

Gretchen Peters' musical career has grown like a Virginia creeper: new leaves spreading in one direction first, then another, then another still. The result is lush and impressive, though it didn't get that way all at once.

Peters has the sort of creative impulse that inevitably finds the fertile spots, which is a wonderful thing from the standpoints of quality and longevity, even if it can be a little unpredictable. *Circus Girl: The Best of Gretchen Peters* is a welcome chance, then, to retrace how her songs have grown—and keep growing—from their roots in her singular storytelling gifts. In other words, it's a chance to take in the full effect thus far.

Says Peters of the collection's 15 carefully selected songs, "What I was amazed by was that there was a continuity to them, that they hung together, all of them, from these disparate times." Indeed, they do.

Peters arrived in Nashville in the late '80s, a singing, songwriting product of New York, Boulder, Colorado and politically active parents. Perplexed by the artificial division of labor in the commercial country music industry, she concluded it would be best to seek a publishing deal first. "I didn't understand the whole delineation between singer and songwriter," she explains. "Everybody that I knew was a singer-songwriter, did it all. I couldn't really conceive of myself in any other light."

And so began a season of striking commercial success. Peters got a publishing deal, and her closely observed story-songs hit a sweet spot with some of mainstream country's finest voices of the '90s; "On a Bus to St. Cloud" with Trisha Yearwood, "You Don't Even Know Who I Am" with Patty Loveless, "Chill of an Early Fall" with George Strait, "Let That Pony Run" with Pam Tillis and—most famously—"Independence Day" with Martina McBride. Culturally and critically the impact of "Independence Day"—an arresting song about an abused woman fighting back—still reverberates. It earned Peters a GRAMMY nomination and CMA Song of the Year honors.

"It just seemed like getting the first olive out of the jar, they just started coming," Peters says of her string of cuts. "And it was great, but it wasn't really my master plan or anything. I was just as surprised as anybody."

A turning point came in the mid-'90s, when Peters got a record deal and the chance to record her own songs exactly as she felt they ought to be done. In 1996 (*The Secret of Life*) and every few years after (*Gretchen Peters* in 2001 and *Halcyon* in 2004) she offered a set of sophisticated folk-pop songs, sung in a fetching soprano that's as sultry as it is girlish, and rendered with the sensitivity and patience to tease out the nuance in every corner of a story.

If commercial country audiences didn't quite know how to categorize Peters' music, U.K. audiences fell in love immediately. Her shows have sold out there ever since. "From the first time I went over there to play, the audiences were so great," she recalls. "They just didn't hold those rigid ideas of what you were supposed to be, and to me that felt like blessed relief. It was almost as though my limitations were my blessings over there."

Midway through the 2000s, Peters' career arrived at a series of watershed moments. Veteran folk singer-songwriter Tom Russell declared himself a fan, inviting her to sing on his recordings—and,

eventually, to do an album of cowboy and Western covers together (2009's *One to the Heart, One to the Head*)—and introducing her to the lively circuit of folk clubs and festivals across the U.S. She found a welcoming home there, even though some of the older songs in her repertoire had been hits in commercial country, about as alien a world from the folk scene as is imaginable.

“With a certain folk crowd, that’s not a plus,” Peters says. “But what I figured out is they’re songs. If you play them for people, especially if you play them in the context that I do—which is just me or it’s just me and [keyboardist] Barry [Walsh]—they lose the affectation of the genre, whatever that might be, and they just *are*.”

She realized, finally, that performing her songs live at every opportunity is just as vital to her as writing and recording them: “I could see that life was short, careers are even shorter, mine is finite. I have some time, while I still feel like I want to be out there doing it. By god, I’m not going to wait anymore. And that was that.” Now she’s touring more than ever before—and relishing it.

And there were more bold steps where those came from. Peters has always shown an uncanny ability to capture the stories of people—especially women—who feel trapped in hope-draining situations. With her 2007 album, *Burnt Toast & Offerings*, she mined her own life—the disintegration of her twenty-year marriage and risk-taking on a new love—for just such affecting vignettes, and set a new high watermark for her songwriting.

It’s only right, then, that *Circus Girl* would feature works from each of these seasons; “On a Bus to St. Cloud” and “When You Are Old” from *The Secret of Life*, “In a Perfect World” and “Picasso and Me” from *Gretchen Peters*, “Tomorrow Morning” and “The Aviator’s Song” from *Halcyon*, “They Way You Move Me” and “This Town” from *Burnt Toast & Offerings*. And it’s fitting, too, that “Circus Girl”—a personal favorite from her first album, about the circus, the music industry, and the girl inside who’s driven to entertain—would be the title track.

“When you write a song like that, it could be ten years before you realize what that third level is,” Peters muses. “That’s the kind of song that has some ambiguity and some places that it will take you long, long after you first hear it.”