

The Night You Wrote That Song is an album that asks for your undivided attention.

Song connoisseurs won't need any such instruction, because they know that the name Gretchen Peters is a guarantee of listening excellence. Over the course of a dozen albums, her luminous voice and brilliant songwriting have earned her a devoted following.

Along the way, she has given us enduring gems – "The Chill of an Early Fall," "Independence Day," "The Secret of Life" and the like – that have earned her induction into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. But with this new collection, Peters pauses the series of albums that have made her a "songwriter's songwriter."

Instead, she is introducing herself as an interpreter of someone else's work. In this case, it is the stunning output of her fellow Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame member, the late Mickey Newbury (1940-2002).

"Of all the songwriters of his era, he was the one I really listened to," says Peters. "He was a definite hero of mine. And I didn't feel he was given his due as much as some of the others.

"I became aware of him when I was a teenager living in Boulder, CO. His singing and his guitar playing were great, but it was his overall vision as an artist that was so clear to me, even at 18 or 19 years old.

"My mom used to listen to him a lot. So when the idea of doing this album came about 15 years ago, I talked to her about it. I always put it off, but my mom was always urging me to do it."

Longtime fans are aware of the rich, clear power in the singing of Gretchen Peters. The Night You Wrote That Song vividly showcases this as she explores the eloquence in Newbury's melodies and lyrics.

Mickey Newbury left a legacy that includes such evergreen songs as "Why You Been Gone So Long" (popularized by Johnny Darrell, Jerry Lee Lewis and Brenda Lee, among others), "Just Dropped In" (a 1968 pop hit for Kenny Rogers & The First Edition) and "She Even Woke Me Up to Say Goodbye" (a country smash for both Ronnie Milsap and Jerry Lee Lewis).

Peters reacquaints us with those timeless treasures, but also dives deeper into Newbury's extraordinary catalog. She draws on her interpretive vocal skills to bring out the wistful ache in "Three Bells for Stephen," the questing wanderlust of "Heaven Help the Child," the defeated desolation in "Wish I Was," the heartbreak of "Leaving Kentucky" and the sad poetry in "The Sailor."

She draws out each note of pain and loneliness in Newbury's "Frisco Depot." She seeks salvation in her echoey, hushed treatment of "Saint Cecelia." Peters has you hanging on every line in Newbury's superb story song "San Francisco Mabel Joy."

Newbury's evocative lyric for "The Night You Wrote That Song" quotes lines from "Help Me Make It Through the Night," penned by another songwriting legend, Kris Kristofferson. In her lovely, languid treatment, Gretchen Peters imbues the song with layers of contemplation and nostalgia.

Much of The Night You Wrote That Song was recorded at Nashville's legendary Cinderella Sound studio, the same place where Mickey Newbury recorded the original versions of some of these songs. Peters is joined on the tracks by such stellar accompanists as Will Kimbrough, Charlie McCoy, Buddy

Miller, Dan Dugmore, Kim Richey and Dave Roe. The contributions of keyboardist/vocalist Barry Walsh weave throughout the collection, and he co-produced all of the album's inventive instrumental textures with Peters.

"About three years ago, Barry and I hit on this idea," she recalls. "We realized that Cinderella Studio was still running. It's like a time capsule of 1962. We said to each other, 'What if we just go into Cinderella and do a couple of songs? Just to see if maybe there could be magic in that space.' We loved the sound of the place. We loved the fact that we were capturing something. And we loved the fact that we were in the same place where Mickey recorded those three iconic albums of his.

"So we just kept going, a little at a time. Every few months, we'd show up again and record a few more songs. There was no pressure. There was no schedule. It took a long time, because we took our time. And I kept coming up with obscure Mickey Newbury songs that I just loved.

"Mickey had such a distinctive guitar style. I didn't want somebody who would copy it, but someone who could sort of 'channel' it. And I knew that person wasn't going to be me. I knew going into this that I didn't want to play guitar. That's how Will Kimbrough became such a huge part of the record. I also knew that I wanted the basic tracks to be live, so that I could just sing; Barry and Will could play. We did the whole album that way, just the three of us. Then if we felt we needed to add stuff, we did."

The resulting album is the latest highlight in a three-decade career that has been full of them. Gretchen Peters grew up in an artistic household in New York State and Colorado. A guitarist and songwriter since childhood, she became a local folk-music favorite in Boulder. She arrived in Nashville in 1987, and word spread swiftly about her songwriting prowess.

Beginning in 1989, country artists such as Randy Travis, Highway 101, George Jones and Joe Barnhill put her songs on their albums. Larry Boone ("To Be With You") and Karen Tobin ("Love From a Heart of Stone") chose Peters songs for singles. Then George Strait gave the songwriter her big breakthrough by topping the charts with "The Chill of an Early Fall" in 1991.

During 1992-93, Gretchen Peters songs became singles for Pam Tillis ("Let That Pony Run"), Holly Dunn ("Golden Years"), Martina McBride ("My Baby Loves Me"), Suzy Bogguss ("Souvenirs") and Shania Twain ("Dance With the One That Brought You"). McBride's 1993 version of "Independence Day" led to a Song of the Year award for Peters from the Country Music Association.

Songwriting success continued in 1994-96 via singles by Patty Loveless (the Grammy-nominated "You Don't Even Know Who I Am"), Michelle Wright ("Nobody's Girl") and Trisha Yearwood ("On a Bus to St. Cloud"). Neil Diamond, Lionel Cartwright, Lowen & Navarro, Maureen McCormick, Bryan Austin, Alabama and others recorded Peters songs.

She began collaborating with rock star Bryan Adams. This resulted in her co-writing his "Rock Steady" 1995 duet with Bonnie Raitt. Peters has had several Canadian rock hits with her other Adams songs. Anne Murray, Sarah McLachlan and Patricia Conroy also hit the charts in Canada with her songs.

Despite huge success as a songwriter, Gretchen Peters yearned to make records. She finally began showcasing her silk-and-smoke voice on her debut album, The Secret of Life, in 1996. The CD's title tune became a giant

hit for Faith Hill two years later. In the late 1990s, "High Lonesome" became a perennial bluegrass favorite, and Peters' songwriting notoriety spread into the r&b world due to recordings by Etta James ("Love's Been Rough on Me") and The Neville Brothers ("Over Africa").

Peters resumed record making with 2001's Gretchen Peters, 2004's Halcyon and 2006's Trio: Recorded Live. Her 2007 CD Burnt Toast & Offerings and her 2008 holiday collection Northern Lights drew particularly high praise from critics.

Songwriting success continued. Andy Griggs scored a huge hit with her song "If Heaven" in 2005. "When You Love Someone" was in the hit film soundtrack for Hope Floats. Peters received a 2002 Golden Globe Best Original Song nomination for "Here I Am" from the soundtrack of Spirit. Her songs were also featured on the soundtracks of the hit TV series Nashville.

Kenny Rogers, John Rich, Billy Ray Cyrus, Lee Roy Parnell, Emmylou Harris, Lee Ann Womack, Michael Martin Murphey, Carrie Underwood and more country headliners continued to record her works. In the new millennium, Gretchen Peters songs became particularly favored by Americana music artists. These included Jimmy LaFave, Mary Gauthier, Matraca Berg and Tom Russell, with whom she recorded a duet CD in 2009.

Peters hit her stride as a solo album maker with the critically acclaimed Circus Girl (2009), Hello Cruel World (2012), Blackbirds (2015) and the politically charged Dancing with the Beast (2018). Throughout her career, she has performed benefit shows for feminist, social-justice and progressive causes. She was voted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2014.

Today, Gretchen Peters invites us to hear her as an interpretive vocalist. The sounds of the great Mickey Newbury that she shares on The Night You Wrote That Song are our alert to stop and listen.

"I knew that if I brought these songs forward and kept the production stripped down enough, that people would really hear the incredible lyrics of Mickey Newbury," says Peters. "My approach toward singing is always, 'Tell the people the story.' For some reason, people really hear the words when I sing them. I knew I could bring that to the table.

"The last three albums I put out, I felt, 'Okay, if I die tomorrow, these can be my legacy. I'll stand by these songs, and I'm happy with that.' So it felt like I was at a creative resting place. I thought, 'What better time to dive into someone else's songs?' And in the back of my mind, I hoped that this project would inspire my own writing. And it did. These are inspiring songs.

"My ultimate goal was to create new Mickey Newbury fans. I wanted to shine a light on him."

- Robert K. Oermann