

David Rawlings told me Gillian Welch's life story. She had grown tired of telling it herself. Welch is a singer and songwriter whose music is not easily classified—it is at once innovative and obliquely reminiscent of past rural forms—and Rawlings is her partner. Welch describes them as “a two-piece band called Gillian Welch.” I had asked her to talk about her past, and she demurred. Then she said, “Why don't you tell it, Dave.” We were in Asheville, North Carolina; Welch and Rawlings were making a brief tour from Nashville, where they live. They were expected before long on the stage and had things to do to prepare, so I had to wait.

The next day, the three of us were in a car heading east to Carrboro, North Carolina, near Chapel Hill, where Welch and Rawlings had their next engagement. Rawlings was driving. Welch was lying on the back seat, with a blanket over her. It was early in the afternoon, and we were leaving the highway for a restaurant where they knew they could still order breakfast. Welch and Rawlings are nocturnal. A few years ago, they lived in a house that planes flew over. Whenever they tried to record themselves, the microphones picked up the planes. The planes stopped shortly after midnight and started again at six in the morning. The hours of quiet in the middle of the night were the ones they became accustomed to working in. They would take breaks and walk around the neighborhood at two and three in the morning, the only figures abroad. They developed the impression that Nashville was a peaceful city, free of traffic, a paradise, where music they loved had been made by people who now were dead but were completely alive whenever they sang on records.

At the restaurant—it was a Denny's—Welch asked for tea. “I don't need a tea bag, though,” she said. The waitress regarded her steadily. A moment later, she placed a cup of hot water on the table, and Welch drew a tea bag on a string from her pocket. I thought it was too soon to ask again about her childhood, so I asked Rawlings about his. He grew up in Slatersville, Rhode Island, he said, a former mill town with a river. The mills were textile mills, built on the riverbanks, and they had been allowed to become dilapidated. Rawlings spent a lot of his childhood walking through them. At a friend's suggestion, he began playing guitar in 1985, when he was fifteen. “He was going to ask his parents for a harmonica for Christmas, and he wanted me to ask mine for a guitar,” Rawlings said. “That way, we could learn to play and perform at the school talent show, in May.” Rawlings pursued a kid who was known as a guitar player for help, and then the boy's father, who had taught guitar. Rawlings noticed that playing guitar “was something I was immediately passable at, or maybe even good at. Which wasn't the case with things such as basketball, which I tried really, really hard at, but it wasn't going to happen. Music, because it was math-based, and I was good at math, I wasn't intimidated.” He and his friend learned “Heart of Gold,” by Neil Young. They came in second at the talent show, and the next year they won.

Welch excused herself to visit the bathroom. When she came back, she said, “We've been here before.”

Rawlings said, “Really?”

“This is the Denny’s where they had the film crew,” she said.

“The photographer who took the pictures for our third record, Mark Seliger, brought with him a friend who had film equipment,” Rawlings said.

“In case we wanted to make a video,” Welch said, sipping her tea.

“They came with a 16-mm. black-and-white camera, and they filmed us at a club.”

“Then we drove to Knoxville for a gig, and we stopped here for some food and shot a little film,” she said. “They called the cops—state troopers—and they kicked us out.”

Rawlings nodded.

“When I got up to go to the bathroom, I realized it’s the same place,” Welch said.

We paid the check, and when we got back in the car Rawlings seemed pensive. He tends to brood, and there is an obscurely mournful cast to his thinking. He drove slowly across the parking lot. “The problem with talking about the past is it becomes disturbing,” he said finally. “You start thinking of a thousand anecdotes, and your life merely as a collection thereof.”

Welch is tall and slender. She has a long, narrow face, high cheekbones, wide-set eyes, a sharp chin, and a toothy smile. She is thirty-six. Her skin is pale, and her hair is fine and reddish-brown. Her carriage is upright, and her movements are unhurried and graceful—her shoulders swing slightly as she walks. She collects hymnals, and handmade shoeshine kits, the kind from which people once made a living on the street. She is inclined toward practicality. As a child, she played the piano and the drums but gave them up because she didn’t like being confined to whatever room the instruments were in. Onstage, during instrumental passages, she bends her head over her guitar, like a figure in a religious painting, and plays with a ruthless rhythmic precision. There is a sense of self-possession about her that seems more a matter of temperament than influence. Welch is adopted. Her mother, Mitzie, who is a singer, says she is surprised that Welch became a performer, because performers, in her experience, always have a need to please, and her daughter doesn’t seem to.

Rawlings is tall and lanky. He has an oval face, a high forehead, dark hair, a long nose, and dark eyes. His hands are delicate. His manner in conversation varies between an austerity which gives him the air of a Pilgrim and a discursiveness in which he never seems satisfied with something he has said—any observation can always be delivered more emphatically or seen from another point of view or elaborated or clarified or even made more concisely. Because his mind is capacious and lively, his talk is nearly always diverting, but he wishes he were less garrulous. He says almost nothing onstage. He plays

with his eyes closed and an impassive expression on his face. He stands on his toes and sways, all of which helps cultivate what Welch affectionately describes as “the Dave Rawlings mystique.” One day after Rawlings and I had spent the afternoon listening to tapes of bands he had played in and of Welch’s earlier work, and I had filled pages in my notebook with his remarks, he slumped in his chair. “I talk so much,” he said ruefully. “I am more as I’d like to be when I’m very sick.”

Welch and Rawlings’s music is deceptively complex, despite its simple components: two voices, two guitars, and four hands. The broadest category into which it comfortably fits is country music. In the Country Music Hall of Fame, in Nashville, a video of Welch and Rawlings performing is shown with other videos that are intended to convey the breadth of modern country music. Welch and Rawlings are portrayed as defenders of a faith—old-time string musicians—practitioners of a lapsed form. They initially found a model for their enthusiasms in records made in the thirties and forties by musicians such as Bill and Earl Bolick, who performed as the Blue Sky Boys. Vocal duets unaccompanied by other musicians were eclipsed in the forties by the more forceful sound of bluegrass—the Blue Sky Boys broke up in 1951—leaving duets as one of the few forms of American music not yet completely covered with footprints. The music Welch and Rawlings play contains pronounced elements of old-time music, string-band music, bluegrass, and early country music, but Welch and Rawlings diverge from historical models by playing songs that are meticulously arranged and that include influences from rhythm and blues, rockabilly, rock and roll, gospel, folk, jazz, punk, and grunge. Furthermore, Welch prefers tempos that are languid. A typical Welch song has the tempo of a slow heartbeat.

Welch’s narratives tend to be accounts of resignation, misfortune, or torment. Her characters include itinerant laborers, solitary wanderers, misfits, poor people plagued at every turn by trouble, repentant figures, outlaws, criminals, soldiers, a moonshiner, a farm girl, a reckless beauty queen, a love-wrecked woman, a drug addict, and a child. Her imagination is sympathetic to outcasts who appeal for help to God despite knowing from experience that there isn’t likely to be any. Their theology is ardent and literal. They are given to picturing themselves meeting their families in Heaven, where mysteries too deep to comprehend will finally be explained. “Until we’ve all gone to Jesus / We can only wonder why,” she sings in “Annabelle,” a song about a sharecropper who hopes to give his daughter more than he had but who delivers her to the cemetery instead. A number of Welch’s songs are written from the point of view of male characters. “My Morphine,” the drowsy, intoxicated lament of a man whose addiction is souring, is the only song I am aware of about a narcotic which creates the sensation of having taken the narcotic. She is accomplished at compressing dramatic events into a few verses and a chorus. In “Caleb Meyer,” a man appears, transgresses, dies, and is revived as a spectre in the imagination of the woman who slit his throat in self-defense. Welch admires the troubadour songwriters Chuck Berry, Bob Dylan, and Hank Williams, and she writes good car songs. The first song she made big money from was “455 Rocket,” which was a hit for Kathy Mattea in 1997, and is about a hot rod. More and more, Welch’s songs describe her actual life. “No One Knows My Name” is about her birth parents. “My mother was just a girl seventeen,” she sings, “and my dad was passing through, doing things a man will do.”

Her mother was a college student in New York, and her father was a musician. By the time she was delivered, her adoption had been arranged.

Welch was born in New York in 1967. Ken and Mitzie Welch already had a daughter, Julie, who'd been born in 1961. She and Welch are close; she lives in California, is a graphic designer, and also teaches improvisational comedy. Julie's birth had been difficult, and Mitzie wasn't eager to go through another pregnancy. According to Welch, when they approached adoption agencies "the agencies said no dice because they were entertainers." Ken Welch had been a performer since childhood, in Kansas City. He had begun piano lessons at four, but the teacher soon told his parents that she couldn't do more with him until his hands were large enough to span an octave. "I couldn't reach an octave on a piano, but I could on an accordion," he says. By the time he was seven, he was tap dancing and playing the accordion throughout "Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa, the remains of the old RKO circuit," he says. Eventually, he attended Carnegie Tech, now Carnegie Mellon, in Pittsburgh, where he studied painting. He met Mitzie at an audition. They moved to New York separately. She sold handbags at a store on Broadway, and made twenty-five dollars on Sundays singing in the choir at Norman Vincent Peale's church. She auditioned for Benny Goodman and got the job, but she had only a few weeks in which to learn Goodman's repertoire. She ended up writing lyrics on the palms of her hands and on her fingernails.

As the comedy team "Ken and Mitzie Welch," they appeared in clubs where Lenny Bruce also performed. Bob Newhart was once their opening act. They had their most public success on the "Tonight Show," when Jack Paar was the host. They performed a slowed-down version of "I Got Rhythm." Mitzie faced the audience and sang, and Ken stood with his back against hers, playing the accordion. By the time the Welches adopted Gillian, with the help of their doctor, Ken was writing music for television shows, and Mitzie was working in commercials and on Broadway.

When Welch was three, her parents moved to Los Angeles, to write music for "The Carol Burnett Show." As a little girl, Welch came home from school one day weeping because she had been reprimanded in art class for making a black outline around snow in a painting. This led her parents to enroll her in a school called Westland. At Westland, the students gathered every week to sing folk songs and Carter Family songs, with Welch accompanying them on guitar. "On the tapes from the period, she sounds the same as she does now, except that her voice is higher," Rawlings said.

Welch's parents bought songbooks for her, and, sitting by herself in her room, playing guitar, she made her way through them. When she got to the end, she wrote songs of her own, "about ducks and things," Rawlings said. "Like a kid who writes poems, and they go in a drawer." Welch attended a high school called Crossroads, "where I get way into ceramics and art and stay hours after school building things and they let me," she said. "And I run like crazy—cross-country and track." Welch made the all-state team for the mile and was invited to run in the national trials. "But if I'd gone I'd have got my ass kicked," she said. "They were in Texas, and I didn't do well in hot weather. Really, my

sport was cross-country. I discovered that the longer the race, the more I moved up in the field. I don't run that fast—I just go, very rhythmic. I'm endurance.”

Welch said that her favorite English teacher had gone to Princeton, so she applied, without telling him. But when he heard that she'd been accepted he told her that she wouldn't be happy there, and she went to the University of California at Santa Cruz instead.

Welch and Rawlings appear often on the Grand Ole Opry. They also perform in clubs in the United States and abroad, where their audiences tend to consist of between a thousand and two thousand people. They play very quietly. Welch sang so much by herself in her room that she never learned to sing above the sound of other musicians. Audiences at even the beeriest clubs attend them closely, as if they were at the theatre. Her voice resonates more in her head than in her chest. Its range is not wide—it is more an alto than a soprano—and it has a mournful, vernacular, almost factual quality, as if she were a witness to the scene she is describing. She conveys emotion through dynamics, not vibrato, and by a self-effacing absorption with the narrative. What ornamentation she employs comes mainly from bluegrass and brother-team singing—the pounce on certain syllables, the dying falls, the trills, the quick fades and returns, the small tear—though she manages, partly by the solemnity of her bearing, to give the impression of singing without artifice, which in itself is dramatic.

At Carrboro, Welch and Rawlings played in a club called Cat's Cradle. As on many nights of the tour, they shared the bill with the Old Crow Medicine Show, a charismatic, punked-up string band from Nashville. Rawlings sometimes plays with Old Crow. When he does, he is occasionally introduced as Butch Hobson. All of them shared a small dressing room. On the door, in permanent marker, was written, “I Hate This Part of Texas.” Welch changed into a full skirt and a sleeveless velvet top. Then she sat on the edge of a small armchair and folded her skirt demurely between her knees and Ketch Secor, the fiddle player from Old Crow, brought out a shoeshine kit and polished her cowboy boots. “It's what the opening act does,” he said, “shine the headliner's shoes.”

Narrow stairs led to a sitting room in the wings above the stage. Morgan Jahnig, the bass player for Old Crow, came down the stairs and said, politely, “Does the name Jerzy Kosinski mean anything to anyone? It just came into my head.”

Welch gathered her skirt and climbed the stairs and sat in a chair. On the pages of a small, lined notebook, she printed a set list in block letters. I went out into the club to listen to Old Crow. From the far corner of the floor, as if through a window, I could see Welch upstairs, seated in front of a mirror, brushing her hair, then turning her head from side to side until it fell to her liking.

Rawlings's account of Welch's past began shortly after we left Denny's. Welch had settled herself on the back seat and said, “I'm still waiting to hear the Gillian Welch

story, by David Rawlings.” We had arrived at her departure for Santa Cruz when Rawlings paused, as if he had something delicate to impart. “At this point, her family,” he said, “they’ve kept her on a pretty tight leash.”

“No boyfriends,” Welch said.

“She goes to U.C. Santa Cruz, and when do you start playing in bands?”

“Soon as I get there,” Welch said. “The first one was called Penny Dreadful, a Goth band, because that’s what my friends were playing. I was very pale, and my hair was very blond from being from California and in the sun all the time. I’m on a bass I borrowed. It doesn’t last very long. I was not a real creative force in that band.”

“At college, though, things deteriorate pretty quickly,” Rawlings said thoughtfully. He paused again. “I don’t know, Gill,” he said, looking opaquely out the windshield at the road. “How accurate do you want this to be?”

“Accurate,” she said.

“O.K.,” Rawlings said. “So Gill’s getting drunk and taking drugs all the time.”

“I immediately spin out,” Welch said.

“After a very cloistered life,” he said.

“I hadn’t been a very social person in high school,” she said. “I kept to myself. I had friends, but college is so different. You arrive and whatever you want to be you are. The question is, who do you want to be?”

“There are other bands,” Rawlings said, as if to return Welch’s attention to the story.

“I was the drummer in a psychedelic surf band, Thirteenth-Floor something or other,” Welch said. “I don’t think we had a singer. We probably had only a handful of gigs, and most of them were house parties. I was always extremely high on acid, and I wouldn’t realize that the song had ended, so there were a lot of drum solos.”

Welch took classes in art and ceramics and became interested in photography. She moved into a house whose other tenants were members of a bluegrass band that played at a pizza parlor, and she went to all their gigs. “When I discovered bluegrass music, it was like an electric shock that it meant so much to me,” Welch said. “I hadn’t heard people playing the music I had sung as a kid, and it made me think, I know these songs, and I sound good singing them. I realized this was possible.”

“Do you start performing?” I asked.

“A couple of gigs, and they scare me to death.”

“And how are they received?”

“Well, I don’t think I was singing very loud, and there was no mike,” she said. “I sort of go and play them, but everything about how I look says, ‘Pay no attention to me.’”

When Welch and Rawlings sing together, their voices fit so tightly that they seem welded. One of their newer songs—it doesn’t yet have a title—is almost hypnotically slow and includes several passages sung in unison. Welch says that sometimes she loses the sense of which voice is hers and which belongs to Rawlings.

Rawlings’s ear for harmonic possibilities is impish. He does not always match Welch’s phrasing. His line sometimes anticipates what Welch is singing, then meets hers and continues in another direction. He likes intervals that are closer than those commonly used. At certain moments of tension, their voices seem to be leaning against each other, like cards in a card house, which is a bluegrass effect.

Rawlings is a strikingly inventive guitarist. His solos often feature daring melodic leaps. He uses passing tones as signal elements of a solo rather than relying on them merely to bridge chord changes, and there is an obstinate, near-vagrant quality of chromatic drifting to his playing—of his proceeding with harmonic ideas at a different pace and perhaps even in a different direction from the song’s changes. He uses double and triple stops and open strings for dramatic effect. Often, he leaves an open string ringing as a drone against which he plays a note that conflicts with the chord the drone refers to. He likes to go as far out on a limb as he can before figuring out how to get back. In Carrboro, he played a solo that seemed as if it were going to skid right off the pavement and recovered itself only at the very last moment. The crowd applauded the simple audacity, and a woman beside me, clearly familiar with his playing, began laughing and shaking her head. “Of course he ends it there,” she said to her companion. “Why wouldn’t he?” In the dressing room afterward, I asked Rawlings how he would describe his playing, and he said that he simply has a fondness for certain notes and he finds ways to play them. When I asked which notes they were, he shrugged and said, “The ghostly ones.”

Rawlings plays a peculiar guitar. It is a 1935 Epiphone Olympic, with an arch top, and f-holes on the face, like a violin, and even when it was new it was a cheap guitar. He may be the only musician who has ever made it his principal instrument. The sound is so unusual that, once when Welch and Rawlings were appearing at a festival where the blind guitar player Doc Watson was also performing, Watson came up to Rawlings while he was warming up and said, “Son, what kind of instrument is that?” In 1997, Rawlings bought a Fender Esquire, an electric guitar, and wanted to use it, so he and Welch got a friend to play drums, and Welch played the electric bass and they began playing clubs as the Esquires. They never announced their performances, and not many people came. They played songs by Neil Young and the Rolling Stones, among others, and Rawlings sang most of them. The Esquires brought to their gigs a complete book of Dylan songs, and once during each evening the audience was allowed to shout out a number. Welch

and Rawlings picked one, then turned to the corresponding page in the Dylan book and played whatever song was on that page. Rawlings says that, for the most part, their playing was “a two on a scale of ten.” They last played in 2002.

“The Esquires’ big gig was New Year’s, because no one would ever hire me and Dave to play New Year’s,” Welch said. “So we were always free.”

The most compelling element of a Welch and Rawlings performance is their deep and, so far as I know, unexampled engagement with each other. Welch’s mother and father once asked me if I had ever seen Welch and Rawlings rehearse. I said that I hadn’t. “Whatever happens in the ear to people listening profoundly to each other is happening in an extreme fashion between them,” he said.

“You know not to interrupt,” she said.

“There’s a kind of supersensitivity,” he said.

“And respect,” she said.

“It’s like they’re breathing together,” he said. “They get lost in there.”

“We were a little scared,” she said.

Parked along the side of the highway here and there on the way to Carrboro were white school buses with “Inmate Transfer Bus” written in black letters beneath the windows, and around the buses were convicts in prison clothes picking up trash. “In the meantime, you’re in another band,” Rawlings said to Welch.

“Campy seventies covers, which is very funny to do, in my opinion,” Welch said. “Late Elvis, Neil Diamond.”

“The band’s name is Sofa.”

“And everyone in it has a persona,” Welch said. “I was Oprah von Sofa. Hal, the drummer, worked at a Goodwill sorting station, so he had access to all this wild, psychedelic clothing that people were finally getting rid of. Plaid pants and vinyl belts. I wore my hair in pigtails. It spilled over into my real life. If you’ve got such great clothes, you don’t just want to wear them onstage, and likewise the names. A lot of people just knew me as Oprah. It was very helpful to me to have a costume and an alter ego. In Sofa, I’m sometimes on bass and sometimes on guitar. The bluegrass band moved out of the house, and Sofa moved in. This is the band I actually start doing gigs with. We make a demo, we have posters, we’re a slightly working band.”

“Then the next thing, Gill’s done with that life, and she’s going to live in Wales,” Rawlings said.



“The earthquake hit in ’89,” Welch said. “I was up on campus when it happened, and as I made my way home things got stranger and stranger. People were trapped in their houses, because the roofs had collapsed, chimneys had fallen, cars were smashed under trees, and water mains had broken. They stood on their lawns with their radios on, so you could hear more than one as you passed. By the time I reached home, I was completely shaken up. My bedroom wall was like a spiderweb. In the days after, people couldn’t sleep. My best friend, who lived in San Francisco, said, ‘You should get out.’ We arranged to house-sit for a woman in Wales. We were maybe going to travel around and take pictures.”

“But it’s a little quiet,” Rawlings said.

“We were very out of place,” Welch said. “After a couple of months, we got a little bored, then we realized that we had the use of this woman’s car. This whole thing ends up in Amsterdam.”

“And then there’s a conference with her parents, who have long sensed that things are going to need attention,” Rawlings said.

“They ask me what do I want to do, and I say, ‘I want to do music.’”

“And they say, ‘If you’re going to play music you’re going to have to go to school for it.’”

“Which is funny, because they didn’t.”

In 1990, a friend of Welch’s parents wrote a recommendation for her to the Berklee College of Music, in Boston.

“Her parents make the situation happen. But on the other hand it’s in Boston, so they don’t have that much control,” Rawlings said.

“Just come back to the story,” Welch said.

“All right. So Gill goes to Boston, and of course she’s useless at Berklee.”

“It’s a jazz school.”

“And she’s a primitive.”

“I felt like a Martian,” she said. “I’m out of my peer group. I have no friends. I’m in my room listening to brother-team music.”

“One of her teachers looks at the way she makes a C chord and says, ‘If you keep doing that you’ll be a cripple in a few years.’ But she stays for two years and majors in songwriting, and the songwriting program is just starting to flower.”

Welch and Rawlings began going out with each other at Berklee. They met in a hallway, while waiting to audition for the country-band class. At Berklee, Welch overcame her shyness about performing, she said, “because you had to. In every class, you had to do things in front of about twenty people.”

When school was over, Welch said, “I looked at my record collection and saw that all the music I loved had been made in Nashville—Bill Monroe, Dylan, the Stanley Brothers, Neil Young—so I moved there. Not ever thinking I was thirty years too late.” At the end of the summer, Rawlings moved to Nashville, too. In Boston, when they played together, they were always among other musicians. In the kitchen of Rawlings’s apartment one night, they heard for the first time what they sounded like on their own. “We sang ‘Long, Black Veil,’ and we stopped,” Welch said. “I think we were both a little startled by how natural a blend we were. If you don’t sound good together, you can’t make it better.”

Welch decided that if she wanted a career as a songwriter she would have to make the weekly rounds of songwriters’ nights at the clubs. Rawlings was working with other musicians, but he agreed to go with her. “Just sort of to accompany me because you have to sit there and wait, and it’s not a good time,” she said. When they began arranging her songs, they realized that, “instead of the Stanley Brothers or the Blue Sky Boys, or any of the brother acts we’ve listened to—lead singers and a tenor—we have a difference,” Welch said. “We have a lead singer and a baritone singer.” Because Welch was intent on establishing herself as a songwriter, and because their arrangement began informally, and Rawlings was playing with other people anyway, she says it didn’t occur to them to name the duet; they performed simply as Gillian Welch.

Almost from the start, people tried to separate them. After about a year, Welch found a manager, Denise Stiff. “I must have had a hundred people say to me, ‘Lose the guitar player,’” Stiff said. Rawlings draws too much attention from Welch, they said. Or, he plays twenty notes where ten will do. Or, with a band behind her she could be the next Alison Krauss. As it happened, Stiff represented Krauss, a bluegrass musician, and cared less about having a duplicate of her than she did about trying to discover what Welch and Rawlings required.

For a while, Welch made beds and cleaned bathrooms at a bed-and-breakfast. “That was a good job for me,” she said. “You can’t listen to the stereo, because you’re moving from one room to another, and the vacuum is too loud; there’s no entertainment, so you have to provide it. I would write. Plus, I had a forty-minute drive there and back, and I have always been able to write when I’m driving, if I’m by myself.” She brought home tablecloths and napkins to iron. She and Rawlings lived in the same apartment building, and sometimes, if Rawlings needed money, he did some ironing, too.

In 1994, Welch signed a publishing deal, and then devoted herself to trying to get a record contract. Her publisher sent tapes of her and Rawlings to Jerry Moss, at Almo Sounds, in Los Angeles, and in 1995 Stiff and Welch went to L.A. to see him. Welch played for him in his office. Behind his desk, Moss began quietly singing harmony with her. When Stiff heard him, she thought, Those are David's parts. Jerry's heard them on the tapes, and if he's singing them he's missing them. She never again felt uncertain about Rawlings's role. Even so, once Welch and Rawlings were signed to a recording contract the question they heard most often was "Who are you going to get to play guitar on your record?"

One afternoon in Nashville, after the tour had been completed, Welch picked me up at my hotel. I had asked her if she would show me the clubs where she and Rawlings had played Writer's Nights. Welch had written down the names of all the clubs she remembered, and we drove back and forth—it felt as if we were tacking across town. There were twelve altogether, and it took us about an hour and a half to visit them.

"How you'd find them is look in the paper," she said. "If it wasn't a highbrow place, the ad simply said 'Writer's Night,' and if it was a highbrow place you'd see the names of all the writers booked.

"One night, I walked around with the cigar box collecting the money, because there was no one at the door, which says something about how determined I was—do you think our show was worth the money?"

At the end of a side street was a small, two-story brick building with a little sign that said "Pub of Love." "Tuesday nights," Welch said. "Probably forty people." Down by the river, near the Ryman Auditorium, where the Grand Ole Opry was, we stopped in front of a building where there used to be a club called the Silver Dollar Saloon. "One time I came down here to a Writer's Night by myself," Welch said. "November '93. Dave has travelled back to New England for Thanksgiving, and I'm here by myself. This night, I'm late, and the guy grudgingly puts me on the list. 'We've got a lot of people,' he says. He works his way through the writers. I'm waiting. The crowd's thinning out. Once the writers play, they leave, and whoever came to see them, their friends, they leave, too. Finally, it gets to be about eleven-thirty, maybe coming up to midnight. The bartender and me are left. The guy says to me, as he's leaving, 'Will you turn off the sound system when you're done?'"

"Most of the things that might have been discouraging have their pathetic and funny sides, too," Welch said. "Usually, it was all right. No one kicked me out. They would listen, but they would always say, 'Don't you have any happy love songs?'"

From the old Silver Dollar Saloon, we drove to a part of town called Green Hills. "We're heading for the Bluebird Café, where you'll laugh when you see it, because it's in a strip mall," Welch said. The Bluebird was behind plate-glass windows. We stood on the sidewalk and leaned into the glass, shading our eyes. The room was dark. I could make

out some black-and-white photographs of songwriters on a panelled wall, and chairs stacked on tables. “The Bluebird was very important in our coming-up,” Welch said. “It was the scene of where I got signed for my writing deal, actually.” She moved a step to the side and pointed. “Right there,” she said. “Over by the cigarette machine.”

Welch is a figure of some controversy, and she wishes she weren't. Some people like to say that as the daughter of musicians in Los Angeles she has no right to play music they regard as reserved for people who grew up in poverty or, anyway, among laborers.

In response, Rawlings likes to bring up Ernest Hemingway. “You read ‘The Old Man and the Sea,’ and you like it,” he says. “Then you find out that not only is the man who wrote it not a commercial fisherman, he isn't even a Cuban. Do you not like it now?”

Assertions about who belongs in the academy and who doesn't are always partisan, but in Welch's case none can be made confidently. There are complications that involve the issue of identity in a fundamental and enigmatic way. Welch says that the first time she heard bluegrass music she felt stirred as she never had by any other music. She has said that it makes no sense that she plays relic music deeply influenced by a part of the country she did not live in until she was grown. More than a few of her songs, for example, have the harsh modal structure of the ballads sung in the mountains of North Carolina in the nineteenth century. Her reaction might plausibly reflect her having sung folk songs as a girl and played the guitar at school, and a pleasure that surfaced when she was reminded of it—a sense memory, that is. In any case, to explain the anomaly posed by the difference between her upbringing and her tastes she has told interviewers, somewhat sheepishly, that she has wondered whose blood runs through her veins. She has even considered which musicians might have passed through New York in 1967. She has imagined her father as Bill Monroe, the founder of bluegrass, or as Levon Helm, the drummer in the Band, who was from Arkansas. After all, the first instrument she played was the drums, and now and then she still plays them.

Welch's parents claimed her the day after she was born, and, honoring rules imposed on the adoption, they sent a friend to the hospital to collect her. Over the years, they have learned two things about Welch's mother and father, which they told Welch while she was visiting last Christmas. Her father was not from the South, so far as they knew, but he was a musician; in fact, he was a drummer. And, from an address they had been given, it appeared that her mother, the college student in New York, may have grown up in the mountains of North Carolina.

When Welch and Rawlings arrived in Nashville, they each bought an old pickup truck. Rawlings spent all the money he had come to town with on his. When I asked Welch what kind of truck she had bought, she said, “A 1966 F-100 with a 352 motor, three on the tree, and an eight-foot bed—you could put a whole sheet of plywood in it.” Rawlings drives a farm truck from an orange grove in California. It was inherited by someone in Nashville. The California sun dissolved the finish, so the truck is several colors, mainly orange, green, and gray. It looks as if it were covered with lichen. Welch said, “It's a one-

piece body, which was a bad idea. If you throw something too heavy in the bed, you can't open the door; it torques."

My last night in Nashville, I went with Welch and Rawlings to a steak house for dinner, and afterward Rawlings drove us to a soft-ice-cream place on Charlotte Avenue, in Sylvan Park, near the house they had lived in where the airplanes flew overhead. Welch was wearing black jeans and a sleeveless black top, her hair was loosely pulled back, and she had a radiant look. On the way, she sang along with the truck's tube radio, which was playing a Connie Francis song. When Francis hit a high note and her voice broke slightly, Welch applauded the effect. Pat Pattison, Welch's songwriting teacher at Berklee, once said to me, "One of the things that Gillian did very well was sing the song rather than the notes. You have singers who have a really great instrument, but you don't feel they're inside the song. When Gillian sings, it's about the presentation of emotion. Even back then, she didn't sing notes; she sang feelings and ideas."

By the time we arrived at the ice-cream place, it was closed. The owner happened to see us through the service window. He knew Welch and Rawlings, and he waved. He, too, was a musician.

Welch and Rawlings ordered cones dipped in chocolate, and while we waited for them Welch said there was a path that led from the back of the parking lot through an alley to their old house. The house was damp and dark, and the rooms were laid out shotgun fashion. It was on Nevada Avenue, she said, and they called it the Spaceship Nevada, because the atmosphere inside, with the recording machines and the cables and microphones, was remote from ordinary life. Across the street from the ice-cream place was a brick building with signs all over it saying "Whiskey," some of them flashing. Welch said that the tricky thing about working at night was getting to bed before the birds started singing.

The owner handed the cones through the window, and Welch told Rawlings, "I took your advice and had the first bite before the chocolate had dried." To me, she said, "Because it's different every time—it's the humidity, and how the chocolate settles." I wrote that down, because it seemed to typify an acuity of mind that she and Rawlings share. A few days later, I was talking to Welch's mother on the phone. Julie Welch, Gillian's sister, had told me that when Gillian was in high school a television station did a program called "Super Kids," in which they included Gillian as an example of a student who excelled at everything she did. I asked Welch's mother if she remembered the program. "Oh, sure. She was unique. I mean, her lyrics, where does that stuff come from?" she said. "The funny thing is, she got all these awards in school, but I never remember her working that hard. She just sort of loved everything she did." She paused, as if reflecting. "I always think of Gill as paying attention," she said. "Really, what she's done her whole life is pay attention."

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