

A Conversation with Patty Griffin
by Frank Goodman (2/2007, Puremusic.com)

When discerning people of hip culture today consider who their favorite singers are, there is a great likelihood that Patty Griffin appears in their Top Ten. She has quietly, firmly assumed that spot without any apparent push from labels or high powered PR, although a more subtle grassroots effort has always been afoot, no doubt. But she got there largely the old fashioned way, she sang her way there. By herself, as a duo or with rock bands in certain periods, making obvious the truth that she can do all that, and much more.

And though her voice is not short of magnificent, her songwriting propelled her to success in short order. People want to cut a Patty Griffin song the same way they might want Buddy Miller to play or Emmy Lou to sing on their record. They want them there, as part of who they are, and to make their record that much more special.

We're very glad to have had the opportunity to speak with the artist recently, to mark the occasion of her new benchmark release, *Children Running Through*. She's complicated, interesting, and shared some of herself that day. A play based on her music will soon appear, written by Keith Brunin and produced by Tom Hulce. We discussed that, and many parts of her past and present in the pages to follow. We're sure that after you hear the clips on the Listen page, you'll be enjoying your own copy of *Children Running Through*, as we have ours.

PM: So thanks for your time, first of all. I know there's precious little of it. What kind of a home and a family did you grow up in, and when did music really take hold of you as something that would direct your very life?

PG: I grew up in Old Town, Maine. My mom is a French Canadian Catholic and my dad is a Boston Irish Catholic. There were seven children. I was number seven. I think the first awareness of music came from my mom's voice. She's just always singing, and had just the most amazing voice when I was a child.

PM: Really? Could she sing like you can sing?

PG: She had more of a silky sweet soft thing going on.

PM: I see.

PG: I thought everybody's mom sang.

[laughter]

PG: I really did. It was very surprising to me that that wasn't true.

PM: Well, if you're the youngest of seven, are all the kids still alive and well somewhere?

PG: Everybody's--knock on wood, everybody is hanging in there. My parents are alive.

PM: Your parents are alive, too, wow.

PG: Yes, lucky for me.

PM: How far flung are the kids?

PG: My mom had seven kids in seven years, starting in 1957. And she took a year off in '63. They had two in '62 and decided to give it a rest, but conceived me in '63, and I was born in March '64.

[laughter]

PM: Wow.

PG: So she was pregnant for seven years. God bless her. I don't have children. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, right. I came from a family of six, too, and only one of us had any kids.

PG: Oh, wow. Isn't that funny?

PM: It was just like that. So how far apart did the kids end up? Are many in Maine, or all over the world?

PG: Most of them are in the northeast, which, now that I live in Texas, seems like all of them live near each other. Philly, DC, a few in Boston and a couple in Maine.

PM: What were you like as a young person and in school?

PG: Well, I don't really have an outsider's perspective on that. I think that my point of view is I was a pretty shy kid. But I made friends easily at the same time, for quite a while. I don't know. [laughs] I don't know what to say. That's a tough question.

PM: Yeah. And as you say, we never have an outsider's perspective on it, but just our own. Would you say that your personality has changed a lot over time, or are you who you ever were?

PG: I think the fundamental core is the same. I think the way I operate and the way I may understand things has changed quite a bit [laughs] over the last 42 years.

PM: Yeah, one hopes so, right. I first heard you sing in the Bluebird in the 90s somewhere.

PG: Oh, wow.

PM: I was sitting right next to you, and you were in the round. I think you were even sitting in. And you sang a song that was so good that I just reflexively stood right up and started walking out without even thinking about it. And I said to you on the way out, "Well, it's not going to get any better than that, I'm leaving." And you smiled at me very nicely and said, "Thanks." It was really an amazing first impression.

PG: Oh, cool, thanks.

PM: The depth of your talent considered, but aside, it's still amazing all that's happened and all you've accomplished, all the greats you've made good music with, the Chieftains and Emmylou and Gillian and David and Buddy and Julie, just to name a few. But this is a question, really: I mean, I think it's amazing. Is it amazing, and is it still amazing to you, all that's happened and all that you've accomplished?

PG: Oh, yeah. Again, from my point of view, I don't look at it like accomplishments, I look at it like luck.

[laughter]

PG: Like, "Wow, how did I get next to these people? How are they letting me within inches away from singing with them? How come they let me do that?" That's how I feel about it.

PM: It's a beautiful thing.

I always feel that our subjects are uniquely revealed when they talk about their friends and their fellow musicians. So let's talk a little bit about a mutual friend of ours that you've performed and recorded with a great deal, the very musical Doug Lancio.

PG: Ah, you know Doug.

PM: He's a good buddy, yeah.

PG: Oh, cool.

PM: So tell me your feelings and impressions of him.

PG: Dougie... His wife Amanda says we're "Sonny and Cher."

[laughter]

PM: That's funny.

PG: She goes, "That's all right. I'm cool with it. I understand."

[laughter]

PG: I thought that was hilarious. She just told me that. Because I do feel like he and I have a communication musically that's pretty rare. And he's so tolerant. He's one of the most tolerant, patient human beings I've ever met in the whole world. On top of being a brilliant, soulful player, he will wait it out until you find your way, and he'll support that. He's my bandleader, and I couldn't really do that myself. But he directs unusually--he waits for the whole picture to appear to him, and then he goes forward. He's not ego driven, he doesn't have to convince everybody that he knows what he's doing.

PM: Yes, that sounds like Doug Lancio.

PG: But he knows what he's doing. And I think what's really sweet about him is that he doesn't even realize it.

PM: I first met him in the late 80s when, aside from just doing music, I was dealing Mesa Boogie amplifiers here in Nashville.

PG: Oh, really?

PM: And you had to kind of come to my house to try them out. So I met all the good guitar players in town at the time, and Doug was among them. You could tell, I mean, he was just really a kid then, almost--

PG: Yeah.

PM: He was still playing with the Questionnaires. And you could tell right away, just a few notes into him checking out an amplifier, that, oh, you're one of *those* guys...

PG: Yeah.

PM: You know?

PG: Yeah.

PM: And I even said to him at the time, I said, "You were good at the guitar right away, right? You were the kid on the block that got it right away." He said, "Yeah, yeah. I guess you could say that, I got pretty good right away."

PG: Yeah.

PM: He's in that very rare crowd. But let's pick two others out of this really sharp roster on the record and talk about them, how you feel about [bassist] Glenn Worf or [cellist] Jane Scarpantoni?

PG: Oh, man, Glenn is just like--I'm not really well versed in the great studio players. [Producer] Mike McCarthy hired Glenn to do upright bass tracks. He'd worked with him before. I work with a really great bass player J. D. Foster [who is all over the record as well] but McCarthy said, "Hear me out on this. You're going to really love what Glenn does." And he just sort of showed up.

When you're making a record, it's almost always chaotic, and you have no idea how this pile of mess is going to come together. And there's something about Glenn's demeanor and his ability together that started making everything gel for me. As soon as he arrived I went, "Oh, okay. This is going to be great. Everything is going to be fine." [Glenn is very calm and friendly, and can go from invisible to propulsive in seconds.]

I think the thing that really blew me away was when he did "Stay On the Ride." We worked him like a dog. We didn't have him for very long, so we worked him very hard. He came in on "Stay On the Ride," and that was his first take. He was learning the song, and I went, "Oh, my God, that's absolutely perfect." And of course, he's a great musician and he said, "That was my first take, I need to do more." And he did more, but we stayed with the first one because he just had such a great instinct and feel. He's a really intuitive and connected player.

PM: It's amazing what some people do on the first pass. So often it's just the one, before you think about it.

PG: Right, give me what came out of your heart and your instincts.

And Jane Scarpantoni is, wow, I mean, what can you say about her.

PM: Thanks--I've never met her, that's why I asked.

PG: She's a little tiny New Yorker. [laughs]

PM: Really?

PG: And she's just a lovely person. We already had put the strings down, and she came in after everybody and just kind of beefed them up and made them a little more--I don't know what the word is for it, but she did her thing to them. She has a thing that she knows how to do. A symphony cellist is more of a team player, and she's in situations where she's got to lead the way, as far as strings go; she has her own distinct personality, and it's really great, powerful.

PM: And speaking of strings, John Mark Painter [of the great Fleming and John] did a characteristically amazing job. Is he an old buddy, or was he a new friend?

PG: He's a new friend. I know I've met him over the years briefly in passing, probably at coffee shops and places like that. But I'd never worked with him. I'd been hearing about his talent for a long time. He was great. He did a great job on all of that stuff.

PM: So this new record, *Children Running Through*, even for you, is a particularly stunning recording. Do you feel it's the best stuff you've done so far?

PG: It's hard for me to say. When I talked to Mike McCarthy a year ago last July, we had a sort of map of what we wanted to accomplish with it. And I think he really paid attention to that, and kept me to it. And we went through the checklist. [laughs]

PM: Wow, that's interesting, the map.

PG: Yeah. I feel, personally, like the old classic recordings are just heads above anything new I've ever heard, as far the recording of vocals go. And that is entirely his school of thought. I mean, he's a vintage equipment person, and he spent months on EBay looking for the right microphones for this.

PM: Wow.

PG: And he really put time and thought into how to record it so that the vocal would have some semblance of the warmth that the classic vocals did.

PM: Was he using old RCA ribbon mics, or Neumanns, or...?

PG: We have one of those, and we have a big Neumann that we used, right, that kind of thing.

PM: I mean, he had a great singer to work with, but he got some really uncanny vocal tracks, for sure.

PG: Yeah, he's good.

PM: So how did you come to work with him? Where do you know McCarthy from?

PG: He's really good friends with a really good friend of mine here. And I've met him over the years.

PM: Now when you say "here" today, do you mean L.A. or Texas?

PG: Oh, in Texas. I've never lived in L.A., I just have an L.A. phone number. [laughs] Anyway, I know that he worked with a lot of different punk bands and boy pop bands and things like that, but I think it was really the engineering background that made me feel like I was going to be all right, because he's technically really proficient and gifted. And it turned out he's got some great arrangement skills as well.

PM: Do the tunes from *Children Running Through* come from the period just before the record, or from various times?

PG: Most of them do. I think "Burgundy Shoes" is the oldest one. I think I remember doing that on the road for the *Impossible Dream* tour. I might have just written it then. I think that's the oldest song, so that's probably about three years old. Everything else was - really, that "Up To The Mountain" song to me is like the first one in my mind, and that was written the week before the tsunami, I remember. Marking time by disasters...

PM: Yeah. Was there anything special going on in your life at the time that you wrote this batch of songs, or just life at large?

PG: I don't think there's any one specific thing. I just think time passing, you know, life at large.

PM: Are you still in Austin? Is that where you're living?

PG: Yes, still in Austin.

PM: I understand from the press release that a musical is going up based around your music in May, with the Atlantic Theater Company.

PG: Yeah.

PM: How did that all come about? That's pretty amazing.

PG: I was approached by this very talented playwright, Keith Bunin. He sent me a play that he'd written that had been performed. He said that the songs were so visual to him every time he listened to them, that he came up with scenes and characters and activities, and different things within the song that had happened.

PM: Wow.

PG: And he wanted to try to start from scratch on something new. I just haven't really had that kind of time. That really takes a huge chunk of time. And I had to put him off and put him off and put him off, and finally he started writing something around what was already out there. I was really skeptical about it, but I saw a run-through, and I thought it was really good, and that the performers were good, and I was excited about it. So I've written something since then for it, specifically. And yeah, it's fun. I'd like to do more of that.

PM: So did he pick tunes from different periods and weave a story around them?

PG: Yeah, that's exactly right.

PM: And then you say you contributed new songs?

PG: Yeah, a couple of new songs.

PM: Is Tom Hulce coming on as producer, and is he getting personally involved?

PG: Yes. He is very hands-on as producer.

PM: Wow. What kind of a guy is he?

PG: He's sweet. He's Amadeus!

PM: Right, he's Amadeus.

[laughter]

PM: But also, did you ever see him in *Dominic and Eugene*? That was amazing.

PG: Yes. He was great in that. And *Animal House*, of course.

PM: Right, right.

[laughter]

PM: I can't remember him in that. I have to go back and check that out.

Is there anything about yourself or your art that you'd like fans to know about you that they may not at all be aware of?

PG: [laughs]

PM: That might be a weird question.

PG: Oh, that's not such an easy question to answer.

[laughter]

PG: Oh, man, no, I don't know. God bless them for paying attention at all. I don't need them to know anything else. [laughs]

PM: Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

PG: I guess--I think everybody is. Actively or otherwise, everybody's got to deal with that.

PM: Well, I certainly agree with that, although I'm surprised at the number of artists who say, "No, no, not particularly."

Do you make much time in your schedule for reading? Is that a big part of your life?

PG: It is. I like to read.

PM: Anything lately that turned you on?

PG: I have to preface this by saying that I've boycotted white male American authors from the twentieth century. In my school reading list, a given sexist author that I had to read made me mad, while others I wanted to read were regarded as too racy. I thought later, "I'm just going to read Russians and African Americans and women, and forget you guys." I didn't actually read very much at all in my twenties, so that wasn't a big deal to boycott them. But I picked it back up in my late twenties and thirties, and now I'm a pretty big reader.

And I decided to read Hemingway this past year, who's a big macho writer. And I fell in love with it. Gertrude Stein is credited with inspiring his style, but I think his style is very, very much his voice. It really helped me a lot, too, in writing myself, just using the minimum to say a lot. It's really beautiful. I've felt very, very moved by him just telling a story line in the most simple way, without suggesting an emotion. You know what I mean? He just kind of tells you the story and lets you figure it out, and I think that's really powerful.

PM: Wow. Are your best friends musicians, or other kinds of artists, or not necessarily arty types?

PG: [laughs] Most people I know are somewhat artistic, I think. I'm lucky to have a family full of people good at math and science and things like that. So I'm not completely without those influences in my life.

PM: Is there anything at all on the television you like, either seriously, or as a guilty pleasure?

PG: Actually, when I'm home, I don't watch TV very much--I try not to, because I end up sitting in front of it for several hours when I could be doing something else.

PM: Right.

PG: So, no, I can't really say I have anything favorite. I love YouTube. [laughs]

PM: That's interesting. Who's Imelda Martin, to whom the album is dedicated?

PG: That's my grandmother who just passed away.

PM: Oh, I'm sorry.

PG: She was ninety-nine. She had a good run. [laughs]

PM: So you've done so many amazing things already. Are there things you want to do or people you want to work with that still lie ahead?

PG: My favorite part of everything I do is kind of digging in and growing, so you can feel it happening in your body. And I think the work that I do helps me to do that, as a person. I'm really lucky that I have something that so directly does that, in such an obvious way. It's kind of a selfish job to have. But that's what I'm looking for. And I don't know how that's going to show up in the next half of my life.

PM: Well, it might feel selfish sometimes, but you're one of those artists who really is giving a lot of herself to the people who are listening. I really appreciate what you're doing. And I know what the readership really does, too.

PG: Thanks, Frank.

PM: Yeah. So it's very nice to meet you, Patty, and I hope to--

PG: Nice to meet you as well.

PM: --run into you in Nashville sometime. I wish you all the best with this new record, *Children Running Through*.

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