

The title of Gretchen Peters' new *Hello Cruel World* is a pun on the famed exit line — a joke that, like the lovely melodies and deliciously textured arrangements framing these 11 songs — sweetens this captivating music spun from a year of turmoil. The Grammy nominated singer-songwriter from Nashville calls *Hello Cruel World* her “most close-to-the-bone work, written at a time when I felt absolutely fearless about telling the truth.” Peters and her guest Rodney Crowell sing, “life is still a beautiful disaster,” on “Dark Angel.” But Peters keeps the accent on the “beautiful” throughout her ninth disc, with both her poetic language and the spare, evocative sounds she created in the studio to support her organic story-telling.

Ultimately *Hello Cruel World* details the sheer triumph of survival and of finding strength, joy and growth in everyday life despite the challenges of our increasingly complex times. Her characters, like the broken-hearted narrator of “Natural Disaster” and the human target of “Woman On the Wheel,” don't just search for fulfillment. They take risks to find it. And none, as the album's title implies, are ready to either surrender or, to quote the poet Dylan Thomas, “go gentle into that good night.” Peters' warm-honey voice softens the edge of desperation in numbers like the character study “Camille,” where a gently blown muted trumpet offers shadings of cool jazz, and in “The Matador” the earthy maturity of her phrasing injects empathy — a quality that makes all of Peters' songs ring consistently true — into a tale about the dark underbelly of love.

Explaining *Hello Cruel World*'s genesis, Peters says, “In 2010 the universe threw its best and its worst at me. Some of it was personal, some global. All of it seemed to demand that I redefine my ideas of permanence and reevaluate what I believe in, to literally rethink what is real.” First the Gulf of Mexico oil spill put an eco-disaster at the doorsteps of the cottage in the Florida panhandle where Peters writes much of her music. Then a friend of 30 years committed suicide in his Colorado home, followed quickly by the worst flood in the history of her adopted hometown of Nashville. Add to that a ray of light in Peters' marriage to her longtime piano accompanist and partner Barry Walsh, which affirmed their musical and personal commitment of more than 20 years.

Eclipsing all this was the revelation by Peters' child that he was transgender. “I see his transition as beautiful and triumphant,” Peters says. “My son's bravery and honesty inspire me every day. But it's profoundly disorienting to

reorder your thoughts about your own child's gender. Ultimately, it reorders your thoughts about everything.”

Peters says creating *Hello Cruel World* “was like coming home after a long trip, unlocking the front door and putting my baggage down. Telling these stories was part of the process of stripping myself bare of all the lies, half-truths, false selves and misguided intentions we take on in the course of living. “After the trials of the past year I felt raw, open. I wanted to write songs that hurt. I wanted to write songs that were brutally honest. I knew it would be a dark album, and I knew it might be off-putting for some. But I felt I had survived the battering of both the natural world and my own interior one for a reason.”

As Peters channeled that energy into *Hello Cruel World* she relied on her instincts. “I have an ability to tap into the emotions within music and words, and to empathize with people,” she says. “I also believe in singing as simply as possible — to let the song sing itself and tell its own story.” To capture her naked emotions Peters began the album's sessions with bared-boned, mostly voice-and-guitar demos. “Usually I make very complete demos of how I want my songs to sound,” she explains. “This time I asked the musicians who played on the album to take a leap with me and open themselves up to the songs as much as I had.”

She even had two sets of lyrics and music for the title cut. Both were recorded, but the survivor's anthem version won out. Her superb cast of players, which includes Barry Walsh, guitarists Will Kimbrough and Doug Lancio, bassist Viktor Krauss, trumpeter Vinnie Ciesielski and Kim Richey adding a choir of backing vocals to the test-of-faith parable “St. Francis,” delivered note-perfect performances. At times their playing is so sympathetic they seem nearly transparent under the potent magic of Peters' tales like “Idlewild,” a story plucked from her childhood that uses her parents' unraveling marriage to essay the loss of America's innocence as well as her own. Yet close listening reveals a carefully tempered array of gently interlocked riffs, rhythms and colors that are entirely spellbinding.

Peters' own voice and guitar playing have been at the core of her music since she started performing in the Boulder, Colorado folk circuit as a teenager. Inspired by Paul Simon, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and a new generation of songwriters rising out of Nashville that included Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith and Rodney Crowell, Peters relocated to Music City in the

late 1980s. Initially she found Nashville inspiring. “Being in a place where you can hear so many good songwriters perform their work on just an acoustic guitar really made me understand the anatomy of songs in a way I didn’t until I moved here,” Peters relates. “Just listening closely to other people who were good at their craft shaped me as a writer.”

The downside was a music business culture that typically perceived “singer” and “songwriter” as different jobs. “The either/or attitude was baffling, since all my favorite artists also wrote their own material,” Peters says. “My decision to pursue a publishing deal was based on wanting to be understood for who I am. I was afraid that if I got signed to a record deal as an artist, I’d never get to sing my own songs. I never had any aspirations of being a hit songwriter for other artists.” Nonetheless, Martina McBride’s 1995 recording of Peters’ “Independence Day,” the gritty story of an abused woman’s revenge, made her a songwriting sensation. The performance received a “Best Country Song” Grammy nomination and won the Country Music Association’s “Song of the Year” title. After that a string of great vocalists — Pam Tillis, Trisha Yearwood, Patty Loveless, Neil Diamond, George Strait, Etta James — began to record Peters’ songs. Peters also signed her own record deal, yielding her 1996 debut album *The Secret of Life*. The title track was cut by Faith Hill in 1999 and hit number five on the country charts.

Since then Peters has recorded five other solo albums: *Gretchen Peters* (2001), *Halcyon* (2004), *Trio Live* (2006), *Burnt Toast and Offerings* (2007) and *Northern Lights* (2008). The compilation *Circus Girl* was released in 2009. And that same year Peters collaborated with one of her favorite songwriters, Tom Russell, for their *One To the Heart, One To the Head*.

"After I'd finished recording *Hello Cruel World*, certain themes began to emerge... One is the idea that ‘survival is triumph,’ and that the real heroes are the ones who endure. That theme surprised me,” she continues. “The others have to do with religion and God, and the nature of art.” “Woman On the Wheel” and “The Matador” both explore the latter. “Art is like a jealous lover who keeps demanding you prove your devotion,” Peters says. In both of those songs the jealousy runs deep as it satisfies needs of the heart — bloodlust, desire, fear — that are typically kept hid. “St. Francis,” “Paradise Found” and other tracks, including her duet with Crowell, “Dark Angel,” are reflections on spirituality. Ironically, Crowell — an ordained minister who married Peters and Walsh in 2010 — plays the role of the dark angel in the

song's title, his voice twining with Peters' as they sing, "And if there is no hereafter/And there is only here/Life is still a beautiful disaster/Ah, but we both know that my dear." Those lines reflect Peters' belief in seizing today, regardless of the challenges and obstacles it may bring — a philosophy reinforced by her recent life experiences.

"Since I was a child I've had a creative urge knocking inside me and I've acted on it," Peters offers. "Early on it was poetry, sometimes art, and sometimes, as a kid, dance. Until I found the guitar I was interested in anything expressive. By then words were a friend, but music was a tall dark stranger that I've been in love with, or maybe stalking, ever since."