

Shannon McNally's Ghost Music
by John Swenson (10/2005, Puremusic.com)

Editor's note: When I was recently in NYC, my old friend Holly Perkins said she had a friend named John Swenson, a veteran music journalist and writer at large, who had recently finished a piece on Shannon McNally for a New Orleans publication. We're very grateful that he saw fit to pass it on to us, under the dire circumstances. It begins with his email:

"This piece was finished only a few days before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and turned this paradise into a lost city. The very magazine it was printed in, offBeat, never hit the streets. I submit it as my tribute to a beloved city..."

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A lazy, sun-dappled August breeze rustled the broad leaves of the maple tree shading Song Café on Chartres Street. It was a quiet Sunday at midday and only two people sat in the silent coffeehouse as Shannon McNally strode through the door, her shoulder-length black hair pulled up offhandedly in a bun. After a warm greeting from a familiar face behind the counter, she ordered an iced coffee and a small cake and sat down with a broad smile. Shannon McNally, raised in Long Island and battle-hardened in Los Angeles, was home.

Home to her bougainvilleas, the Cyprus tree she planted last year, her sage and wildflowers, her two cats and a dog, the crepe myrtle split in two by Hurricane Cindy leaving her backyard a riot of pink. But most of all home to an artist's life she's nurtured with her husband and the drummer in her band, Wallace Lester, in the stimulating cultural environs of America's most creative city.

Song Café, nestled at the far edge of Fauborg Marigny by the railroad tracks that divide it from the Bywater district, is one of the more dramatic examples of the transformation this area has undergone in recent years following an influx of artists, musicians, and students. Piety Street Studios, run by New York expatriate Mark Bingham, is a few blocks away, and McNally is one of many musicians from other parts of the world who've moved into the neighborhood in recent years, including Jon Cleary, Washboard Chaz, Jason Mingeldorf, and Andy J. Forest.

McNally returned to her New Orleans home after a six-week tour in support of her outstanding new record, *Geronimo*, a record that has topped airplay charts and won her critical raves in New York, Nashville, Austin, and elsewhere. Her touring band, featuring the ever-astonishing Dave Easley on pedal steel and electric guitar, finished off the tour with a triumphant gig at Tipitina's during which McNally commanded the stage, moving with an animal grace as she played guitar and sang her songs about defiant heroes, women who won't accept tragedy as inevitable, and her own quest for spiritual meaning in a world dominated by empty consumer values. But the following afternoon during a promotional in-store at the Louisiana Music Factory, McNally demonstrated how deeply nuanced her songs can be. The same material, with the same band, had a completely different edge. The well-rehearsed concert set was carefully paced and packed with dramatic gestures as McNally proved herself as a big-stage rock and roll figure capable of the interactive intelligence only the greats possess, always giving off the sense that she was aware of everything that was going on in the room around her.

On the cramped, lo-fi, record store stage, singing through a creaky PA that couldn't do her voice justice, and left without Easley's pedal steel to handle the solo chores, McNally cranked up her electric guitar and

played fiercely throughout the set, often turning to lock in with Lester as she directed the pulse of the beat with her strumming. The songs took on a slightly harder edge, and her cocoa eyes appeared to make contact with every person in the room at various times during the set. Even the words, and her phrasing, changed for the occasion. Where she tossed away the line “How does it feel?” from the hard-rocking “Miracle Mile” the night before, this time she nailed it with an exclamation point. In the same song she changed a key line from “what they call quality” to “what they call pop music” and when she followed it with the cry “It sounds like bullshit to me!” the audience whooped like partisans at a political rally.

The scene was mighty different than the last time McNally had been on that stage at Louisiana Music Factory, right after Jazzfest, when she sat in the back playing behind John Sinclair, whose ever-evolving Blues Scholars band that day was McNally’s group. Sinclair said at the end of the gig that one of the requirements of being a member of the Blues Scholars was that you had to have a criminal record.

“He gave me a pass on that,” laughed McNally. “I had never played guitar in a blues band before that. I played just before him that day and that was my band. There was no rehearsal. He just told us to play, we picked a groove and he went with it. John lived with us for about a year right before he left town, so I’ve had a lot of time with him.”

That kind of rapport between musicians is part of what made McNally choose New Orleans as her home. She met Lester five years ago at a time when she was struggling with her life as a renegade ingénue on Capitol records in Hollywood. Exposure to Mardi Gras Indians practice sessions, Sunday second lines and meals at the legendary Bywater eatery Elizabeth’s were enough to convince her to make New Orleans her permanent home four years ago. In the interim she has found more than she bargained for, a place where she could fully realize her musical dreams on her own terms, surrounded by a support group of like-minded people.

“It’s very specific to the ground that the city’s built on,” she explained. “The energy that gets trapped here, that lives here, is very unique and it’s very powerful. And I think that’s what we all feel. It’s transmitted in a million ways, that’s why the music is like it is. I believe music comes out of the ground. I don’t think it comes out of the sky or your head, it comes out of the ground and it has something to do with the vibrations of the earth wherever you are. The earth here, this plot of ground, it’s a combination of elements: the fact that it’s below sea level, the heat, its history as a port town and a porthole into the whole western hemisphere for Europeans and Africans, and then the millions and millions of people who lived here already. It’s like the Constantinople of the New World. Everything is exaggerated here, the beauty is exaggerated, the poverty is exaggerated, the brutality, the music, the food. If you’re a person whose senses are acute, there’s no way of getting around it. You just feel it.”

McNally definitely heard the reaction to the “pop music” line at the Music Factory. “That’s the first time that happened,” she said. “It just hit me. At Tipitina’s the night before during ‘Sweet Forgiveness,’ I changed the line ‘Cause I don’t want a life that’s soft and high if it means that others must suffer and die for my country.’ At Tips that turned into ‘...if it means that 25,000 Iraqis gotta die for my country.’”

“What happens is I’m living the songs as I’m singing, which is part of how you remember it. I’m not reciting something I’ve memorized, I’m having a conversation. You don’t memorize a conversation before you have it. One of the things Bob Dylan does that I like is that he’ll rewrite his own songs, it almost doesn’t matter. What I realized going to see that band live and getting to know Charlie Sexton, he told Charlie, ‘You can listen to the records and learn all the chords and stuff but it’s not gonna help you.’ Can you imagine having to learn 500 songs that every night are played different? With different words? It’s brilliant because the songs are alive... I can do it a little bit, I can’t do it on that level. When the songs

are about something, it keeps becoming clearer in my mind the more times I play them. It's like people say to me, 'Why'd you call the album *Geronimo*? Why would you care about the Native American experience if you're not a Native American?'

"To me, that doesn't make any sense. I'm an American, therefore Native Americans are part of my history. Part of all of our histories. It's an extremely poignant, old, textured history. The history of the Americas didn't start in 1500. It was going on for 10,000 years before that. That was just the year the first lost white guy got here, that's all. The genocide and slavery, that's my history. You can't just pretend it didn't happen. I'm expected to vote. It's my history, regardless of where my blood originally came from, I'm an American citizen now. *Geronimo*, *Sitting Bull*, it's part of my history as a citizen of this country. It's about singing about the world around me and what I see and feel. It's all part of it.

Because I'm feeling it, I can't always explain it verbally. That's where the tone of your voice when you're singing comes in, the sound of your voice, the rhythm, it also communicates. It's a multi-level thing, not just can you hear the lyrics. The songs get honed as they get performed. I'm really working to find the right words. That's one of the big illnesses of society right now. Words have lost their meaning. People use words without thinking of what they mean. All day long you hear people use words like 'God,' 'freedom,' 'war,' but so few people really focus what those words actually mean. They get thrown out there and everyone's supposed to understand the vague meaning of it. Maybe it's coded, but I still don't know what it means. When this administration uses the word 'freedom' I don't have the foggiest idea of what they mean. What does the word 'freedom' mean? *Geronimo* was free. He woke up in the morning, he went about his day. He was the king of his universe. That's freedom. Freedom isn't waiting in lines and filling out forms and getting searched, or being lied to."

McNally, 32, grew up as part of the MTV generation watching her classmates become imprinted by such culture classics as Madonna's "Dress You Up," which created the charming fad of 12-year-old girls masquerading as hookers. The young Irish-American Long Islander was already in full rebellion at that point.

"MTV just didn't take," she recalled. "In high school I liked U2, that's about as much as I participated as far as bands that were popular. I didn't like television itself, forget the quality of shows, it's something about the box itself, I find it very jarring. I hated Madonna. I hated all of it. Even in the fourth grade I remember being 10 years old and there was this huge radio contest where everybody wanted Duran Duran to come to their school. I couldn't stand Duran Duran, I couldn't stand Madonna, I couldn't stand any of it, I just hated it, I thought 'What's wrong with you people?' I didn't participate well in the mainstream, I mean I went to school and classes and was on teams but I didn't have much to do with most of my peers after school. I read a lot. I found dealing with my peers at school very stressful.

"My uncle gave me a J.J. Cale record for my 12th birthday and a guitar. It was slow and simple and I could hear all the notes, what he was playing, so I was able to pick it up. Classic rock radio was big, too, on Long Island, so I heard that. And of course I heard Bruce Springsteen on the radio every day so there were things of substance. And being into U2, Bono wrote real lyrics... I was also very into Irish music in general. Live Aid made sense to me. I was 14 when *Joshua Tree* came out so that to me was sort of my Beatles experience. Those were the first live concerts I went to. I listened to Tom Petty, Eric Clapton, Carlos Santana, I saw them all at Nassau Coliseum and I heard a lot of Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd on the radio and I read a lot. Naturalists, a lot of English women writers from the Victorian age. *Jane Eyre*... if I could go find that big window with the seat behind the curtain... that's what I was into."

At college McNally was surrounded by peers ambitious to line up jobs in the corporate world, but music kept a strong hold on her. In her junior year she went to Paris as an exchange student, determined to return as a musician who could play and sing original material. She brought her guitar and a handful of Dinah Washington and Aretha Franklin records, took lessons and busked in the Paris subways. When she returned home for her senior year McNally was ready to become a professional singer-songwriter.

“I didn’t know how you made money at it,” she admitted. “When I graduated I made a demo. For a year after college I played coffee shop gigs, there was a band in Pennsylvania called Once Fish, a Grateful Dead cover band, they played constantly and I opened up for them. I was doing Emmylou Harris stuff, I was listening to Ry Cooder’s *Into the Purple Valley* and Bop Till You Drop and the Los Lobos record *Kiko*. I kept playing and got better. I realized the other day I gave myself 10 years, not exactly knowing what was supposed to happen in 10 years, just that I was supposed to have some measure of success and if not then I’ll move on. And I think it’s...10 years. I was 22, I’m 32 now, it was in the summertime, I’d just graduated.

“I had met this guy who managed the 10,000 Maniacs and the Cowboy Junkies, he’d heard my demo tape. He called me up and said, ‘What are you doing?’ I’m playing coffee shops. Waiting tables. He was in L.A. and said I should come out there. I went out there, found someplace to start gigging and went from there. The guy had no idea how to make recordings, so I worked with these songwriter/producers. He got me signed to Capitol. He went on to manage Dido. He thought I should be making some kind of (British accent) ‘hip hop, you know like the Sneaker Pimps.’ He would call me up after listening to something I did and say ‘It was en-TIRE-ly too country.’ What does too country mean, like the Grand Canyon? What was he fucking talking about, too country? It was horrible, the whole process was excruciating and sad and I got beat up all the time and I could only argue what I liked and what I didn’t like.”

McNally arrived in Los Angeles just as Fiona Apple’s record was debuting, in the immediate wake of female stars like Alanis Morissette and Sheryl Crowe. Capitol thought they had another canary in the cage, suggesting that McNally record with Morissette’s band, but McNally had her own ideas.

“I went through all these songwriters and producers and decided one by one that they were all assholes. I was clear minded about wanting to get this record made and I did but it took four years. I thought I’m just gonna do what I want to do and not even tell anybody. Alanis was huge, Jewel was huge, Sarah McLaughlin was huge. They wanted me to be like that so bad and I hated all of it, I thought it was all trite and shrill, horrible shit. I hated it. They wanted me to record finished tracks so I was constantly forced to prove myself. They never once proved anything to me, or gave me enough money to do it properly. We managed to get through the demo process. I had gone through the whole L.A. carousel, everybody who had worked with Sheryl Crowe, which was a lot of people, all of whom were assholes and all of whom took credit for her success. It was amazing. I’m not a big fan but I can see that Cheryl Crowe is the brains behind Cheryl Crowe.”

McNally held out for the musicians she wanted, including drummer Jim Keltner, and made a solid but overproduced debut, *Jukebox Sparrows*. The label dressed her up as a sex kitten and put her on the road for eight months before abandoning the project.

“The record came out on Elvis’ birthday, and they pulled the plug on it on the anniversary of his death,” she recalled. “So I immediately got on a plane, went to L.A. and said ‘Now that you’ve killed this one I wanted to go make another one.’ I already had the demos, I knew how to do it at this point. But this was three record company presidents later, Andy Slater was president, I gave him a whole bunch of demos, got a new A&R guy and started the process which took from September to June to get everything OK’d

and agree on a producer and have them release the budget. I cut the record, turned it in, two months later they called back and said 'Change this, do that.' I said 'Take it or leave it' and they said you can have \$250,000 to do three songs with our bozo, or you can have half that to make the record with Charlie Sexton."

McNally had already determined that she wanted Sexton, then a member of Bob Dylan's band, to produce the album. Once she moved permanently to New Orleans in 2002, McNally set about making *Geronimo* in earnest, traveling back and forth between New Orleans and Austin doing prep work, then recording in June 2003 in Lafayette. Capitol rejected the finished product and McNally asked for her release that August. She eventually signed with another EMI affiliate, Back Porch Records.

"I had to stay at EMI because Capitol wouldn't negotiate with anybody that wasn't part of the company," she explained. "When I saw that J.J. Cale put out a live record on Back Porch I thought that would be a good label for me. By that time I had figured out that it was a waste of time trying to tell people in the record industry that an apple was an apple so I thought Back Porch, that's where I want to go. Some place called Back Porch. I was sick of the front porch. Sure enough they liked the record and they made me an offer."

Geronimo is an impressive album that places McNally in the tradition of musicians like Bob Dylan and the Band. The Dylan influence is close to the surface: Sexton and bassist Tony Garnier played together with Dylan for a decade, and McNally seems perfectly comfortable referencing musical passages, words and even phrasing clearly inspired by Dylan. One of the most powerful songs on the record, "Leave Your Bags," is an answer song to Dylan's "Shelter From the Storm."

"I wrote that after two things happened to me in the same week," said McNally. "The first was I was out in Amagansett visiting my aunt and we went to see Rick Danko at Stephen Talkhouse. I'd never seen him before. He was at the end and he was in really bad shape. He did 'Long Black Veil' that night and it made me wonder what the woman in the Long Black Veil, what did she think? Here he died so gallantly not wanting to fuck up her life but I thought she didn't get off easy, she's got to live with that, she's got to visit his bones every night when the cold wind blows. That sucks. I wondered what she thinks. So I started to write this song, I was gonna name him and call it 'Ezekiel John Brown' because you never hear his name in the song and it was gonna be her perspective.

"Somebody gave me a copy of *Blood On the Tracks* the same week. I had heard a lot of those songs, but I don't know that I'd ever heard 'Shelter From the Storm.' I was listening to it and again I wondered what the woman in that song thinks. Why don't we give her a name? I wonder who she is. So that all became 'Leave Your Bags By the Door'."

Another song, "Weathervane," is a powerful metaphor for the creative process. "That's sort of how I experience it," she said. "A creativity that passes from one person to the other person. There's just kind of this group of people I keep coming back to that really help that channel, help me channel certain energy. When I think of that song I think of George Harrison, J.J. Cale and Bob Dylan."

McNally realized one of her dreams when she got to meet Dylan. "I was out on tour when Charlie was still with him and every night off that I had lined up with where they were I just went to the show over and over and over again. They let me stand on the side of the stage. I was practically sitting on Larry Campbell's amp. He gave me a guitar lesson. He wanted me to play a C chord and a scale. He was very specific about what he wanted me to do. He said 'Play a major scale,' and I played it, then he says 'Play a pentatonic scale.' I'm sitting and he's standing over me, he's totally backlit. The only light in the room is

right behind his head. He's smoking a cigarette and he's in this black suit, ten minutes before they hit at Madison Square Garden, and he's telling me to play more pentatonic scales. Then he goes 'That's the blues.' So I said 'That's where we're going, right?' He goes 'That's where we're goin'.' He goes 'Play me a song I might have heard.' He was so ordinary, kind of inquisitive and not weird at all, just normal, but I didn't expect him to ask me to play him a song. He wanted me to play something in C, and all I could think of were his songs, and my songs. I'm not gonna play him any of his songs and he's not gonna know any of my songs, and I could not think of one, so I said 'Can I play you one of mine?' and he said 'Well all right but just the first verse.' So I played him a song called 'John Finch.' The first verse is 'Hang down John Finch, hang down and cry, hang down John Finch, there's an angry crowd outside.' And he says 'Sounds like the Kingston Trio. Know who they are?' I was devastated. I'm like 'Oh, man'."

Dylan is another musical visitor who was captivated by New Orleans. "New Orleans, unlike a lot of those places you go back to and that don't have the magic anymore, still has got it," Dylan wrote in his autobiography *Chronicles: Volume One*. "The past doesn't pass away so quickly here. You could be dead for a long time. The ghosts race towards the light, you can almost hear the heavy breathing—spirits, all determined to get somewhere."

The mystical sense Dylan evokes from New Orleans sounds akin to McNally's self-description of her roots-influenced songs as "North American Ghost Music."

"I don't see how it would miss him," she said, nodding her head. "If anybody would have picked it up, he would have. Everything he said, he talked about 'that woman's voice on OZ,' and Tony Hall, Willie Green, and how air is just different here, how the heat and the air mix, the smell of the air..."

McNally is part of all that now, part of a new generation of transplanted New Orleans artists who draw inspiration from the music of the city's past but are playing something different. Some, like the pioneering violinist Gina Forsyth, arrived long ago, only to be joined by the likes of Mike West, Lynn Drury, Anders Osborne, Theresa Andersson, Susan Cowsill, Marc Stone and Jeff & Vida. Open sessions such as Marc Stone's Monday night shows at the Old Point, which have featured nearly all of the above mentioned as guest stars including McNally, offer a process by which musicians can stretch out to test new material as well as favorite covers.

"People are so used to doing long gigs and lots of bar gigs, and people have large repertoires," McNally concluded, "so when I play with Marc Stone he says 'Just come in, you'll be the featured artist, we'll do whatever you want to do.' You just yell out the changes as we're going, you just do it. The whole town is like that, it's like anybody in town can come play. It's not an expensive place to live, you can come down here and you can do it, you can eke out a living and play for the sake of it."

"I think the most nurturing thing about New Orleans is the quality of what's here. You can see the Neville Brothers play, you can see Snooks play, just being in the presence of certain musicians is lesson enough. Just feeling them the way they are. New Orleans is unique because these guys are here. You can sit at Gatemouth Brown's feet and watch him do what he does. When Pinetop Perkins comes to town you're on the presence of a 90-year-old delta bluesman. And the things that made him the way he is, many of those things are still here. In New Orleans you can still feel it, and you can watch it and get close to it."