**A Conversation with Carrie Newcomer**
**by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 2/2004)**

I don't know why, but I'm still always moved and surprised when interview subjects are very warm and open, and make you feel like they are befriending you. It's a totally different process, of course, speaking with a male or female musician, at least for this interviewer, simply because I like as interactive a conversation as they make welcome. With Carrie Newcomer, I came quickly to feel as if I were headed over for dinner, and had called for directions.

Not too may folksingers get voted Woman of the Year in a town as well known as Bloomington, IN. (I didn't get around to asking her anything about John Mellencamp, you just can't cover everything.) But Carrie's deep social conscience and active participation with various relief and resource organizations around the globe earned her that distinction this year.

Since I didn't know her music well, I was jazzed that the occasion was a compilation of songs from her 10 years at Philo/Rounder, her ninth record. That enabled me (and you) to get a peek inside her rich and consistent catalog. *Betty's Diner: The Best of Carrie Newcomer* was a real ear opener, new turns of the songwriting diamond just keep presenting themselves. Having received only the advance copy sans artwork thus far, I cannot comment on the players and studio minds in play, but the quality of the tracks and production over the career of this writer is consistently high, like the songs themselves.

Midwestern gypsies are their own tribe, as she calls it. They're as distinct from the Jersey restless who are called to the West as they are from the city outlaws who disappear into the redneck Riviera or the Florida keys. To my way of thinking, there is frequently a deep-rooted wholesomeness that differs from the goodness of other regions. (They say there is no reality, only perception, so that is my small perception.)

Carrie is a very open-faced character about her beliefs, her process, and her concerns. She's got a lighthearted manner for her line of work, and seems refreshingly less self-absorbed than many in her position. Although her songs are frequently third person, they say an awful lot about her. I think you'll enjoy the conversation we had, and be as impressed as I was with her kind and inclusive manner. Please be sure to check out the clips from *Betty's Diner* on the Listen page.

**Puremusic:** I'm sorry I screwed up the time, there, first of all.

**Carrie Newcomer:** Hey, I'm from Indiana, so we never know what time everybody else is on.

**PM:** Is Indiana one of those states with split up time zones?

**CN:** It's even crazier. It's like Indiana never changes, so half the year we're on the East Coast time and then half the year we're on Central Time.

**PM:** [laughs]

**CN:** And then there are certain sections, like the counties up near Chicago always go with central time, and the counties down near Louisville all kind of stay with eastern time. And a lot of people commute to those areas. So no one ever knows what time it is here. [laughs]

**PM:** So perhaps it becomes less of a big deal.

**CN:** Well, every now and then the legislature will have this push to get us to go with one time zone or another. Then all the farmers get together and say, "You know, the cows get up at the same time."

[laughter]

**CN:** Anyway, so no one here knows what time it is.

**PM:** I see.

I thought *Betty's Diner* really rocked, that it was a great retrospective.

**CN:** Oh, thank you. I'm glad you like it.

**PM:** Not only that, but it's very rare that I would say to an artist that, "Wow, that's an amazing website you have…" Yours is great.

**CN:** Oh, Aaron Cooper did the website. And isn't it fabulous? He is so creative. He really put a lot of heart and creativity into that project. And we love him.

**PM:** And did he come up with the whole motif, the diner menu and all that stuff?

**CN:** Did you get a pre-release album that had all the artwork with it, or just—

**PM:** Unfortunately I got the advance without all the artwork.

**CN:** Oh, because the artwork goes along with that diner motif. A lot of the photos and the little icons are from the album cover—the record artwork was really fun, too. A fellow named Hugh Syme did it. And then when we decided to do the website, we gave Aaron a lot of those elements, these diner elements, but then he just ran with it and came up with the menu idea and the jukebox.

**PM:** Totally cool.

**CN:** It's really a fun, interactive site. I started out as a visual artist, so I love the visuals, I really do.

**PM:** It's funny how many musicians do start out as visual artists, sometimes because there was more support for that in their schools than there was a way to realize their musical endeavor, until they just got off on their own. Do you do any visual art these days?

**CN:** Oh, I do, but it's mostly for myself at this point. I'm always making something. I always like to ask people, "When you were a kid, what was your favorite game?"—because sometimes there's a funny little clue in that.

**PM:** Wow. What an unusual question. What was yours, then?

**CN:** Mine was a game called "Making Something." "What are you doing?" "I'm making something." And I would be drawing pictures or making little books or things, writing little songs, or hammering furniture together for my sister's Barbies. I was out making forts. I mean, I was always making something.

**PM:** Wow.

**CN:** All these years later, I'm still making something.

**PM:** Because we were urban kids, and there were a lot of kids in my family, we were very much like the Little Rascals. And we were always playing store, where rocks were money and stores did specific things. And the game was basically called "My Store's Open."

**CN:** Wow!

**PM:** And you could hear it resound through the neighborhood early in the morning. Somebody would yell, "My store's open!" [laughs] And people would be just cruising the neighborhood, going to each one—"What happens at this store?" "Well, you knock these things down and you win this prize."

[laughter]

**PM:** It was more like carnival stalls.

**CN:** That's great.

**PM:** But I never even thought about that until your very brainy and cool question, "What was the game you used to play?"

**CN:** I don't know if it's brainy, but I just always find that when you ask people that, often there's some little clue or even a very direct connection to something they're doing

now. I've had people say, "Oh, I used to just be on my stomach on the ground looking at ants and critters all day." And now they're entomologists, that sort of thing.

**PM:** [laughs]

So obviously it's a splendid occasion to speak with you, this CD that celebrates your 10th year with Philo/Rounder.

**CN:** Yes, it is.

**PM:** Would you talk with me on that subject?

**CN:** Putting together a compilation album, it was a really interesting project. There are three new songs on it, but mostly it was a process of going back and listening to the older albums and really considering what's held up for me, what songs have become old friends, and what songs are requested often. And there's always a compromise, what songs does Rounder really like and would love to be on the compilation as well.

**PM:** Oh, they were vocal about that?

**CN:** Yes, they were. In general we agreed on everything, and there's nothing that I don't feel is a good song to put on the album. But there were a few that—I have eight albums on their label.

**PM:** That's a lot of songs.

**CN:** And some of it is deciding what will make a nice album as a whole, as well. You can't do a whole album of ballads, or it shouldn't all be one kind of song. So if you had a handful of this kind of song, one of them didn't get on the album. You like them all really pretty much equally. Well, there was some give and take that way, but in general, I think they were very supportive of the things that I chose, and I like what they chose, and it worked out fine.

**PM:** So, you've been with them so long now, how's your relationship with the company in general?

**CN:** Rounder has really been a wonderful company to work with. And I say that for a lot of different reasons, but my biggest reason is that they've always been a music company—my albums have always been seen by them as my artistic work, and they haven't dictated to me, "Now, we need this kind of song or that kind of song," or, "We need a top 40 hit," or, "We want you to not have these songs on because they're controversial." They've never done that. They've always trusted me as an artist. [dogs barking] Whoops, hang on, that's my dogs. Okay.

**PM:** Do they have a yard to run around in?

**CN:** I live way out in the woods—

**PM:** That's nice.

**CN:** —so they have lots of woods to run around in and things to chase. Let's see, where was I—oh, about Rounder. They've always been a music company, and they've always trusted me as an artist. And I appreciate that. It's not always like that, to say the least.

**PM:** Have you been working with some of the same people at Rounder from the get-go, or has it revolved in a predictable record company manner?

**CN:** Well, the person who first encountered my work and brought me into the company is Ken Irwin, who's an amazing person with really great ears, and he has continued to be supportive of what I'm doing all these years.

**PM:** And he's still there. That's great.

**CN:** He's still there. He's one of the owners. And there's a whole cast of characters at Rounder who are still there and who have been supportive since the very beginning. John Virant, who is now the CEO, has always been very supportive of what I'm doing. I hate to even pull out individual names, because there's a bunch. And it is interesting that so many are still there. So Brad Paul and—

**PM:** Oh, yeah. I know him. He's a good guy.

**CN:** Just a whole group of people who have continued to support what I'm doing, and are excited about this compilation album. That's been fun, too. I think there has been kind of a feeling of celebration with it, and I appreciate that.

**PM:** Oh, boy, that really sounds like family. Because I'm a Nashville guy, where you see the staffs of record companies revolve just, oh, with sickening rapidity.

**CN:** It's true. And Rounder has also put out a *lot* of good music. I've always felt good being part of a roster that had people like Alison Krauss on the label. And so many really interesting creative artists.

**PM:** And they do so many cultures and they do so some kinds of music. I mean, as you say, they're a music company.

**CN:** They really are.

**PM:** And that distinguishes them.

**CN:** And again, I truly appreciate that. In a land of the bottom line, they really have been a company that—well, they're also a company, of course they are. And they have to pay

attention to those things so that they're still here to put out those records. But in the land of the bottom line, they really shine.

**PM:** It's a beautiful thing. You've been not only with them, but obviously on the road in support of your records for all those years, too. Is it possible to say anything about how the singer/songwriter business has changed in that decade, to your perception?

**CN:** Well, for one thing, when I first started doing this, I really didn't think it was something I could make a living at. A singer songwriter from the middle of Indiana—how unlikely was it that I would be able to make a living doing this thing I love? And it has been wonderful that I've been able to. I think earlier than the 90s, there was, for a moment, a greater opening for acoustic music and acoustic artists who were maybe crossing over a little bit more—when the Triple A format was more open to things that weren't quite as mainstream. In country music, that's when people like Mary Chapin Carpenter or Lyle Lovett came on the scene. It's a little harder now for people who are just entering into it, because things are more narrowly focused.

**PM:** Yeah, narrower and narrower.

**CN:** And since I've always been a crossover artist, I really find that narrowing to be a shame, because there's great music out there on the edges, and people doing incredibly creative things. There are great artists in the middle, too, but you don't want to lose people who are pushing the edges.

**PM:** Yeah, a lot of good action is always on the fringe.

**CN:** And for a while, there was the Americana format. I loved it when they came up with that title, Americana, because it was so wonderfully vague.

**PM:** Right. It didn't mean a thing, and it allowed a broad definition.

**CN:** Yeah. What is it that Lyle Lovett does, or Alison Krauss? Or the Jayhawks, or Wilco, or John Prine? And depending on where you're coming from, Nickel Creek—

**PM:** I've met several people that claimed to have coined the term Americana.

**CN:** Really?

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah. So, having been on the road all these years—I don't mean to date you because you're a very youthful person—who are some of the favorite singer/songwriters you've come across on the road, famous or otherwise, that may come to mind?

**CN:** Oh, gosh… Well, I think touring—I took a break from the road this fall. I was off the road for 10 weeks. That's the longest I've been off the road since 1990.

**PM:** Oh, come on!

**CN:** Yeah. That was the longest break I took, to just be home and spend some time out here in the woods and do a lot of writing, very focused writing. So I've actually—I think you have to have a bit of wanderlust to tour, and have a real love for places and people in order to like touring. I love this country in that there are so many different personalities. I mean, every area of the country, every region of the country, has its own personality. There is the tribe of the South—

**PM:** Big time.

**CN:** —and the tribe of Minnesota—

**PM:** Oh, yeah.

**CN:** —and the New England tribe. And I just love it. And there's landscape and there's language. And you know when you cross the Mason Dixon you can get good grits in a diner. I love the personality of places. And touring has really allowed me to see that and experience that close up, because I'm not an artist that—okay, I'm not the Rolling Stones. I don't get in a jet after the show. It's just not how I tour. So I really see the country, and talk to people very intimately and close up. And it has changed me. All that touring has really made me have a much greater appreciation for other places, but also for my own home area. I'm really a Midwesterner, and I appreciate that voice, and what that voice is about, and what it has to offer.

**PM:** All the songwriters I know or some whom I interview, I always hear some kind of road-weariness or jadedness or bitterness in their voice when they talk about touring. I don't hear a trace of that in yours.

**CN:** Well, I just had a nice long break.

[laughter]

**CN:** But also, I think part of it has been a balancing thing, that I decided a long time ago—I have a daughter, and one of the things I did is I decided to tour in shorter blocks. Some people go out there and they're out there for months at a stretch, and I have so much respect for them. It's a hard thing to do. But I never really toured that way. I do a lot of—I'll fly out to a section of the country, I'll do a week or a circuit there, come back, work very regionally at home, then pop out to another part of the country. So if you look at my schedule, it never looks like this nice, long, logical, money-making tour.

[laughter]

**PM:** Right. God forbid.

**CN:** But what I've always done was made sure that I was grounded, and I would come home and be really present for my daughter, and have a place to put my feet down.

**PM:** In all that traveling, have you run across certain songwriters, famous or otherwise, who really changed you, that really—

**CN:** Oh, absolutely.

**PM:** Any that come to mind?

**CN:** Well, I was touring with Alison Krauss for a while, and Union Station. I opened one of her European tours.

**PM:** What a joy.

**CN:** Oh, gosh. And then, here in the States, too, I did several shows with her in different parts of the country.

**PM:** I don't think there's a better live band out there than hers.

**CN:** I don't think so, either. There are artists—I think opening for her so many nights in a row got me to appreciate the idea of musical elegance. These are people who can *play.* You hear them warming up backstage, and they can play circles around most players.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, most anyone, yeah.

**CN:** Yeah, I mean, these are people, if you want a lot of notes, they can play them. But everything was always about the music and it was always about the song. When a song needed something flashy, then someone would be more than happy to step out and do it—

**PM:** Yeah, right. If the song needed something flashy, Jerry Douglas would be glad to do it.

**CN:** But if all a song needed was something very simple, an arpeggio and a pause, that's all they'd do. It was all about creating the most powerful music, and this idea of elegance, really elegant playing. That's changed me and inspired me. I mean, I always appreciated that, but maybe just seeing it in action so many nights in a row just really brought it home to me that what you don't say is just as important as what you do say in music.

There is a certain attitude of elegance that I aspire to as a writer and as a performer. As a songwriter, I mean, we have so little time to make a statement. We have how many verses—maybe four verses—and choruses, and perhaps a bridge, to get a really powerful story across. So it has to be about elegance of language. Every word has to work. Every

line has to move the story in a meaningful way. Again, listening to other artists who work in this way—Mary Chapin Carpenter is wonderful that way. I opened for her once here in Indiana. Just listening to her and her lyrics and how she does that—a lot of artists that I've worked with are in that category of just truly elegant writers.

**PM:** Yeah, she's a very strong writer.

**CN:** Yes, very much so. But that idea—I love [laughs]—okay, the longest Scrabble game I've ever played was with three other songwriters, because it couldn't be a good word, it had to be *the best* word.

[laughter]

**CN:** It's like, "Go, go. It's been a half an hour."

**PM:** Do you remember who they were?

**CN:** Sure. My husband, Robert Meitus. And Buddy Mondlock.

**PM:** Buddy Mondlock. [laughs]

**CN:** You know Buddy?

**PM:** Yeah.

**CN:** And his wife Carol?

**PM:** Sure.

**CN:** Yeah, yeah. We were actually playing one of the Kerrville cruises. And one afternoon we decided to play Scrabble. And it's just a bunch of songwriters playing Scrabble. It's just, "There's a better word. I know there's a better word."

**PM:** [laughs] Oh, yeah, I can really see Buddy and Carol doing that. Tell us about your husband, Robert Meitus.

**CN:** When I first met Robert, he was in a band called the Dorkestra.

**PM:** Ah-hah.

**CN:** He was the head dork.

**PM:** Naturally.

**CN:** And when I first started touring, we did some double bill tours, where the Dorkestra would back me up, and I would sit in with the band and be a Dorkette.

**PM:** [laughs]

**CN:** And it was kind of like Muddy Waters meets Elvis Costello meets John Prine.

**PM:** Really? That's my kind of band.

**CN:** Oh, man, they were a great band.

**PM:** And he was a guitar player or—

**CN:** A guitar player and songwriter. And now he's a copyright and entertainment and internet lawyer, so he does intellectual property and entertainment law.

**PM:** Really? Oh, I need to know him.

**CN:** He's a wonderful—he teaches now at a couple of universities, in particular internet and entertainment law. But he practices as well. I think a lot of folks have appreciated working with him because he's seen the music industry from the artist's point of view.

**PM:** Is there a firm name that our readers should know?

**CN:** Well, he works right now with Baker & Daniels. They're in Indianapolis.

**PM:** Okay.

**CN:** I can give you—I don't know, would his e-mail address be appropriate?

**PM:** I think so.

**CN:** It's just rsmeitus@bakerd.com.

**PM:** Okay. We'll link to that in the interview, if you don't think Robert will mind.

**CN:** No, I don't think he'll mind.

**PM:** Okay, good. Yeah, because that's terribly interesting.

**CN:** I think it's been especially good for people because, as I said, he's coming from a place of having spent many years being an artist.

**PM:** Right. It's perfect.

Now, I always inquire in interviews about spiritual matters or the spiritual life. And I'm surprised how short and how amorphous the responses to that frequently are. But in your

life and work, this certainly seems to be a more up front and pivotal aspect. Can you give us anything on your spiritual life or your orientation, or how it may show up?

**CN:** My spiritual life is really a very important part of my life, so of course it gets into my work. I don't censor what I'm going to write about in terms of relationships. I write about romantic relationships, and those are important, but I also write about family relationships and spiritual relationships, political relationships. I really like to look at life as a whole. I think it's easier to reach those universal ideas that we both recognize. They may be my details that I use in my songs, but what I'm really trying to get at is something that we both recognize. And I think there is a basic human recognition with the idea of something greater than ourselves.

When I do write about it, I try to write in a very inclusive way and not exclusively. Most of us have had some kind of an experience with that something greater, whether it's walking in the woods or the first time you hold your baby in your arms, or whether it's something more formal in a traditional church setting. Most of us have had some experience somehow with this idea. And think that's a human thing, so it gets into my writing. Like I said, though, I do try to be very inclusive about it.

**PM:** Yeah, because what's spiritual about being exclusive, after all?

**CN:** Well, I feel that way. But I've had people tell me that it's dangerous to write with a spiritual context, because it may put you in a category you may not want to be in.

**PM:** Oh, you mean people may label you, they might say, "Well, she's kind of a New Age folkie."

**CN:** Yeah. Or they might say, "She's Contemporary Christian."

**PM:** Ah, for instance.

**CN:** Or they might say that, "She's Radical This-or-that Folkie," or whatever. It just may put you in a box somewhere.

**PM:** Right. Which people are quick to do.

**CN:** And I use a lot of western spiritual language. But I just feel like that really powerful language resonates with us. You say the word "home," and it does something to a person. You talk about the concepts of spirit or soul, and it touches people. I don't feel I should censor myself from talking about those things and using those words. They don't belong to any one group or another.

And I've actually really appreciated the feedback I've gotten on that, too. People have been very generous with their feedback and letting me know that, "You know, this is important to me, too, and I'm glad you talk about it and include me." So my background—personally, I'm a Quaker, so—

**PM:** Raised a Quaker or became one in your adult years?

**CN:** I wasn't raised a Quaker. My dad came from this kind of West German Amish Mennonite background, my mom was Italian Catholic. So I'm the only Italian Amish person I know—

[laughter]

**CN:** —which explains all kinds of things.

**PM:** That's very cute.

**CN:** I started attending kind of silent Quaker meetings about 25 years ago. And there's an old Quaker saying that I have really loved, and it's: "Let your life speak." Who you are and what you believe should be really evident in how you live and how you work. And it sounds so simple, "Let your life speak. It shows in your life." But it's actually a really hard thing to do.

I take that saying to heart in how I write and the music I create, but I also take it to heart in how I operate in the business of music. When I go on tour, every album tour I choose a charitable organization and I give a percentage of my CD sales to that organization. I work with a lot of really amazing human service and charitable groups that—well, it's not necessarily altruistic. It keeps my hope alive that there are so many people out there really trying to make the world a little better place for all of us.

**PM:** And isn't the group you've chosen to support with this record the Friends?

**CN:** Yeah, AFFC, which is American Friends Service Committee.

**PM:** Right.

**CN:** And there's a little blurb about them on my website, it explains them a little bit. They have a project right now called E-maps. And it's sending material assistance and food to Iraq and to Afghanistan. And then there's a particular section of the project that's working with orphans of AIDS in parts of Africa. I generally choose an organization that has a real immediate need that they're working on. And this seems like a very immediate need right now. And they're good folks and I've worked with them before.

**PM:** AFFC seems like the kind of group that doesn't get bogged down in bureaucracy and actually gets the money where it's supposed to be going.

**CN:** Yeah. And it's a bunch of Quakers. They're pretty frugal.

**PM:** Yeah, right. [laughs]

**CN:** You know it's not going to get spent on expense accounts and fancy offices. It's going to really go there.

I've worked with other great organizations. On one of my tours I worked with the Literacy Volunteers of America. One tour I worked with, Nature Conservancy and Habitat for Humanity. I've worked with Planned Parenthood, and just a whole slew of different health and hunger organizations. Like I said, it's not totally altruistic. It definitely keeps my hope alive, because it's so easy right now to despair. There are a lot of sorrows out there in this world. And it would be easy to be overwhelmed by it.

But I get to see people really close up who—and you may not see it on the front page, it's not sensational as some of the difficult things happening out there—and those things are important to know about—but there are a lot of people working out there who aren't going to get on the front page. But they are there, and they're doing incredible things. And I feel lucky that in some of my work with them I've gotten to see it close up. But yeah—

**PM:** It's a remarkable example you set there. And I know that it's your work with some of these organizations that was behind you being chosen Woman of the Year in your town. How did that touch you?

**CN:** It did. Boy, did I cry when I found that out.

**PM:** I'll bet.

**CN:** And it was completely unexpected. And I was the first artist, I guess. When I started looking at the list of some of the women who had gotten it—some very amazing, powerful women who had done such good work in the community—I felt really honored and humbled. And yeah, boy did I cry.

**PM:** Wow.

**CN:** It was good. Yeah, it's kind of my work in music—well, first and foremost I'm a songwriter and a musician and a creator. But I've always, I think, looked for ways to use what I do and what I love to maybe help out where I can. There's a Romero quote that I love, "You can't do everything, but you can do something." And sometimes I think it's a matter of finding out where it is that you can best contribute, that not everybody can play guitar and do a benefit for an organization, but maybe you're good at accounting and you can volunteer at the local food bank that needs some help. Or maybe you're the person who makes really good casseroles when someone's in trouble.

**PM:** Yeah.

**CN:** Or the guy that always runs the truck. Folks have all kinds of talents that they can contribute. And usually I say, "Find what it is that you love, contribute with what you

love, because it'll be a really powerful contribution then. You can't do everything, but you can do something. And maybe focus on the things that you love and you do well."

**PM:** You're an activist in your heart, I think. As such, whom do you favor in the Democratic race for nominee?

**CN:** Oh, it's so hard to figure out that one. I'm definite—[laughs] well, I make jokes at my shows when I talk about what's available at the boutique after the show. I always talk about the albums that are available, and then the Ginsu Knives, and the folk digital watches with Pete Seeger on them. But I always say we have folk bowling balls that are great bowling balls but they always veer to the left—

**PM:** [laughs]

**CN:** —and maybe a lot to the left. But I definitely support a progressive ticket. And it's been very difficult because I think it's important that a more progressive candidate wins this next election. So I think a lot of us are looking very carefully at what candidate is maybe most electable.

**PM:** Right, exactly. Who actually stands a chance.

**CN:** Kucinich. I just think his politics are great.

**PM:** Right. But how electable is he?

**CN:** I wonder. I don't know. I shouldn't make comments one way or another on that, because I don't know, the way it is at the moment. Everybody thought one thing in the Iowa caucuses, and then it turned out completely different.

**PM:** Then when Howard Dean came in third, it was a big surprise.

**CN:** Yeah. So listening to polls and stuff may not be the way to go on that. But I love Kucinich's politics, that's for sure.

**PM:** Yeah, and I think that's the answer I'm after. You like his politics.

**CN:** I do. I think Kerry has some really valid points and there are things about him that make him very electable. I think Edwards, he's such a southern gentlemen, and I think people like that. Howard Dean, he has a lot of good things going for him, too. So it's hard to say. It really is hard to say. But just straight politics, I really like Kucinich.

**PM:** At least it's shaping up to be kind of an interesting race. That's a nice change of pace.

**CN:** And I'm really glad that there have been a lot of different kinds of voices, you know, from very conservative, very centrist Democrats like Lieberman, to someone

who's a lot more on the progressive side of the ticket like Kucinich, or Carol Moseley Braun. I think it's been really great that we've been hearing these arguments and these voices, and that they're putting forth some of these ideas so that we even hear them. That's pretty encouraging.

**PM:** I agree.

**CN:** I don't know. Everybody thought it was going to go one way in Iowa, and then it doesn't. And I'm not a political analyst, thank goodness.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, right. There are more interesting things to be.

**CN:** Oh, I don't know about that, but I don't think I'd be very good at it.

**PM:** What are you reading lately?

**CN:** Oh, I love to read. And I always have about three books going at the same time. Right now I'm starting a book called *Three Junes* [by Julia Glass]. I just finished a real interesting book called *Forever* [by Pete Hamill]. And *Our Lives as Torah*. It's by a woman who talks about the tradition and process of storytelling as having a sacred quality to it.

**PM:** Wow. Do you have the authors at hand involved for these three you mentioned?

**CN:** *Our Lives as Torah* is by Carol Ochs. I also just finished not too long ago one called *Expecting Adam*, which is a really wonderful memoir. I'm trying to remember her name. Isn't that terrible, I don't have the author's name [Martha Beck] at the tip of my tongue?

**PM:** Well, you read a lot of books, obviously.

**CN:** I do. I'm pretty voracious about it. But you would think I would remember the authors, being a writer myself.

**PM:** May I ask, then, to whom are you listening? Are you spinning many records at the house?

**CN:** Uh-huh. Well, I've been spinning two. Let's see here. Now I'm spacing. When people ask me this, it's like when someone asks you what your favorite aunt's name is, and you can't remember her name.

**PM:** [laughs]

**CN:** Patty Griffin's last album, *1,000 Kisses.*

**PM:** Yeah, a buddy of mine produced that, Doug Lancio, a very sharp guitar player.

**CN:** No kidding.

**PM:** Yeah.

**CN:** I just loved that album, and I still have not been able to let go of it. God, it's a fabulous album.

**PM:** I keep trying to interview her but her management won't give me the time of day.

**CN:** Oh. Yeah, it's a great album. And I've been listening to the new Lyle Lovett. He hasn't come out with anything in a long time, so it's nice to hear him.

**PM:** I love that first song, "Cute as a Bug."

**CN:** Isn't that wonderful?

**PM:** I play it over and over and over.

**CN:** And let's see, I've been listening to the latest Jayhawks a bunch.

**PM:** Yeah, *Rainy Day Music*. That's fabulous.

**CN:** Isn't that? I love the retro thing they do with the production on that.

**PM:** Yeah, it's just beautiful. They're into all the old gear and all the old amps and guitars and the whole deal, sounds good.

**CN:** Really cool. And I just picked up the new Lucinda, just kind of listened to it once or twice so far, and I'm liking it. I always have to give myself lots of time to let the albums settle in.

**PM:** Yeah, because I miss a lot of things at first. It takes me a while to get things.

**CN:** I have this three listen rule: I just give every album about three listens, because depending on where you're at, if you're in a hurry, or you're in the car, or whatever—

**PM:** Yeah. Sometimes I have my little ears on and sometimes I have my big ears on.

**CN:** Yeah. And I've enjoyed the new Lucinda. I just picked up the new Roseanne Cash, and it's a lovely album. And an album that I've been to a lot for the last two years—there are albums that end up in my car and I just can't get them out of my car—is the *Heartland* CD. It's Bela Fleck and Edgar Meyer and Mark O'Connor and Yo-Yo Ma. Oh, man!

**PM:** A bunch of losers, yeah.

**CN:** [laughs] It's this combination of classical instruments and roots instruments doing very traditional melodies.

**PM:** Wow, that sounds great. I don't know that record.

**CN:** Oh, *Heartland*, it's called. That one just floored me, and it's been staying in my car.

**PM:** On top of the way the music we listen to reveals us, I always feel that our subjects are uniquely revealed when they speak about the people who are close to them. So allow me to ask about one, the author Barbara Kingsolver. She says wonderful things about you, and she sounds like a good friend. How did you meet and what's she like?

**CN:** Barbara is amazing. In 1998 I came out with an album that had a song on it that was inspired by one of her essays. And I never do this, but I just love her work, and I sent it to her. I mean, I never do that. But I just sent it to her. And she wrote me back the most beautiful letter, basically saying, "You got it."

**PM:** Wow.

**CN:** And we started writing and e-mailing, and eventually we started doing shows together. She's a wonderful musician, and so is her husband.

**PM:** Really?

**CN:** Yeah!

**PM:** What do they do?

**CN:** She's a pianist, and her husband is a guitarist. And we've done a couple shows together in Tucson where she lives. It's wonderful when you've had an admiration for someone's work, and then you meet them and you get to know them, and you admire them even more as a person. It's not always like that.

**PM:** Boy, you're not kidding. How would you describe her music?

**CN:** Again, she's very eclectic. I think she was classically trained, but she enjoyed jazz a lot and has been working with that.

**PM:** Well, I should get in touch with her if they make records—and maybe review her in Puremusic?

**CN:** Well, they haven't made a record together. Now, several years ago, Steven came out with an acoustic guitar album with another fellow. And [laughs] actually for a while, Barbara was playing in this band called the Rock Bottom Remainders.

**PM:** [laughs]

**CN:** And it's a Stephen King and Amy Tan and—oh, gosh, the writer from Florida… Dave Barry. And it was just this rock 'n' roll kind of garage band.

**PM:** Excellent.

**CN:** And they would do these shows and all the money would go to a literacy foundation. But I guess they had a ball doing it for a season. Barbara plays piano, so she was the keyboard player in the Rock Bottom Remainders.

**PM:** That's great. So you're a storyteller kind of songwriter a lot of the time, and never far from the human condition as a subject. Have you written a lot of prose as well?

**CN:** I'm kind of a workhorse writer. Some people write from inspiration, it comes down and hits them on the head and they write it out and it's perfect the first time. But most people don't like them—no, no, I'm just kidding. Just kidding.

**PM:** [laughs]

**CN:** But actually, I write best when I write consistently. It's really a practice for me.

**PM:** Yeah.

**CN:** When I'm out on the road, I do a lot of writing that's not songwriting. I do a lot of essays and poetry and prose of different kinds. And a lot of my songs come out of those writings.

**PM:** Oh, that's interesting.

**CN:** The song *Betty's Diner* started out as a short story that I wrote when I was on the road. And then when I got back, I decided to encapsulate the story in a song, which was a great challenge, because how do I put pages of character study into four lines—

**PM:** No kidding.

**CN:** —and make that character really come alive? So that was really fun. Something interesting that has happened this fall, something I just starting includng in my shows—I wasn't done with *Betty's Diner*, I guess, so I've been writing all these songs from the perspective of characters who come to visit the diner.

**PM:** Wow.

**CN:** Now I have this whole collection of songs that are from all different walks of life, with the differences and the commonalities, all these people who come to this diner.

**PM:** What a rich motif that became.

**CN:** Oh, it's been really fun. And I can approach different subjects and different kinds of people and write from different voices that talk a lot about the human condition. Also about that idea that communion doesn't always happen in church, and that forgiveness comes in the most unexpected places. So it's been really interesting. And I just did my first show where I did basically a "diner set," where it's some of the songs from *Betty's Diner* to introduce it, but then a whole collection of voices from the diner.

**PM:** That's wonderful.

**CN:** It's been really fun. I've been talking to Aaron about creating a section at my website where I might put up a few of these diner-people demos—-none of these songs have been recorded except in demo form—so that if people want to hear them again, they can just go to the website and stream it.

**PM:** That's great. I love when people keep their websites really up-to-date with stuff like demos or new thoughts. It really makes it so interactive.

**CN:** Yeah, I like that too. It's hard to do, if you're trying to be personally involved with it, because you're on the road and you're traveling. But I really love the site, and I think it'll be great fun.

**PM:** Yeah. And when you've got a good team member like Aaron is, you can just shovel him your ideas over the phone, that's hot.

**CN:** I actually talked to Aaron today and he said he spoke to you and had a really nice conversation.

**PM:** He hooked me up with Willy Porter, which I thought was really cool, too.

**CN:** Oh, yeah. Well, that's how we ran into Aaron, through Willy. It all comes around.

**PM:** As a musician and the wife of an intellectual property lawyer, do you have any thoughts on where this crazy music business seems to be very awkwardly headed? Do you think the future bodes well for the indie artist, for instance?

**CN:** I sure hope so, because it would be a tremendous loss to lose the indie artist. Our musical landscape would just be so much poorer without that voice.

It's a very amazing time we're living in, in terms of music. I keep thinking we're living in a time that's very similar to when radio first happened. When radio started, all of a sudden there were all these wonderful things that were possible. You could hear music that you could have never heard before. There was recorded music and live music coming into your home. But at the same time, the piano companies went out of business, because

everybody used to have a piano in their house, and everybody played an instrument. And they sat in the parlor or out on the front porch and played. There was something wonderful about the fact that now you could hear music that you could never have heard before and be moved by it and experience it. But there was something really tragic about the fact that there wasn't a piano in every house anymore.

I think right now, with this whole internet explosion happening, the change in the landscape of the musical scene is similar to when radio came in, that moment in time where everything's changed. There's a whole new paradigm. And what's really important here is that the artist's voice doesn't get lost in this whole new amazing technology that has come on the scene, with all of the advantages, but at the same time, the possibility of losing really important things about music. I don't think indie art will ever go away. But I think we need to be outspoken about it, in terms of educating people about what we'll be losing if there isn't a way for artists to make a living, especially indie artists, if they can't make a living doing what they love, and doing what they do really well. I'm a folk singer, so my job is to generally look at the glass half full.

[laughter]

**CN:** So I think indie art is going to stay around, but—

**PM:** As it becomes more a world of downloading and less a world of retail CDs over the counter, I think that there's going to be a greater leveling of the playing field. And as people find ways to discover new artists, like, "If you like this artist, try these," places like Puremusic and other things—places online where people are referring you to artists you may not have heard of, and you can go to anybody's website and buy it there, I think the indie artist is looking better than they did for the '90s in the decade to come.

**CN:** Maybe so. I hope you're right. The thing that will be a factor is that you can have the best site in the world, but unless people know to go there, they don't go there. They don't know it exists. So there is the machine of letting people know that you exist and this music is available. How do indie artists do that? How do they let people know they exist? I think that's a really important factor that will affect how well that whole system works for us as indies.

The downloading thing, again, has its pros and cons. Now someone can go to I-Tunes and download individual songs, and there's a part of me that says, "Oh, great, they can choose the songs they like and download them for 99 cents for a song, and it's very affordable." But then again, albums are made as a product in themselves, as an artistic work in themselves, created with the idea that the thing as a whole works as well as just individual songs. And I would hate to have the loss of that creative collection idea.

**PM:** Yeah. That paradigm is a function of how we grew up, albums as such. But I wonder if as the download becomes more the paradigm, if that concept just starts to morph, kind of—

**CN:** Well, that may be it. That may be just, that's how I grew up—

**PM:** Yeah, me too.

**CN:** —listening to complete albums and discovering the song that's the eighth song that is a real jewel that I didn't really get into until I'd heard the whole album a few times and then discovered it—

**PM:** Right.

**CN:** —and then I was like, "Wow! What an incredible song!" That may be an experience that we don't encounter as much if it's more downloading of individual songs. The whole Napster thing—it's not Napster anymore, but file sharing—

**PM:** Well, yeah, the piracy—no, I don't go for that.

**CN:** Some artists feel like it's okay, but I think, in particular for indie artists—because most of us, on our tours, album sales are the difference between a tour that goes in the black or in the red. And for most of us, we actually can't tour more. Someone says, "Just tour more." "No, I'm sorry, I did 115 shows with the last album, and then all the touring that went with it. I can't really tour more and have a life."

**PM:** Right. No, that's plenty of shows for anybody.

**CN:** And that idea that if we don't sell albums and the record company doesn't put them out, the artist, especially middle range artists, really are stuck in a hard place with that, because they do depend often, for tours, on album sales to make it work.

And then there's just the idea this is what I do. If I had a fish store, you wouldn't walk in and take my fish.

**PM:** Right.

**CN:** This is what I do. But it is an interesting phenomena. And I'm always amazed at the sense of entitlement that people have—"I'm entitled to this music." And I don't feel that way.

**PM:** It's truly warped.

**CN:** I think healthcare we're entitled to. We don't get it, but we are entitled to it. And a place for people to live—people are entitled to that. I feel that. But music, it's a creative work. And people can go to the library and get that and take it out and listen to it. But are people entitled to someone else's art?

**PM:** Yeah, I mean, thinking you can steal somebody's music is akin to the idea that if you see someone with a violin case at a bus stop that you could demand that they break it out and play for you.

**CN:** It's very difficult, because sometimes I think that it's the artist's voice that's getting lost in that argument. We're hearing from the big record companies, and they have a particular business stake in this, and we're hearing people speaking from a consumer viewpoint, "CDs are expensive," and that take on it, or a feeling of somehow having entitlement. But then I think what's getting lost often is the artist's voice.

**PM:** Right.

**CN:** You know, "How long did it take you to write that song, Carrie?" I usually say, "All my life." This is what I do. And this is the work of my heart. This is also how I pay for my daughter's shoes. It's that practical. I really hope that the artist's voice doesn't get lost in all this discussion, that it doesn't become just a matter of business and money, having to do with corporations or a consumer sort of issue. It's not just a consumer issue. It's an issue of: is art worth something? Is it really worth something? Do people who create art, are they valuable, is their work valuable? That's the big question. And we're not hearing that voice often enough, I think, the voice of people who make the art.

**PM:** So I'll ask you one more question, if I may. Are there things so far unattempted, musical or otherwise, that you would like to try sometime?

**CN:** Well, it's been interesting. Like I said earlier in the interview, in the beginning I just didn't think this was an option, that I would get to do this thing I love. I feel pretty fortunate that I do get to do what I love. But part of doing that has always been not getting attached to one picture or another. If the only picture I had for being a musician was, "Okay, I need to move to L.A. and become Madonna"—

**PM:** Right.

**CN:** —that's only one picture of how people do music. And being open to this idea of following what I love and going where it takes me, there's a certain amount of faith that you put into your art and into—kind of into the cosmos, I guess. And so far, it's really taken me amazing places that I never thought I'd go.

Right now I'm doing a lot of workshops. I teach songwriting and teach creative writing. I'm loving that. That's a somewhat new thing in the last five years. I continue to put out albums with a company that's supporting what I do. I've gotten to work with incredible musicians. I've gotten to travel all over the country and Europe and different places. This is kind of amazing. So I feel I'm open at this point to wherever the next turn takes me, and I try not to have a picture in my head of what that looks like. Because as soon as I get a picture in my head that *this* is where I'm supposed to go, usually the big cosmic two-by-four goes "Huh-uh."

[laughter]

**CN:** But just to continue to really push myself and stretch myself musically. This whole new collection of songs from the diner is stretching myself. I'm doing some visual art again that's pushing me; writing things that aren't songs and challenging myself to push that envelope a little bit more; going out and touring again after the longest break I've taken in over ten years, that's pushing me. I guess if I had to say what am I looking for in the future, it's to remain restless, to never get complacent as an artist. I think that will keep my art vibrant, if I always stay restless.

**PM:** Well, it's been a wonderful conversation. You're really a beautiful person, and it's very nice to meet you.

**CN:** Well, gosh, thank you. And your webzine is wonderful. Actually, that's one thing Aaron said to me, too, that he was so delighted that you liked the site, and he looked at yours and thought, "Wow, this is pretty cool."

[laughter]

**PM:** You take care, Carrie. I hope to see you the next time you come through Nashville.

**CN:** Okay, Frank, that'd be great.

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