

Mary Chapin Carpenter

Sometimes Just The Sky



Flatland is little aid to contemplation, and so Mary Chapin Carpenter has her own hill.

It's deep in the Virginia countryside, on a farm that she got for a song. Or rather, for a bunch of songs, and a way of singing and playing them that has taken her around the world and back home, over and again.

Carpenter and those songs have traveled for thirty years, though the songs are the most frequent fliers. They spring from her head and hands, vibrate through tone woods and six steel strings, then find their way into microphones. Then they go forth into the world - they've been doing that for thirty years now—even at times when their creator sits at the top of her hill and observes natural wonders both human-made and mysterious.

*Sometimes church bells, trees, and seasons marking times gone by.
Sometimes startling swells and tidal moons and filled-up eyes.
Sometimes everything at once, and sometimes just the sky.*

That's what thirty years brings: Sometimes everything at once, and sometimes just the sky. She knows that now, though knowing takes a long, long time. It's still hard to know whether everything at once is preferable to just the sky. In halcyon, everything at once times — like when she won country music prizes as vocalist of the year and Grammy awards for all sorts of things — she was reminded to enjoy the moment. But up on the hill, the sky is its own reminder.

Anyway, it's hard as hell to keep a job for thirty years. It's cause for commemoration of some sort, and that sort might normally involve nostalgia and trophy-polishing. But nostalgia and trophy-polishing are flatland ideas, and Carpenter has her own hill. *Sometimes Just the Sky* is not a greatest hits endeavor or a remastered compilation. It's not a celebration or a souvenir. It is a reimagining of a most unusual nature.

It is a collection of songs written across the decades, recorded in bucolic western England at Real World Studios with the great producer Ethan Johns. Carpenter sat with new and old friends who circled together in a wooden room and made music, in real time. What we hear is precisely what was played and sung, all at once.

There's a song originally recorded for each of Carpenter's original studio albums, and then there's the new song, which was aided and abetted by hillside contemplation and a punk poet's advice.

"Patti Smith was saying that you don't have to look far or wide, and it doesn't have to be complicated or expensive or madness in order to find things to soothe you in life, or to be happy about," she says, sitting at the kitchen table where she writes her songs. "Sometimes just the sky makes everything fall into perspective."

Up on the hill, at that magic time of day when there is little day remaining, the sky can take on colors that escape linguistic description. A person can feel a strangely comforting smallness amidst the

expanse. And thirty years of sublimity, shit storms, and all points in between can boil down to a bemused cosmic shrug.

*Yearning makes you who you end up as, more or less
Whatever choice I made that worked out
Was just a lucky guess
Just a lucky guess*

Sometimes Just the Sky is about travels of varying sorts, all connected by a writer's voice that was well-formed by the time it was popularly heard. The album begins with "Heroes and Heroines," a song written when Carpenter was playing small clubs in the Washington, DC area, and living in spaces bereft of land, much less of hills. The next song, "What Does It Mean To Travel," was written a million miles later, yet it is clearly of an artistic piece with its generational predecessor.

The whole album is that way, unfolding in ways at once unexpected and undeniable. If any other serious Mary Chapin Carpenter listener had been asked to choose songs for this album, we might not have chosen these songs, and we surely wouldn't have imagined these presentations. Most of us would have gone with Grammy winners and chart-toppers, singles and sing-alongs. And we would have been wrong for our choosings, not because these aren't worthy things but because they don't tell the story, and the story is what surprises, delights, and inspires.

Now, the story isn't the biography, though the biography is a pretty good story: Folk-inspired, Ivy League-educated club singer, songwriter and guitarist (let's not ever forget her remarkable guitar playing, with compelling chordal voicings and finger-picking that produces unique sounds from a ubiquitous, traveled-and-trampled instrument) somehow becomes a major label country star not by faking a drawl or a stance but by exploring depths of language and emotion (She's the only country star to write and sing the word "verdant," or to use "peripatetic" in an interview).

That's part of the biography, at least. Then there's the part about shifting into other musical modes, and touring with childhood heroes like Joan Baez, and enduring other life battles, and emerging from those battles with gratitude and grace.

The biography isn't the humanity, though, and the humanity is the story, because it's our story, too. What we have here is a riveting travelogue, from departure to arrival, of a human heart and soul. It involves abundance and the lack thereof. It involves certainty and searching.

It is sung to us softly, because stridence is as helpful to communication as flatland is to contemplation.

It is beautifully and thoughtfully played, and gracefully presented.

It is full of night songs, and inspired by the time of day when there's little day remaining.

It is an arrival that promises departures anew.

Anyway, as we know, it's hard as hell to keep a job for thirty years. These are battle scars and lucky guesses from the journey. These are postcards, written from the ledges, recorded in the English countryside, and sent with love and intention from Carpenter's Hill.

—Peter Cooper
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