

FolkWORKS

FREE

BI-MONTHLY

Volume 7 Number 2

March-April 2007

THE SOURCE FOR FOLK/TRADITIONAL MUSIC, DANCE, STORYTELLING & OTHER RELATED FOLK ARTS IN THE GREATER LOS ANGELES AREA

"Don't you know that Folk Music is illegal in Los Angeles?" — WARREN CASEY of the Wicked Tinkers

A LEGACY OF SAGEBRUSH AND SONG

COWBOY & WESTERN MUSIC AS FOLK AMERICANA



BY LARRY WINES



here are **Cowboy Junkies**, a **Cowboy Nation**, **Cowboy Celtic**, even **Kahuna Cowboys**, and all are bands on today's music scene. There are the enduring images of frontier primogeniture, **Sons of the Pioneers** and **Sons of the San Joaquin**. There are **Riders in the Sky** and **Riders of the Purple Sage**, all riding decades before, and still in the saddle decades beyond, the life span of the rock-era's **New Riders of the Purple Sage**. And there are all those rangers, including the **Lost Canyon Rangers**, the **Steep Canyon Rangers**, and the Americana band with the Celtic name of **Kaedmon**, and their song, *Still the Lone Ranger*.

All these and countless more conjure western images, and to varying degrees, perpetuate the legacy of western music.

Country & Western as a single musical genre hasn't existed for decades. When mainstream country went exclusively Nashville after 1980 to pursue a sound that became a cliché, western music found itself out of the spotlight, bereft of the glittering rhinestones. Nevertheless, western and cowboy music have flourished in their liberation and diversity, happily embracing everything from Celtic-

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INTERVIEW WITH WENDY WALDMAN

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TIED TO THE TRACKS & MUCH MORE...

BACK BY SPRING

THE RETURN OF WENDY WALDMAN

BY REX BUTTERS

From 1973's *Love Has Got Me* to 1978's *Strange Company*, **Wendy Waldman** proved her talent justified her inclusion in the legendary Warners/Reprise brain trust, which included **Bonnie Raitt, Van Morrison, Maria Muldaur, Captain Beefheart, Van Dyke Parks, Randy Newman, Ry Cooder, Miriam Makeba, Arlo Guthrie, John Hartford, Jesse Colin Young, and John Sebastian.** In addition to her own performances, Waldman became a widely covered songwriter, with versions by **Muldaur, Linda Ronstadt, Kim Carnes, Judy Collins, Melissa Manchester, Rita Coolidge, and Bette Midler** released simultaneously with Wendy's. By decade's end, nearly all these legendary artists were dropped or forced to find greener pastures due to management changes and the arrival of punk rock.

After a rock outing produced by **Jimi Hendrix's** engineer, Eddie Kramer, Waldman started a second career in Nashville, first as a hit songwriter, and then as one of the first influential female producers in country music, guiding definitive projects for **Suzy Bogguss, the Forester Sisters, Jonathan Edwards, Ozark Mountain Daredevils, and the New Grass Revival's Friday Night in America.**

With major success in so many areas of the music business, Waldman now releases her first studio album in twenty years, the sublime *My Time in the Desert*. Fans of the Warners releases will be thrilled by the return, as well as being impressed by the obvious growth and new depth in the songs and performances. An obvious multi-tasker, Waldman graciously spoke to *FolkWorks* about her recent past and new projects from a portable headset phone while cleaning a new house and preparing for the holidays.

FW: *You've been doing a number of projects.*

WW: It's the way life worked. It's a good thing. My trajectory turned out to be, you get to go play a lot of different positions on the team, you get to learn a whole lot about how people work, how records are made, how music is made. You don't necessarily get to come out of the box and be some kind of a rock star. You get to have a long interesting life filled with study. I wouldn't trade it, man. One of my mentors is twenty years younger than me. My friend Mark Nubar from (alt-rock band) Hypnogaja has been mentoring me through today's market, through the new world. I get the advantage of getting to work with these marvelous people who are involved in today's market, they see things in a very different way, there's a lot to learn. I find it very exciting.

FW: *How did the Nashville adventure begin?*

WW: I couldn't get work, I couldn't get respect. I was facing an issue of bread and butter: finances. I'd just signed with a major publisher in LA, and the guy who came out to run the LA office definitely didn't like me, and didn't respect my work, and was very influenced by the punk movement. I'd signed a 5 year deal with this company, and this guy's treating me at 30 like I'm over the hill. I was desperate. Guy calls me and tells me, "I think your writing is really mediocre."

But then, the head of the Nashville office came out to LA, met me. I guess he read my mind, and invited me out to Nashville. I had been thinking I was going to have to get out of LA, go to London or somewhere. I needed to work. Simultaneously, I found out I had a hit record in Nashville for **Crystal Gayle** with a song I wrote with Josh Leo, who was already working down there and had connections, so we had this big

Crystal Gayle record. What better time to go than behind a hit record?

I went to Nashville the week of CMA 1983 and our record was #1. And I had no idea, I was such a hillbilly. Wading into the shark pool of Nashville, even in those days. I had no idea what it meant having the #1 Country record, what it meant to those folks, what my profile was. But they were so generous to me, everybody that week was so gracious. I've never been in a community where songwriters would come up and introduce themselves and their friends and say, "Gee, you ought to write a song with my friend. I bet you guys would write something great." I was shocked at the generosity.

Then I started writing with a few key people, and that in itself was the real shock. It was such an eye opener to work in that community. I fell in love, and I started commuting and within six months I lived there. It was a tremendous time in my life. I wound up being a record producer and writing hit songs. My son was born there. I put my daughter through high school there. Had and have still very many close wonderful friends in Nashville. It was quite a life.

FW: *How did you get started as a producer?*

WW: I made a record in 1987 called *Letters Home*. I made it in Nashville. It's a pretty Heartland kind of record, a very good record. I'm still very pleased with it. All the big producers were busy so I did it myself. It was very well received in the community especially. All these other artists starting coming to me saying, "We really love what you did on your record, would you do that for me?" Capitol Records came to me and asked me to do **Suzy Bogguss**.

The first person who came to me was a Christian artist, **Pam Mark**, at the time she went by the name Pam Mark Hall. I think my budget was maybe \$18,000, out of which my salary was \$4,000. I went over budget so my salary was less. Here I am, a girl from the old country producing a Christian record. It was a tremendous learning experience. It was a lot of fun. I made a lot of mistakes. Then I started doing a lot of demos, then Warner was interested in me doing demos for them. Did an album and a half of **The Forester Sisters**. The one that's had the greatest impact for me over the years was the last **New Grass Revival** album, *Friday Night In America*. That has opened doors for me to this day. It's so interesting, because at the time it was just a real tough project. It was a glorious

record, the only album they ever cut that had drums on it. That was one of our battles. All I can say is, I don't think I was wrong because those tracks still wind up supplying at least 50% of every "Best Of" that New Grass does.

FW: *It seems like your voice has grown to express the deeper concerns of the new songs.*

WW: I've never stopped singing, but I had an opportunity to work with those vocals, an opportunity to re-sing them when I needed to. Having produced a lot of vocalists, as always it's a huge, huge topic: how do you help a singer get their best work out? It's always been a frightening one for me. The very first thing I did when I started producing records myself was call all my producer friends and say, "How do you do vocals?" Very few of the producers I called in Nashville were singers themselves, so I did not get satisfactory answers.

It's taken me years to learn for myself how I think vocals should be produced, and the fact also that it's a moving target because one person may work a certain way, another



PHOTO BY MARK DONIKIAN

may work another. But I had the luxury of time, and I had a partner who was very willing to fight with me. I was also willing to stand my ground. There were some times when there was no doubt in my mind, when I was reaching for something, if I could just go at it again, or if I could figure out where I was over-singing in particular in my case, if I could have another shot at it, I could do it. A couple of them are live vocals, and then there are some that are extremely not live.

I've never had a great opinion of my voice. I think what I'm good at is phrasing, I don't have a marvelous instrument like **Ronstadt**, but I'm good at conveying feelings. Since these are my personal statements, I had the luxury to go, "I don't care how anyone else would sing it. I feel it in my gut, how can I the vocal that I feel, that I know is there?" I used every tool known to man to do it, I don't mind telling you. I'm a record producer, I have no problem. There are marvelous tools available to us for a reason, and I treat vocals like shooting film. On a lot of my artists I would say, "I'm going to shoot a lot of footage and then you go away and let me edit a movie." I did whatever I had to do. *Luckiest Woman* is a live vocal.

FW: *I love the jazzy feel on that one.*

WW: After all is said and done, I looked at and said, "It's just another Wendy Waldman record." *Luckiest Woman* is just today's version of *Waiting for the Rain* or any of those old jazzy things I used to do. Nothing has really changed in the essence. It's just that now it's twenty years since the last one, and you hope you can do a mature work that means something. You know what they say about you really have to live it. It's in the writing.

FW: *Your writing is often filled with natural and agrarian images.*

WW: Yeah, I know, **Andrew Gold** complains to me about that. We all have a language in which we write. Few of us are as versatile as Shakespeare was, where we can live in so many different worlds. Look at **Tom Waits**. When Tom

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writes, you listen to him and you know where this guy lives. You feel the sense of place. I can feel it in **Bruce Springsteen**, I can feel it in **Billy Joel**. I can feel it in **James Taylor**. I may never have been to the Carolinas, or Massachusetts, or the east coast, but something talks to me about where these guys are from. And I expand that to a whole analysis of what I think is great about some rock and roll, too. You get **Van Halen**, **the Beach Boys**, **the Burrito Brothers**, **the Eagles**, **Ronstadt**, they have a sense of place in their work, a sense of location. For me, because I'm a bit of a nature worshipper, I guess, that's just in my language. I read a lot of Zen, I read a lot of philosophy. I'm a gardener. I lived in the mountains for many years in Topanga. I have a bit of the earth mother in me, okay, I'll say it. I don't mind. I was an extremely well dressed hippie, a hippie who shopped at Saks. That's a fundamental part of who I am. When Andrew first criticized me about that years ago, I was embarrassed. I felt he had a valid criticism, but I am what I am. I write in a harmonic language, that's intrinsic to my nature. The images that come to me, like it or not, that's what's there.

As writers, we're all going to have that sense of place. Every writer has a core. In that interplay, I am a girl who lives in the city and loves to garden, and wishes always that she had lived on the coast of Big Sur. I love the Santa Monica mountain range. I love the chaparral. I had a horse once. I used to ride out in it for hours. That's in my DNA. I'm a Southern Californian, I grew up in the foothills. I feel so many of us are

rootless, because we're descendants of people who left the land and came to the city. It's a long, long way to the serenity and magnificence of nature and what nature has to teach you.

FW: *How much are you writing these days?*

WW: A lot. I've never stopped writing. I always write.

FW: *You must have a trunk full.*

WW: Yeah, man. And a lot of it is really bad. People are so flattering and sweet to me, and they say, "You're such a great songwriter," and I say, "no, no, no, I've just never played the bad stuff for you." I'm just a good editor. A lot of good songs you can only get to through the bad ones. Sometimes you have to write a bunch of prototypes before you can get to the one you've been trying to get to, that might be really good. In the case of *Carves New Rivers*, and *the Walkacross*, those are both ten years old. I consider them new songs. It took me years after I wrote those songs to figure out if they were any good, to figure out if I could record them.

FW: *Walkacross is like a fever dream.*

WW: That's exactly what it is. It's an apocalyptic song. It's a frightening image and a frightening story, and I wrote it in '96. I don't remember writing it. There was a group of songs I wrote that year. It was a very, very tough year for me. I was going through a divorce and all kinds of stuff. I wrote that song the same time I wrote *Carves* and some others that now have matured to the point, or I should say I've matured, because the songs are just songs, where I'm going to use more songs from that period to form the basis of the next record. They were very tough songs for me, and there was no way I could

have performed those songs, I just wasn't good enough. I absolutely was not good enough to pull off *Walkacross* or *Carves New Rivers* a few years ago. I could write it. I look over my old work and think, "I wish I had written it then but not recorded it then." I think I've learned how to deliver some of those songs. You do, that's life.

FW: *One subtext to this record is how your writing has grown due to what life has dealt you over the past twenty years.*

WW: You can't write that shit when you're 20. I think for those of us who are becoming elder statesmen in a culture that is so incorrectly ageist, and in entertainment, the music business in particular, they never did get the message that Boomers, older people, will still buy records if you make them for them. Great music knows no age boundaries, it just doesn't. The guys who run the marketplace may have their issues, a lot of which are colored by their own personal issues, but the truth is the audience doesn't give a damn. If you make great music, I don't care how old you are. The Stones had their biggest grossing tour this year and it wasn't all 60 year olds who went to see them. It's been a struggle for me to come to terms with the fact that I am how old I am, dude, I'm getting better. All artists are supposed to get better as they age. They don't call them the late Beethoven quartets for nothing.

Poet and Journalist Rex Butters has been published for over thirty years in magazines as diverse as BAM, Rapport, LA Free Press, All About Jazz, Free Venice Beachhead, Caffeine, and Brain Vomit



Tamburitzza



Zulu Drum



Thai Zilophone