

### Conversations with Kenny Rogers, Mary Gauthier and The Groundlings' Tracy & Laraine Newman, Plus Marcus Goldhaber

By Mike Ragogna

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#### A Conversation with Mary Gauthier

**Mike Ragogna:** Mary, it's been four years, right? How could you do that to us!

**Mary Gauthier:** What did I do? Oh, the records. [laughs] It takes a while, man! It's hard work, writing these things.

**MR:** What went into this one? Take us on a little tour of Trouble & Love.

**MG:** Well, it's a story of loss. There's the beginning and the middle and the end of the process that we go through, mostly when we lose something important to us. I tried to capture that while I wrote this thing. I wrote thirty-five songs for this record and eight songs made the cut.

**MR:** Since only eight songs made the cut, does that mean the others were purely for the purpose of a catharsis?

**MG:** It's not for a catharsis, really. The process is about trying to capture lightning in a bottle. Songwriting tends to try to make sense out of utter chaos and put a story to it with a beginning, a middle, and an end, under four minutes, that then we look at and go, "Oh yeah, that's what happened! I couldn't make sense of it when I was in it, but yeah, I've been through that. I don't really write for catharsis, I get that kind of work done in therapy. I've come to terms with the fact that I'll probably be in therapy all of my life. [laughs] Every time I think I'm done, I'm not. I write to make sense of things that are confusing and emotionally complex and like Hank Williams, I try to simplify it so that I can play it for people and they can look back at me and go, "You're not alone, Mary, yes, I have felt this too." In that simple act we somehow create a connection that means a lot to both the artist and the listener.

**MR:** The song "When A Woman Goes Cold," that in particular seems to set a lot of the tone of how you were feeling at the time. What do you think about that?

**MG:** I'm not sure if I got into how I was feeling so much as how she was feeling. I think the song captures a phenomenon that might or might not be unique to women, which is that once you push a woman past the point of no return, she can't come back. There's a place where she disappears. I have experienced this from both sides, I've been that person and I've been on the other side of that person, and I've seen it enough to consider a phenomenon, and that's how the song was born. I'm like, "Okay, I thought it was just me or just her, but it's happened enough for me to think maybe there's a universal in there," and as a songwriter I'm going for the universal always. My personal diary is irrelevant to most people and it's not good enough, it's not deep enough, I'm looking for human nature and I think I nailed something there, because the way audiences react, particularly women, tells me a lot of people have experienced this thing.

**MR:** And there's another song like that, "I've Learned To Live Alone," which to me is as blatant a statement of what you went through.

**MG:** Yeah. You know, when you reach a certain age you've lost someone, it's just part of life. We connect and we move along and then it disconnects and there's loss, and that loss is a grieving process. The goal, I think, is to not stay stuck in the sorrow but to keep moving through it and keep the heart open. I think it's hard to explain what this song captures, but I think the character's moving forward, reluctantly, doesn't want to let go but has to. It's beginning to move past the sorrow into acceptance. There's a matter-of-factness about it that tries to speak to acceptance. In the acceptance of the loss comes some peace.

**MR:** Mary, one of the albums that affected me the most over the last couple of years was Mary Chapin Carpenter's *Ashes & Roses*. Now here comes your album that touches the same nerve in some respects. Is there something in the water? I'm not making light of what you went through to get to this album, but it seems like songwriters are connecting even more deeply with their lives for their art.

**MG:** I agree. I think Bob Dylan showed us that songs can rise to the level of literature and he proved it over and over again, that's why they keep trying to get him a Nobel Prize for literature, because there is no Nobel Prize for songwriting. There should be, and he should be the first one to have that put around his neck. He taught us that songs can go to the place where literature goes, which is a deep exploration of the human condition, and Chapin is one of the very best, Chapin is brilliant. Her songwriting is incredible. I walk with the knowledge that this is my goal, this is what I want to do as a songwriter, I'm hoping to connect in that way. Ultimately what I want is for my songs to outlive me, I want my songs to keep being played even after I'm gone.

**MR:** And it's not so much about your personal legacy but the legacy or power of what you're saying.

**MG:** Exactly! It's so that people can go, "Yeah! Me too, me too. I'm not alone. This is not just something that's happened to me because God hates me." This is the human condition, this is what we are here to deal with and most of us end up in the position to have to deal with it. It's biblical in scope, some of these things are just going to repeat in perpetuity. Each being comes in and boo, some of this is going to happen. So I think it creates hope, when you see yourself in songs, even if the songs are intense and considered "sad songs." I think sad songs can be very helpful, as long as they're honest. An honest song, there's life in it. That's why I didn't make a record with thirty-five songs, that's why I didn't put all those songs in it, because some of them were just too sad, it wasn't the truth. The truth is that sadness is a temporary state in grief. You move to acceptance, and through the acceptance of what's gone down your heart reopens and hopefully, love will come back. It almost always does if you're open to it.

**MR:** That's why I used the word "catharsis" earlier.

**MG:** I kind of flinch a little at "catharsis" because it just sounds so "confessional." I'm not saying I'm not confessional, I'm just saying that I wanted to go all the way down to the human condition. I don't want it to be a melodic reading of my diary, to me that's just incredibly boring.

**MR:** How did you approach this album, and moreover the whole batch of thirty-five songs? Was it different from the last time you made a record?

**MG:** The process was about the same, you sit and stare at a blank page with a guitar in your hand until something happens, the process remains the same. I have a writing room, I have totems in my writing room from so many different places I've traveled; I've got a Harry Potter wand that was given to me by someone in England; I've got eagle feathers given to me by an American Indian, I've got hobo nickels given to me by hobos, just a pile of stuff. I've got a Bob Dylan 45 of "Positively Fourth Street" that was given to me by a woman in Belgium; it's an absolutely 45 in perfect condition. I've got stuff in here that was given to me in love and kindness, so it surrounds me in my writing room and I come in here and sit down and work. I'm hoping to conduct electricity somehow, I've got a lightning rod hanging out the window, looking for the lightning, and if that doesn't change,

**MR:** You've got a few cool people guesting on this project, too, such as Beth Nielsen Chapman. What was the recording process like? What were you up to?

**MG:** We were up to something that was really old-fashioned. We recorded on tape, we didn't use computers and Pro Tools and so forth. We recorded on tape and that required dusting off an old tape machine and finding tape to record on to. We didn't use headphones, we all sat together in the room and played together. It was stripped down, the old-fashioned way, the way Sinatra recorded. Get everybody in there and you play together. I think that's my favorite, too, because there's an honesty in it and there's also a humanity in it, there's imperfections and, for lack of a better word, mistakes. But oftentimes the mistakes are the most beautiful part. So we just stripped it down, I got the best players that I could get my hands on in Nashville, Guthrie [Trapp] is an incredible guitar player, Lynn

Williams is an incredible drummer, and we just played them. We played the songs four or five times and we knew when we had it, and when we had it we moved on to the next one. We cut this thing in less than a week.

**MR:** When you listened back to Darrell Scott's performance on your track "Old Soul," what did you think?

**MG:** I just still takes my breath away. He just outdid himself. He is incredibly gifted, he's one of the most gifted artists I've ever met and he's a dear, dear friend. We just put him and said, "Just sing. Just sing, Darrell. Just sing. Get in there and just sing," and he sang his heart out. I'm so very grateful that he took time out of his unbelievably busy schedule to come work with me on this record. He contributed so much, he's just phenomenal, and I bow to him, he's a monster. We've been working together for a long time, we've taught songwriting together around the world, we've been friends for a long time and it's been a real joy to watch the world come to find him and finally see him get his deserved claim. He's been great forever.

**MR:** I bet it's nice to have supportive friends accompanying you on musical adventures.

**MG:** It's fun to share with people that are also on their own journey. We give each other standing ovations, we're very supportive. Nashville's not competitive, not the circles I run in. We can see what each other's done and it inspires us, but we're not trying to crush each other, we're trying to help each other because we realize how hard this is, what we're trying to do.

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**MR:** Excellent, that's so healthy, and it's so not what the atmosphere was when I lived in Nashville.

**MG:** Well you were probably around commercial country music.

**MR:** Exactly.

**MG:** This is not that. We're trying to be artists, we're trying to be in Paris with the creative types at the turn of the century. We're looking for Gertrude Stein, we're looking for truth and beauty on a level that surpasses what's come before us. We're digging for diamonds and gold, we're not digging for country fucking radio.

Every now and then something accidentally happens and you land here and it's  
**MR:** Many have covered your material such as Jimmy Buffett and Blake Shelton.

**MG:** Yeah, every now and then they find songs and record them and I'm so grateful. I've got to tell you, it really helps. But we don't sit down with that as the goal, that could never be the goal for me. I don't sit down and try to figure out what Blake Shelton would record. I just try to get to my truth and every now and then it intersects with their truth, which is a great honor.

**MR:** Are you proud of your albums in that way? You're pretty confident that your career has followed that paradigm until now?

**MG:** Yeah. I know that each record I've put out is the very best that I could do at the time. With that I can live peacefully, I have peace around my work because I know I never, ever, ever stopped for a moment until I knew it was the best I could do, every single syllable, every single note, I didn't phone in any of it. The best that I can do is the best that I can do and I have that peace. Yeah.

**MR:** What advice do you have for new artists?

**MG:** The way I see it, and I believe this is true, the entire music business is an inverted pyramid, and the tip of the pyramid sits on a song. There would be no music business without songs, so the song is what matters. You've got to get your songs right, and for me your song's not right until you're utterly honest. So my advice is to strip it down, be vulnerable, get real, get honest, people resonate with that and it matters more than anything. That's been my experience and I think that's why I have a career.

**MR:** Are you going to be touring?

**MG:** Oh, I'm touring like crazy. I'm working with Iraq War veterans, US soldiers, we've got an organization called Songwriting With Soldiers, I'll be with three other female writers working with female vets who have incurred trauma in Iraq and we're going to help them tell their story through song, and in that we're going to hopefully take that giant step from victim to storyteller. Once you tell your story it no longer tells you. We're hoping to help them. Then I'm going to the UK, I've got a conference I'm speaking at, I've got tour dates and tour dates and tour dates, I'm booked all the way through January at this point. When this record hits, I'm gone for a year, period. I'm out of here!