moon Orchestra. And it'll be all acoustic – so it'll be quite different! Oh, and Michael Johnson will be coming with us on the guitar and that's going to be extraordinary because he played on the record – it's going to be extraordinary to have him there!'

I wonder whether or not she'd considered taking a string section in tour to recreate the album sounds. 'No because I really like this stripped down sort of sound. I mean I love the arrangements on the record that Kristin Wilkinson did but as far as live goes I really want that intimate feel and sound... and playing in

a club like *The Blue Note* in New York or *Ronnie Scott's* in London or whatever; you really need that stripped down sound in order to make it work.

It's only a few months since Griffith was treading the boards on this side of the pond and yet she seems to be constantly on the road with an extensive cabaret tour lined up this Spring. That's punishing schedule by anyone's standards 'You know, I hate travel... I really, really dislike travelling but I love performing, I love my audiences and the only way to be there and play for them is to travel! So it's kind of a trade-off'

As well as a musician, Nanci Griffith has gained a reputation over the years as a humanitarian, committed to a number of charitable and campaigning causes. Not surprising really for someone who describes herself as the offspring of a couple of West Texas Liberals – part folkie, part beatnik. Like music, it's a subject she's clearly passionate about. 'Well I first got involved with the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation [<http://www.vvaf.org>] because I was already involved in the Mines Advisory Group over there in the UK [<http://www.mag.org.uk>] and I got involved in that, in the landmines campaign, from seeing Princes Diana out in the minefields. From there I got introduced to the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation and started working with them particularly with the work they're doing for victims of mines. And I've done several tours for them – gone to Vietnam Cambodia, Laos, Kosovo, Bosnia, several places.

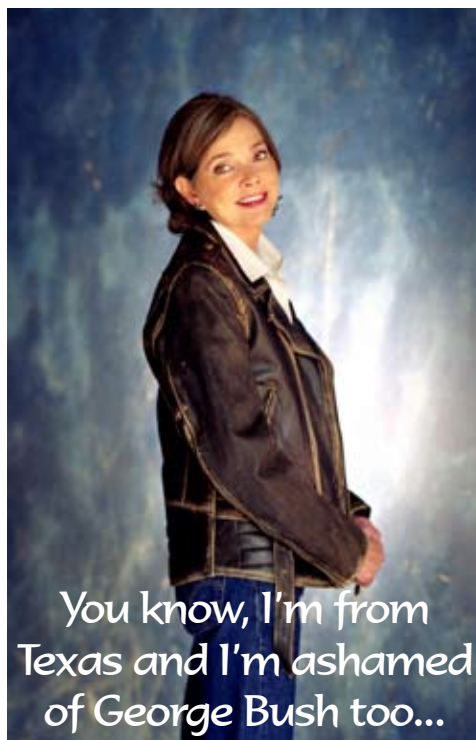
'It's a wonderful feeling to be able to help somehow. I went again in December to Vietnam and Cambodia for a celebration that'll mark the 25th anniversary of Bobby Muller and John Terzano going back there. You know they first went back as veterans 25 years ago with the idea of seeing how they could help – the first American veterans who did anything like that.' A great cause indeed and with continuing conflicts across the globe one that's badly needed. 'Yes it is. And of course now with the cluster bombs and IEDs being used in Iraq and round the world... they're the new landmines. They really need to be banned.'

Inevitably that brings conversation round to political matters. Something on which Griffith's has never been bashful about giving an opinion. Her song "*One Blade Shy of a Sharp Edge*" is a stinging indictment of Republican redneck attitudes while her recent album *Hearts in Mind* raised some eyebrows for dealing head on with 'Nam. I ask if she was surprised at the backlash the Dixie Chicks have faced for their comments about George W Bush? 'Yes! I was very surprised. I was so surprised because I'm from Texas and I'm ashamed of George Bush but I say it all the time but nothing's ever happened to me! But what I think was really bad was that base of "Clear Channel" and, I guess, country music is so Republican and I think

that's part of why it happened. You know, I think Natalie has the rights to say anything she wants to.

'You know one thing Natalie has said is that in one way she's very happy that it happened because while they had the big downside of the boycotting and everything but now she knows that the people in the audience are there for the right reasons. For the music. And the people who aren't there... she doesn't care!

'I haven't seen *Shut Up & Sing* [the Dixie Chicks' film] yet. But you know it's



so severe that we have a television station here in downtown Nashville that even refuses to run the trailers for the film.'

Getting back to the music and a welcome return to the label that gave her that big chance all those years ago. 'I love that I'm back on Rounder now. It's always like going home, you know, when I put out a record on Rounder. I know everybody there and know that they're not going anywhere. With major labels you just never know. You sign a deal with a major label working with someone and by the time your record comes out that person's gone. That makes it terribly difficult when suddenly you don't know anyone you're working with and they don't know you.' And looking at the strength of Rounder's current roster I comment that it must feel good being recognised among that company. The response is suitably modest and magnanimous, 'Oh well you know I've ALWAYS been in good company!'

Drawing our conversation to a close we turn to what's been an amazing career spanning nearly three decades. Increasingly being cited as an influence boy up and coming singer-songwriters I wonder how she feels about being a bona-fide icon.

'Wow, that's mad. It's always a thrill for me. I'm overwhelmed when that happens. You know I'm thrilled to hear someone like Todd Snider names me as an influence. It's always a thrill! And again, like this record it's an adult thing.' And not just American artists, British singer Edwina Hayes (currently one third of *Hummingbird*, a kind of "female Crosby Stills and Nash" also featuring Brit chanteuses Amy Wadge and Cathy Burton) who is now Griffith's first-call UK support act openly expresses her debt during her onstage banter. This delights the musical mentor and the complement is rapidly returned, 'Awww, well, that's lovely because Edwina's so talented. I mean, she's got the voice of a... a... cherub! You wouldn't even call it an angel. It's a cherub in that voice! She wrote me about her new project too so I'm real excited for her.'

Well, '07 racks up the big three-oh since her debut disc so what are her thoughts looking back over that time? 'When I made my first album, back in 1977, I would never have thought I would be still standing!' Again she bursts into self deprecating laughter, 'Wow, 30 years later... I never would have thought!' So does this mean that she's planning a big celebration? 'Hey no, it's just business as usual!'

Looking to the future, touring *Ruby's Torch* aside, I wonder what other projects might be on her mind? 'You know I'd love to do some sort of project with the Crickets again. That's something I've dabbled in over the years, you know, I made a record with the Crickets which had a bit of rockabilly on there [1997's *Blue Roses from the Moons*]. But I'd like to do a whole record... write with them, Sonny Curtis, J.I. Allison and all of them... do a record... do a tour... and that would be the next frontier for me! Last time was real fun!'

So are there any more personal mountains she wants to climb? That provokes some deeper thought and the answer, when it comes, is more serious; steeped with wisdom born out of experience. 'Well, I don't know... every day is a new step for me. As a cancer survivor just every day is a bonus. So I kinda wake up every morning not planning things... living for the day.'

And with that it's time to finish. But what better terms on which to part. It's clear that Nanci Griffith is an artist with nothing left to prove who could coast into the twilight of a career if that was her wont. However, it's refreshing to see the level of enthusiasm she still has for her music and the desire she has to give the best to her manifold fans. Agenda or no agenda, it's doubtful that "coasting" will feature heavily. Somehow, there's a sneaking suspicion that, taking each day as it comes, there are still more mountain tops to come!