

## Gillian Welch Biography

"I heard an old radio recording of the Stanley Brothers, from the dark days when rock and roll was just killin' 'em, around 1957-58," recalls Gillian Welch, getting around to the bittersweet origins of the song that is the centerpiece of Time (The Revelator), her third album. "Nobody could work because Elvis was king. And Carter Stanley was assuring the audience, 'The world is changing, you know, we've heard the rockabilly and we've heard the rock and roll, but we want to let you know that you'll get the same traditional music from the Stanley Brothers you've always come to expect.' That was the beginning of it. It's kind of a gospel song."

Gillian's understated manner dances rings around her rosey new album, the first that she and long-time partner David Rawlings have produced by themselves. Time (The Revelator), released July 2001, follows up the Grammy-nominated 1996 debut, Revival, and 1998's Hell Among the Yearlings. Both those albums were produced by T Bone Burnett in Nashville and Los Angeles (best known for his production work with Elvis Costello, Counting Crows, Los Lobos, Sam Phillips, and others). Of the studio full of famed session sidemen who played on the debut, Gillian and David had planned on working only with bassist Roy Huskey Jr. for the second record. But his unexpected death turned the latter into a *de facto* duo album. With a subtle change in attitude, they were able to stay with the two-person approach on Time (The Revelator).

"At the end of the last record we were both a little tired of the sounds we were making," Gillian says candidly, "and felt like our musical palette had shrunk. We were a little burnt on the duet acoustic thing but now we've expanded out again. We incorporated a slightly more rock and roll sensibility into this record, in that much larger arrangements are continuously implied. As opposed to being little tiny folk songs or traditional songs, they're really tiny rock songs. They're just performed in this acoustic setting. I switched genres without switching genres. In our heads we went electric without changing instruments."

Listening to her ever-improving banjo playing (she only learned the instrument prior to recording Hell) on "My First Lover," gives a clear understanding of Gillian's notion of "implied" arrangements. "Red Clay Halo" challenges you to fill in the full complement of instrumental sound it might be given by, say, the five-man Nashville Bluegrass Band, who actually recorded it on their 1998 album, American Beauty. The homesick modal blues of "Everything Is Free," whose rolling choruses swoop down and then soar away like so many brass rings on some hard-luck merry-go-round, suggest a church choir or a tent revival meeting. Likewise the heart-rending waltz, "Dear Someone," whose last-verse chord modulation elicits no less an emotional reaction than if it were played by a swelling symphony orchestra.

Gillian Welch, it has been observed by many, has an uncanny ability to present new ballads that float with a timeless quality that could have been born in the Appalachian two centuries ago – or on Music Row two decades ago. "April the 14<sup>th</sup>, Part 1" and "Ruinination Day, Part 2" are serial treatments of that fateful date as a metaphor for disaster, "the day the great dust bowl storm hit, and the Titanic sank, and Lincoln was assassinated," as Gillian explains. Worse disaster awaits the struggling rock band when no one from the press shows up for their gig. In "Elvis Presley Blues," the fate of the King Of Rock and Roll ("he shook it like a hurricane, he shook it like to make it break, he shook it like a holy roller, baby, with his soul at stake, his soul at stake...") is linked to another steel-drivin' country boy, John Henry, who went down defeating the odds.

It all comes together in a near-hypnotic flood of cinematic imagery mixed with equal parts history and irony, war and remembrance, and sepia-toned glimpses into the time warp dreamscape that *is* Gillian Welch – on the 15-minute triptych "I Dream a Highway," which closes Time (The Revelator). "I've never done anything like it before," she says. "It's not very linear, it's more impressionistic, slightly visionary. We intentionally left it to the end of the album to record, which was a kind of gamble because we'd never played the song down from top to bottom. We reserved that for when the tape was rolling."

When the tape commenced to roll, the spirit of Elvis and a thousand other Nashville cats suffused the illustrious facility known as RCA Studio B. Newly renovated some years ago as a tourist attraction by the Country Music Foundation, it took David Rawlings' foresight to bring the room out of its staid retirement and re-outfit it in proper style. "We're not back to the '50s setup," Gillian says of their outboard gear, "but we're something like the late-'60s, early-'70s era." Engineer Matt Andrews (who worked on Q Brother, Where Art Thou?) was the only other participant at the sessions. And the King, of course.

## 2. The Gillian Welch Version

Gillian Welch was born in Manhattan and moved to Los Angeles at age four with her older sister and their parents, both of them performing musicians, composers and arrangers who worked in television. "My first guitar was a hand-me-down classical guitar from my sister," recalls Gillian, who was playing by age seven, guided by Mel Bay's guitar books. As part of the curriculum at the ultra-progressive Westland School, one hour everyday was devoted to music, specifically folk music. In the mimeographed songbook they were given, Gillian dutifully scratched in guitar chord changes over the words.

"I was playing all these songs and I had no idea where they came from," she continues, adding that she soon became the accompanist at the 'School Sing' every Friday. The music of Woody Guthrie, the Carter Family, and Bob Dylan captivated her. Gillian continued to collect songbooks and "play for fun" when she moved on to the equally progressive Crossroads High School in Santa Monica.

The notion that there was a folk music career out there was slow to focus on her screen, though, and after graduation she enrolled at the University of California at Santa Cruz as a Fine Arts major. The Bay area lived up to its reputation as a musical hotbed. "I already liked R.E.M., I heard the Velvet Underground for the first time. Camper Van Beethoven, the Pixies. I had seen Richard Thompson a couple times at that point and Peter Case, T Bone produced his first record. Years later, when I met T Bone, I didn't know his big, commercially successful records, but I knew the Peter Case record. I think that kind of made T Bone laugh the first time I met him."

Gillian's too-well chronicled bluegrass epiphany did, in fact, take place while she was cleaning a bathtub on a Sunday morning. "I was gonna take a bath, and one of my housemates put on a *live* Stanley Brothers record. It's still one of my favorite records."

She fell in with a fast bluegrass crowd that centered around a homegrown Santa Cruz band, the Harmony Grits. Their hangout was a coffee house called Sluggo's. But Gillian preferred to play music with them at the house, not in public. "I was still pretty shy about performing in front of people. But that's where I started to get some experience, playing with other musicians, singing harmony. I was a decent rhythm guitar player and I knew a *lot* of songs."

By now she was a student of photography, "but really the bulk of my time was spent pouring over records, learning bluegrass songs, learning what the hell the Blue Sky Boys were doing when they sang." The songwriting journal she had been keeping since high school burst with new songs. By the time Gillian graduated with her BFA, she was singing and playing bass in a rock and roll party band doing Elvis covers, while holding down a straight job in a photo lab. With her sights set on pursuing music as a trade, she enrolled as a songwriting major at the prestigious Berklee School of Music in Boston.

More than intimidated by the classical guitar prodigies, jazz musos, and heavy metal shred-meisters at Berklee, Gillian retreated into the world of the two-finger pinch, old-timey music, and the blues of Lightnin' Hopkins and Memphis Minnie. Friends suggested she meet a fellow student, David Rawlings, in whom Gillian found a kindred spirit (and dyed-in-the-wool Mel Bay devotee). Gillian's intuitive grasp of Bill Monroe and the Stanley Brothers complemented David's depth in folk and country music. "By that time I'd figured out that a whole lot of the music I liked had come out of Nashville. Neil Young records I liked, they'd come out of there, Dylan records I liked, Bill Monroe records, the Louvin Brothers."

### 3. Nashville

They arrived in Nashville in the summer 1992. "I was happily and luckily somewhat oblivious to how far the music I loved was from the commercial world of Nashville. But I must say we moved there at a very liberal time. This little anomaly was happening after Steve Earle's first record, and Dwight Yoakam was having an impact, and Rosanne Cash, and Mary Chapin Carpenter. It was a kind of homage to Nashville's roots, a little window into a new kind of Nashville, and that's when I got there."

She began the arduous task of presenting herself to the publishers along Music Row, and playing the nightly songwriter showcases with David at the Third Coast, Douglas Corner, the Bluebird, the Courtyard Café, Guido's, and so on. "At that point, here I was playing all these songs we loved, bluegrass songs and folk songs, but without fail it would be our original songs that went over the best every night and got the biggest hand. 'Orphan Girl,' 'Tear My Stillhouse Down,' songs that would be on the first record."

Typically, Gillian got her first "cut" (a song recorded by an artist) as an independent writer, even before she'd signed a publishing deal, when Tim and Mollie O'Brien included "Wichita" and the first known version of "Orphan Girl" on their Away Out On the Mountain album. The Nashville Bluegrass Band followed up with "Tear My Stillhouse Down" and "One More Dollar" on their 1995 album, Unleashed, the same year that Emmylou Harris released "Orphan Girl" on her Wrecking Ball album.

By then, song-plugger David Conrad had convinced Gillian to sign with ALMO/Irving Music Publishing. He soon introduced her to owners Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss, who were ready to start a new label in Los Angeles, ALMO Sounds. "I went out to L.A. and sat in Jerry's office and played a couple songs for him," Gillian relates. "I knew things were going good when he started singing along with 'Orphan Girl.'"

### 4. Revival

Back in Nashville, opening a date for Peter Rowan at the Station Inn, Gillian and David were approached by producer T Bone Burnett, who offered to work with them. He assembled crack rhythm sections to work on sessions in Los Angeles (James Burton on dobro and guitar, Greg Leisz on steel guitar, bassist Armando Campion, and drummer Jim Keltner) and in Nashville (John R. Hughey on steel guitar, bassist Roy Huskey, Jr., and drummer Buddy Harman).

The debut album, Revival, recorded in 1995 and released April 1996, boiled over with familiar titles: "Orphan Girl," "Tear My Stillhouse Down," and "One More Dollar" in particular. "Barroom Girls" would go on to a life of its own, as would "Paper Wings" (on the best-selling Hope Floats movie soundtrack). Revival sold more than 100,000 copies, and earned a Grammy awards nomination as Best Contemporary Folk Album. This more than earned Gillian and David the go-ahead for a second album two years afterward.

### 5. Hell Among the Yearlings

As explained earlier, the intention of Welch, Rawlings and producer Burnett to work solely with bassist Huskey was set aside when the Nashville legend passed away unexpectedly. The resulting album, Hell Among the Yearlings, released July 1998, became essentially a duo album with occasional spots of vivid color, most notably Burnett's piano and B-3 organ on "Whiskey Girl," Rawlings' rockabilly electric guitar on the Carl Perkins send-up "Honey Now," and Gillian's brand new banjo licks on "Rock Of Ages".

Frustrated Lit majors stuck on Faulkner, Caldwell and Steinbeck found plenty of dark historicity to chew on in "Miner's Refrain," "I'm Not Afraid To Die," "Good Til Now," "Caleb Meyer" (as evocative of the Civil War as the Band's finest moments), and the controversial "My Morphine."

"Rape, death, and tough women left alone to protect their homesteads have been the stuff of folk music since the first murder ballads were sung," wrote Simone Solondz in Acoustic Guitar magazine. "Gillian Welch and David Rawlings do the tradition proud with their latest collaboration... If the duo's debut recording Revival was too heavy for you, you'd better not spin this one. It's only for those listeners who enjoy a dip in the deep, dark holler."

## 6. O Brother, Where Art Thou?

In spring of 1999, T Bone Burnett came to Nashville to record the soundtrack for an upcoming Coen Brother's movie O Brother, Where Art Thou?. From the beginning, Joel and Ethan Coen's true admiration for old time, blues and traditional music was evident. Gillian was asked to serve as Associate Producer and helped to assemble the cast of musicians who figured so prominently in the film and guaranteed an important soundtrack.

For the remainder of 1999, "O Brother" became a consuming project. At T Bone's suggestion, Gillian wrote the Siren song "Didn't Leave Nobody But the Baby", based on a single verse of a traditional lullaby. She appeared in a cameo on screen, recorded "Didn't Leave Nobody But the Baby" with Emmylou Harris and Alison Krauss, worked on the score music, and recorded a duet version of "I'll Fly Away" with Alison Krauss for the soundtrack album.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? was released in December of 2000 to critical acclaim and became the Coen's largest grossing movie to date. The soundtrack to date has sold over 1,000,000 copies in the U.S. (certified Platinum) and over 2,000,000 worldwide.

Even before the film was released, the Coens and Mercury Records knew they had a very special collection of music. They assembled almost the entire soundtrack cast to present a historic night of music at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium. This magical evening was captured by documentarian D. A. Pennebaker and recorded by Burnett. John Hartford served as an enchanting master of ceremonies. Gillian and David Rawlings performed two original songs

"I Want to Sing That Rock and Roll" and "Dear Someone" at the request of Joel Coen. The documentary, "Down From the Mountain" was recently released theatrically and is getting tremendous response. The live soundtrack album is scheduled for release on July 24 on Lost Highway Records.

## 7. Acony Records

With the reconsolidation of the Universal Music Group and the dissolution of the ALMO Sounds label (which had been part of the Geffen Records Group), Gillian Welch and David Rawlings were now the captains of their own fate, as it were. Their next step took its cue, of course, from the title of one of their very own songs.

"The Acony Bell," as Gillian explains it, "is the little flower that blooms through great adversity, it's the first flower to bloom in the spring even though there's still snow on the ground. It became the name of our record label."

Time (The Revelator), then, is the maiden voyage of Acony Records, an independent label whose principal staff can be counted on one hand. "We're very excited," Gillian says of the venture, whose artist roster consists only of her and David Rawlings. Keeping the staff small and the roster smaller is the primary goal. "That was one of the first things we had to promise everybody."

Over the course of five years Gillian Welch has toured throughout North America and Europe, appeared on countless television shows and innumerable music festivals here and abroad, played everywhere from the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville to Carnegie Hall in New York to the Royal Albert Hall in London. Her name

is dropped alongside the precious few songwriters whose work defines a generation, and she has already contributed inestimably to the quotient of great music whose core – bluegrass, blues, country, folk, and pure pop – resonates with the heart and soul of America.