

Gretchen Peters *Dancing with the Beast*

There's a bittersweet beauty to the passing of time -- the changes it brings are just as often heartbreaking as they are heartwarming. The inevitable tension that arises from that sway is Gretchen Peters' most trusted muse. With melody supporting that melancholy, the songs on Peters' new album, *Dancing with the Beast*, combine to lift the effort over the high artistic bar set by her last outing, 2015's award-winning *Blackbirds*.

Whether a single sentence or a simple setting, once planted, even the tiniest seed can grow into a vision unto itself. Strung together and populated with strong and broken female heroines, those vignettes make up *Dancing with the Beast* and, indeed, Peters' entire discography.

Once tapped into a world of emotion, Peters digs underneath to see what's fueling a particular fire, as she does so stunningly with the overwhelming insecurities of female adolescence in "The Boy from Rye." Knowing very well that most teenage girls endure objectification and sexualization, and their ensuing loss of confidence and power, Peters put her pen to paper and told that story. "I remember being that age," she offers. "There was a feeling that you'd crossed some invisible line, and gone from being the subject in your own life, to being the object. It's a very treacherous time of life for girls."

Dancing with the Beast puts female characters at the fore, from teenage girls to old women. And intentionally so. With the 2017 Women's March and #MeToo Movement as bookends to her writing time, Peters knew that a feminist perspective would be the critical core of the record. She admits, "You can trace the feminist DNA in my songwriting back to 'Independence Day' and probably before. The thing that 2017 did is just put it front and center."

Scenery, too, played a part in inspiring several cuts on the LP, most notably "Wichita" and "Truckstop Angel," both sketches of women doing whatever they have to do to stand up in a world built to hold them down. Once she knew where the songs were set, Peters and Glover dug into the details. "I think I had the line, 'I hope I was the last thing that you saw that night in Wichita,'" she explains, "And the next questions were, 'What happened to this girl? How did we get there?'"

"Truckstop Angel" was an idea originally sparked 20-something years ago by a *New Yorker* article Peters read about people that lived in the wide open western reaches, including prostitutes. Peters wrote *around* the idea a lot in those two decades, but never got to the heart of the story until she encountered such a character at a truckstop in Alabama. "This woman -- a girl, really, as I don't think she was more than 17 -- at 1:30 in the afternoon, walks through the lot in five-inch platform shoes and short shorts. And I just thought, 'Oh my God, that's the woman. That's her.'"

Though Peters doesn't consider herself a political writer, she is politically minded and, therefore, knew she had to address the 2016 election and all that has happened since... but in her own way. With "Lowlands," the title came first, bringing with it both a feeling and a place. "The description of the geography gave me a feeling inside of low clouds and general gloominess, but also the idea of laying low and staying low." To capture that mood, Peters crafted a multitude of verses, whittled them down, and stitched them together. "It has no chorus. It's nothing but verses," she says. "It's relentless, which is exactly how last year was."

The final female voice on the album comes from Peters' mother, who passed away in late 2016. "Love That Makes a Cup of Tea" came out of a dream Peters had of her. "I can't remember what the rest of the dream was, but she, in a reassuring way, held my hand and she said, 'You know, honey, there is love that makes a cup of tea,'" Peters recounts. "I do remember feeling that I had to try to write something with hope in it. It's not my strong suit. But I wanted that on this record, because I do think there's hope. I see a lot of trouble, too, but we have to try to find some light."

Beauty tempered by dread, sorrow buoyed by hope, these are the ever-present tugs of war that make life worth living and songs worth writing. And they are the over-riding themes that make Gretchen Peters one of her generation's most compelling singer/songwriters.