

**A Conversation with Caroline Herring**  
by Frank Goodman (4/2008, Puremusic.com)

Happy day, the return of Caroline Herring. Best new artist of 2001 in Austin, declared by both the Austin Statesman and the Austin Music Awards. It was an undeniable debut. And by *Wellspring* in 2003 her husband's job (an academic and a musician himself) had relocated the family to Atlanta. Family indeed--by now the mother of two, Ms. Herring's luminous beginnings had to go on hold to a certain extent for a few years, though she continued to play locally and do some European festivals, build a database of rural traditional musicians for the State of Georgia, and write songs that would eventually lead to the next rung on the ladder, a deal with coveted songwriter-centric Signature Sounds and her best release to date, *Lantana*. And like the plant for which it's named, it's bound to attract butterflies in great numbers.

The bell-like purity of her voice is sonorous in its depth. A folklore scholar and co-creator of the *Thackery Mountain Radio Hour* (still going on Mississippi Public Radio), the woman knows from whence she sings, and the themes in her own songs both run and cut deep. "Paper Gown," about Susan Smith of Carolina drowning her sons, and Caroline's spin on "Fair and Tender Ladies" (in her version, it involves a nun, a poet, and an anti-lynching activist), are but two that show the strength and gravity that are a part of her trademark.

We talked about music some, but also about family and just being a person trying to marry and be married to both of those things, and just being awake and excited by the process of living and making music. She's a great woman and an important artist, and we're happy that she's back with another fine record, this time co-produced with Rich Brotherton, *Lantana*.

**CH:** This is Caroline Herring.

**PM:** Hello, Caroline. Let me turn--this's a terrible thing to say--let me turn you off. I'm listening to you here.

**CH:** Ah!

[laughter]

**PM:** "Let me turn you off"--that's terrible when somebody says that to you. So okay. The tape recorder is running. Good. Well, it's so nice to speak with you. We met one time many years ago at a Folk Alliance after I'd initially covered the first record *Twilight*, which I loved so much.

**CH:** Thank you.

**PM:** So I am of course very happy to see a new album appear after some years doing something else, which I'm sure we'll talk about in the course of the conversation. How does it feel to be back at it?

**CH:** It feels great to be back at it, of course. I did take a bit of a hiatus, though I haven't completely stopped since I saw you last. But there's nothing like the push of a new record to make things happen, and to get you out on the road again. So I'm enjoying myself. It's a full life, but I'm enjoying myself very much.

**PM:** If it's not prying overly, maybe you'd give our readers and your fans a little timeline. After *Twilight* came out and was so well received in Austin, and then nationally and then beyond, you toured behind that for a year or more, I'm sure. And then came *Wellspring*, the second CD.

**CH:** Yeah.

**PM:** After which you, no doubt, toured likewise. And then what came next?

**CH:** Two children.

**PM:** Oh, two children.

**CH:** [laughs] They were bigger than the records, to be sure. And my daughter just turned four years old, and my son is 13 months old.

**PM:** Wow.

**CH:** Yeah. And we relocated to Atlanta. So I've been here in that interim. And I've been playing at lot at a great folk club called Eddie's Attic.

**PM:** That's a great club.

**CH:** Oh, it's a terrific club. They're so supportive here. I haven't found many places like it, I'm so lucky. And I've toured Europe a couple times a year, and played some festivals in Denmark and Scotland and the Netherlands. So that's mainly filled my time--two kids, festivals in the U.S., touring in Europe, and a lot at Eddie's Attic.

**PM:** Wow.

**CH:** And I do bit of writing, too.

**PM:** So it was from Austin you relocated to Atlanta, is that right?

**CH:** With a short step in Washington DC for a year.

**PM:** Wow.

**CH:** Yeah.

**PM:** So is your husband, if I might ask, is he music connected, or does he do something entirely different?

**CH:** He's an academic. Those jobs are even harder to come by than music jobs.

**PM:** Right. Then you really have to go where the work is.

**CH:** That's right.

**PM:** And what branch of academia does he work in?

**CH:** American history.

**PM:** Wow. That seems so appropriate somehow--

**CH:** Yeah.

**PM:** --you being kind of an essentially American artist.

**CH:** That's right. Well, we definitely--I think we inform each other's work.

**PM:** Wow. Maybe you'd speak a little bit about your co-producer and collaborator on records, Rich Brotherton. That's a great chemistry you guys have.

**CH:** Yes. Well, Rich heard me one night at Stub's Barbecue in Austin. He was playing with Robert Earl Keen. And I was doing my weekly happy hour there. He approached me, and we became friends. And he played with me whenever he was in town. Then he did *Wellspring*. And then I went back to him for this record, *Lantana*, and asked if I could co-produce it. I went back a couple of times and we sort of hammered out what we wanted, and just kept at it. So I was just at South By Southwest, and he played with me, so the whole time that he was in town, I think three or four shows. I really love playing with him because he's such an amazing guitarist and multi-instrumentalist, and then he's really creative in the studio, and patient.

**PM:** Yeah, and they're such different things, how good a guy or a gal is on stage, and how they find their way around the studio. It's a whole other world, isn't it?

**CH:** It is a completely different world. And we did this album in his new studio, Ace Recording Studio. So that was fun, too.

**PM:** What's his platform there? Do we know? Is he like an old school analog guy, or is he a Protools guy, or Nuendo?

**CH:** He's a Protools guy.

**PM:** One of our very favorite musicians appears on the record, the extraordinary banjoist, Danny Barnes.

**CH:** Yeah.

**PM:** Is he a friend, or did Rich bring him in?

**CH:** Rich brought him in. I've never met him. But we were talking about one song--I can't remember which--and Rich said, "Let's ask Danny Barnes." Of course I said, "Yes." I knew who he was. And then we said, "Hey, let's just send him two more." So he became one of our main instrumentalists. It's amazing when you can send somebody a song, and you trust them completely, and they send it back, and there it is.

**PM:** So he was cutting tracks remote, he was cutting them in his town, and then he'd just send you the .wav file.

**CH:** That's correct.

**PM:** Wow. More and more records are done this way. And I think it's really a fascinating way to cut records. People are sending their tracks from all over to Nashville to have the great players on it. And you're doing it in Austin, too. I think it's a fabulous way to cut records.

**CH:** Well, I'd say the only difference between a Nashville approach and this one was, I think Danny Barnes took it into his house, and did what he wanted, and sent it back.

**PM:** Well, you know how much Nashville is going that way, too? You're going into the home of Michael Rhodes, or the home of Bucky Baxter.

**CH:** Yeah, that's true.

**PM:** Just because studios are closing everywhere, it's hard to keep them open, and everybody's got the gear at home. But Danny Barnes, on top of being such an incredible string-smith, is a very unusual person. Did you get to hang out with him at all?

**CH:** No.

**PM:** Yeah, he's a really amazing fellow, extremely intelligent and a very unique personality.

**CH:** Yes, yes. Well, I certainly talked with him. And I was really glad to have that personality on the record, that's for sure.

**PM:** Yeah, he's a very enlightened character. I met your percussionist, Paul Percy on a trip to Austin a few years back. What a nice and talented man he is.

**CH:** Yeah. Oh, yeah, I've known Paul for a long time.

**PM:** Right, I figured he was a pal of yours.

**CH:** He is, definitely.

**PM:** And he added a lot to the record.

**CH:** Yes.

**PM:** Because we've done so many records of theirs, I'm interested in how you got together with Signature Sounds. They're a great outfit. I like that Jim Olsen.

**CH:** Oh, I do, too. Well, it was on one of my European trips. I traveled with Dar Williams and Jeffrey Foucault on the same tour. And both of them encouraged me to send something to Jim. And both of them contacted him on my behalf.

**PM:** Wow.

**CH:** And I made this record on my own and sent it to Jim when I was nine months pregnant. And he called me a couple weeks after I had my son and said, "Let's talk." And we did, and here we are.

**PM:** And did it come together very easily, the deal?

**CH:** Jim is remarkably easy to work with, and so well respected. And this music business can be kind of tough. And Jim, for me, is an answer to a prayer. I'm really thrilled. I know how hard it is in this business to get a break like that. It has been remarkably easy with him. I mean, I have obviously been working hard and invested a lot in that record, but I'm so grateful he recognized it.

**PM:** How is it touring Europe with the Signature folks, with Dar and with Jeffrey Foucault? What kind of characters are they?

**CH:** Both incredibly generous, warm, nice, fun people. Both of them.

**PM:** Real smart, too, both of those people, right?

**CH:** Oh, yeah. And I've traveled with Alana Levandoski. It's a guy named Burt Pipers in the Netherlands who puts these tours together. Who knows who I'll be with the next time. But I have had a great experience on these European tours with different artists, and we spend a week or two talking about what we do and listening to each other.

**PM:** Wow.

**CH:** It's just inspiring to me.

**PM:** And when you did Scandinavia was it just Denmark, or did you do Norway or Sweden?

**CH:** I have not played Norway or Sweden. Just so far this festival in Tonder.

**PM:** Ah, yeah. God, there's so much going on over there, it's really incredible--not only music itself, but so much of the technology of music is now coming from Sweden, from Denmark, recording software, drum software, all kinds of stuff. They're just so prolific over there.

**CH:** Well, that world is a bit foreign to me. But it's not often that I get to share the stage with Arlo Guthrie, but I did at that festival, and then he backed me up--

**PM:** Isn't that something?

**CH:** Oh! Really, the highlight of my life.

**PM:** And is he a real nice fella?

**CH:** So nice, incredibly nice, really approachable, humble.

**PM:** That's good for him to live that life and end up right-sized, that's a testament.

**CH:** Yes.

**PM:** Yours is an uncommon physical beauty, and you carry very well. I hope you don't find it impertinent if I ask what your relationship to that beauty is?

**CH:** Well, thank you. But it's also getting the right angle on a photograph, you know. They're always going for your best look.

**PM:** [laughs]

**CH:** I'm glad you can't see me right now. Well, as a woman in a society that really hammers physical beauty, I'm on and off with not caring about it and really caring about it. And now, as a mother of two who is seeing wrinkles in the mirror, again, it's trying not to worry, and accepting the wisdom that comes with a little age and change, and watching my youth slip away. I hope, on my better days, that I don't care, and I'm grateful to be alive. I don't know. I have a love/hate relationship with physical beauty.

**PM:** Yeah, I think it's a very charged issue for anybody, as you say, in our world. But you seem to have a good relationship to it. I think we've got to allow our youth to slip

away, because there's no stopping it, and I think the more we allow the better--the more at peace we are with that.

Caroline, are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

**CH:** Yes.

**PM:** And in any special way?

**CH:** Increasingly obscure, only because as I age I realize that maybe all the things I just knew that I knew I don't know anymore. I mean, I do believe there's something out there beyond us, or at least I hope so. And many days I think that's a benevolent God. And I go round and round with people, it's one of my favorite conversations, on what made us, and why are we here, and what's waiting for us, and how our lives are structured. I don't know, and yet I have a faith, I suppose, that was instilled in me from a very young age that was structured for me to believe that all those things do exist. And I must say, I'm very unhappy when I come to the places in my life where I dismiss that. I eventually just have to crawl on back to it, because it's too much a part of my DNA. And whether it's culturally, socially, or more than that, I've come to accept that I do believe in God, whether I like it or not. [laughs]

**PM:** Yeah.

**CH:** So that's who I am, and I certainly enjoy the great conversation, and have no big answers. But I am grateful for my faith.

**PM:** Yeah. I feel a lot like that. So do you plan now to enlarge the family, broaden the career, or both?

**CH:** Well, I've enlarged the family, and I think my hands are pretty full with a four-year-old and a one-year-old. And so yeah, now is the time to start broadening the career, while keeping the family first. And I'm just glad to have a career. I think it's really doable. In probably three years we can all hit the road and have fun at summer festivals, and all have our instruments in tow--without shoving the banjo or the fiddle down my son or daughter's neck, I can show them musicians on stage. One of the great joys for me of playing music is that I get to meet other musicians, as I've already mentioned to you, it truly is. And so to expose my kids to that is reason enough by itself to keep playing. I feel like it's a rich opportunity for all of us, as long as we can shift around and manage, and as long as my husband stays [laughs] really supportive. But he loves it, too. It's definitely a family affair.

**PM:** Wow. Does he play as well, then?

**CH:** Yeah, he plays upright bass and a little guitar.

**PM:** Oh, wow, he plays upright bass. That comes in awfully handy.

**CH:** Awfully handy.

**PM:** What's his name?

**CH:** Joe.

**PM:** Well, yeah, I hope I get to meet Joe down the line. And as I said, I'm very happy to have you back on the scene. And your new album certainly makes it very clear that you're here to stay. I think it's your best one yet.

**CH:** Thank you.

**PM:** And it really re-establishes you as a very important voice. It reminds me of my good friend Diana Jones. Have you shared the stage with her anywhere yet?

**CH:** I have had the pleasure of doing that.

**PM:** Isn't she something?

**CH:** Yes, she is.

**PM:** And I think you guys are candidates for friendship.

**CH:** Well, I'd love that.

**PM:** Caroline, it's very nice to speak with you today. And I look forward to running into you out there in the world somewhere, and wish you the best of luck with this record.

**CH:** Well, thank you, Frank.