



Gillian Welch

The Orphan Girl Opens Up

By Melanie Haiken

Photos David Johnson

The final encore at Gillian Welch's San Francisco show in May was the kind you don't forget.

"I don't know if this will work, but we're going to try it," Welch said dubiously, before she stepped away from the mic and joined partner David Rawlings and guest Peter Rowan at the very edge of the stage. Looking directly at the audience at the Palace of Fine Arts theater, they sang "Long Black Veil" in soaring three-part harmony — with no mics or amplification. The sold-out crowd, which had been whooping and hollering just moments before, was completely silent as the pristine sound carried throughout the theater. It was a telling moment for Welch and Rawlings, who have for some time been on a crusade to de-technologize music and break down the barriers between musician and audience.

The same low-tech directness is at the center of Welch and Rawlings' latest record, *Soul Journey*, recorded and produced in just eight weeks and released in June on their own independent label, Acony Records. "This record really could have been called 'One Week in March,'" Welch says on the phone from her home in Nashville. "It's about playing music with people you want to play music with."

Gathering a group of musicians at Nashville's Woodland Sound Studio — located in historic RCA Studio B where the first *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* was recorded — Welch presented them with a cluster of new songs and let them loose. Spontaneity was the order of the day. "There was no master plan, the arrangements weren't mapped out," Welch says. "We didn't even go home and listen to playbacks." Most vocals were recorded in one take while Welch sang live with the band. The point was to get rid of the overproduction that filters so much of what finally makes it onto CD these days. "We wanted this record to be anti-manufactured — it's almost anti-professional, really."

It shouldn't come as any surprise to Welch and Rawlings' fans to find them in pursuit of a rawer, edgier sound. They've been heading in this direction for a while, playing live, clustered around vocal mics like a 1930s-era radio show. And after all, old-fashioned mountain music, one of the duo's primary inspirations, is in its essence a back porch jam. After spending her formative years digging further and further back into the roots of gospel, bluegrass and old-time country, Welch found herself at the forefront of a trend when the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack surprised the musical world by climbing the charts. Welch, whose three-part harmonies with Emmylou Harris and Alison Krauss create the record's spine-tingling high point, toured the country with the *Down from the Mountain* revue, which also featured staunch traditionalists like her hero, Ralph Stanley. "Ralph's the real thing," Welch says reverently. "Any musician can learn something from listening to Ralph Stanley."

Gillian Welch and David Rawlings certainly did. After meeting each other at the Berklee School of Music in Boston more than a decade ago, the two, who are both in their early '30s, began a rich musical collaboration that's succeeded in making traditional music sound completely new again. With the help of *O Brother* producer T Bone Burnett (Elvis Costello, Counting Crows, Wallflowers, Los Lobos), Welch and Rawlings carved out new territory with their first two records: 1996's *Revival* (nominated for a Grammy) and 1998's *Hell Among the Yearlings*, with songs that sounded both centuries old and brand new. In 2001 came their first self-produced release on Acony records, *Time (The Revelator)*, which hinted at an edgier, more rock-inflected sound. Songs like the ambitious "April 14th Part 1/Ruination Day Part 2," in which Welch ruminates on a series of catastrophic events that all took place on the same day, and the mystical 14-minute jam "I Dream a Highway" erased any previous perception that Welch and Rawlings were nothing but a retro act.

Live on stage in San Francisco, they seemed to be playing up the contrasts. Rawlings sported his trademark 1930s-style suit, but his hair is shoulder-length now and flops in his face so much that Welch couldn't help teasing him about getting a haircut. Welch herself stands eerily outside of time: with her high cheekbones and strong jaw, she could be a Dust Bowl heroine straight out of a Dorothea Lange photograph — but her black leather jacket and tough-girl delivery quickly laid any thoughts of country girl naiveté to rest. Playing acoustic guitars with only the occasional addition of banjo or harmonica, the pair still managed to rock out, making the evening as much a trip to a steaming honky-tonk as a plaintive back porch harmony fest.

Beloved for their between-song banter, which plays off Rawlings' trademark shyness and silence, Welch and Rawlings come across like quintessential high school nerds made good. Their comments about the songs — particularly the tendency toward dark subject matter like rape and murder — are hilariously deadpan. Introducing "My Morphine" from *Hell Among the Yearlings*, Welch commented that the song was "top of the pops in England," adding, "I guess they like drug-addicted yodeling songs over there." As they have in recent live shows, Welch and Rawlings took a decidedly low-tech approach to recording *Soul Journey*, with everyone playing through shared mics. "It's a truer sound because you get the sound of all these instruments blending in the air and there are all these weird overtones," Welch says. "All the sounds are mingling and affecting each other." She's right — in ways both positive and less so. Yes, *Soul Journey* has an endearing hanging-out-in-the-barn intimacy. But the clarity sometimes suffers to the point that it's hard to pick out which individual instruments are playing. On the wonderfully rollicking "Wayside/Back in Time," for instance, the fiddle is so far in the background that it sounds tinny — or like it's not meant to be there at all.

On the up side, *Soul Journey* has none of the deflective surface polish that prevents any depth on the records of so many singer-songwriters. Listening to it for the first time, you have the distinct feeling that you're hearing exactly what it sounded like to be present during the recording, something that can't be said about many records today. "It's completely unfussy," says Welch. "There's nothing fussy about this record. That's the spirit we were going for."

That means no post-production fussing either. Most of the vocals on *Soul Journey* were recorded in one take—and there's no possibility of using auto-tune to polish them up. "My vocals are not recorded in isolation," explains Welch earnestly, waiting for me to grasp the significance of this. "That means if you tried to shift the pitch on my vocal, you'd shift the pitch on the guitar, and then you'd be in trouble."



This kind of collaboration calls for a lot of trust, and the musicians on *Soul Journey* are a tightly interlaced group. Austin-based Mark Ambrose, whose role Welch describes as "surrogate guitar player," has been a friend for years. (Rawlings produced Ambrose's most recent solo album.) Welch and Rawlings have known bassist Jim Boquist since 1996, when they opened for Son Volt. "We always told him if we ever needed a bass player we'd call him." Fiddle player Kercham Secor plays with Old Crow Medicine Show, for whom Rawlings is currently producing a record. And Dobro player Greg Leisz was featured on *Revival* and has stayed in touch with Welch and Rawlings ever since. Asked about the album's cryptic liner notes crediting Welch and Rawlings with "all else," Welch is apologetic but firm. "It was a completely collaborative process," she says. "We really don't want to try to separate out who did what." She does let on, though, that both she and Rawlings played drums, and that it's Rawlings playing the banjo, not her.

The addition of bass and drums is not the only new thing about *Soul Journey*. The songs are nakedly autobiographical, a huge departure for Welch, who's tended to distance herself with songs about seemingly made-up characters. "With story songs you're one step removed," says Welch. "That's always been really safe for me." In "No One Knows My Name," Welch speaks openly about being adopted and not knowing who her birth father is. "It's a wonder that I'm in this world at all / And I have a life to claim / Though I really don't know my name / It's a wonder that I'm in this world at all."

"I was somebody's love child and I don't know who," she explains. Her birth mother was a 17-year-old freshman at Columbia who took up with a visiting musician. "All I know is my dad was a musician, so he could have been anyone who was passing through New York City in 1967," says Welch, adding, "He could have been Keith Richards, he could have been Bill Monroe. Who do you think I look like?"

At first, she notes, she wrote the songs for herself with no intention of releasing them. But once she decided to do so, the effect was freeing. "It was like I took the clamps off what I was willing to say." Welch talked it over with her mother and father before deciding to record the songs. "I'm okay with putting that out in the world now," Welch says, "but before I was not." And now that we're on the subject, Welch confesses, many of the older songs weren't so far removed from her own life either. "It's all me," she says, ticking off songs like "Orphan Girl" and "My First Lover" from her earlier records. "People who knew me intimately always knew that."

Adopted and raised in Los Angeles by Ken and Mitzi Welch, a husband-wife team who scored movies and TV shows (including *The Carol Burnett Show*), Welch grew up with music everywhere. She started playing guitar at the age of seven and immediately discovered her talent, which was nurtured at an ultra-progressive private school where one hour a day was devoted to music—specifically, folk music.

After high school Welch headed north to Santa Cruz for college, where she played in a "hippie bluegrass" band while getting a fine arts degree. During these years Welch picked up her multidirectional influences, from post-punk bands like the Pixies and The Breeders to singer-songwriters like Peter Case and Richard Thompson. She colorfully evokes this period in the record's final track, the wonderfully grungy "Like a Wrecking Ball," with its repeated reference to herself as "just a little Deadhead / With too much trouble for me to share."

In the San Francisco show Welch let us know she's not just paying lip service to such eclectic influences. For one of the final encores, she and Rawlings huddled, then suddenly broke into an impromptu cover of the Dead's "Brokedown Palace." While Rawlings took a stab at playing harmonica, Welch let her voice soar over the familiar words, claiming them as hers.

This looks to be a big year for Welch. This summer, after a handful of headlining dates in support of the new record, she and Rawlings will play 20 dates opening for Norah Jones. It's an odd pairing, to be sure, with the hugely popular Jones more jazz- than folk-influenced. But the exposure seems bound to win Welch and Rawlings a slew of new fans. And clearly, they're ready to step out of the box. 🎸 🎵