

ROUNDER RECORDS

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER ASHES AND ROSES: TRACK BY TRACK

1. “Transcendental Reunion”

It’s using the metaphors of travel and flying. When you’re traveling by yourself, your fellow travelers become increasingly available to you. I flew alone to London twice last year, and there is a sense of togetherness, a camaraderie you feel during long hours with strangers. You find it in airplanes, at gates, outside in our lives. And flying west to east, you have this long journey together from night into day. Almost like a redemptive act. Then you get to what they call the Hall of Arrivals at Heathrow [airport] where all of these people are waiting for their person to come through the door. You are a witness to all these rendezvous and reunions, and you can’t help but get caught up in it. So this is a song that is using the metaphor of travel for moving from one place to another in your life, your heart, your emotions.

2. “What to Keep and What to Throw Away”

This is a moment-by-moment account of a day that I had. Everything in there is exactly true and is exactly how it happened. There is no instruction manual for how to remove the presence of someone from a home. It’s as if I was talking to myself, “These are your instructions. This is what you do.” I wasn’t kidding when I said, “Burn the lists and letters, delete all the photos.” They’re all gone. Everything is gone. I had to do that for me, so that I don’t have pictures to look at or things to listen to that remind me.

The musical outro builds, almost defiantly.

3. “The Swords We Carried”

This is about letting go of idealization. It’s about facing the horror of what people can inflict on others with their choices. Trust evaporates and what were once weapons of love are now used as weapons of destruction—the song is pretty self explanatory, I think.

4. “Another Home”

I started this song last summer when I was taking some time off between tour dates out west. I was thinking about how to return to my own home and feel able to reclaim it after my marriage had ended. It’s just daunting. I started out by telling myself it’s possible to physically find another home. But home is home. It’s how you feel inside about yourself. So this is about trying to find your place again in the world. I finished the last verse just after my father died. I feel that I was writing it about him as much as I was writing it about the idea that there’s some unknown life out there that I have yet to discover, a further destination for me. It is a song that I’m singing to myself, trying to believe this. And I do believe it.

5. “Chasing What’s Already Gone”

This is nostalgia mixed with sadness. It’s the loss of dreams, the loss of love and the passage of time. I can still see those Instamatic pictures in my mother’s scrapbook of my three sisters and I standing by a Ford station wagon that has wood on the side, trying to look tough, hands on hips, squinting into the sun. You go from that childhood bravado to being a self-conscious young adult. You have fears and doubts, but it’s not OK to show them. You’re trying to make your way in the world. Then one day you wake up and this is your life.

Then the last verse I wrote right after my father’s memorial service. I was having dreams about him. And that was mixed in with the loss of my marriage and betrayal and all of that. Ashes, roses, love, time. It all burns up eventually and is gone. So that’s “Chasing What’s Already Gone.” We all do it. You make mistakes, you hope to learn from them, and ultimately all you can do is try and be strong.

6. “Learning the World”

I’d be driving in the car, and I’d start talking out loud. It was as if I was talking to something that was in the passenger seat. Not a person, but like a “force” or something. It was a presence. It was grief. I was talking to the grief. It would just inhabit every space, like sitting in a chair staring at me. You keep trying to find the person who is lost to you, but they’re gone. It’s as if you have to create a new world to live in. It’s terrible. It’s something that takes a very long time to get through. I don’t think we ever process it so much as we just learn to live with it. Grief hands you your overcoat

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and pushes you out the door. It's your companion. It's your adversary. It's your solace. We learn to navigate the world again, how to simply be in the world again, having been through what we've been through.

7. "I Tried Going West"

It's about trying to find something somewhere else and realizing, like Dorothy [in *The Wizard of Oz*], that it's back where you left it. Or rather, back where you belong, even though you're acknowledging you're gone through the changes. Sometimes it takes leaving in order to know when to turn back around.

8. "Don't Need Much to Be Happy"

This was one of the first songs I finished for this record. When you really need to pare things down, when you're so overwhelmed, it's a good exercise to just write things down and try to remember what's important, what makes sense, what makes you happy, what gives you comfort. It's about rejecting despair. In the end, you get to the place where you look at the things that you first thought were disasters as gifts. Peace comes along slowly.

I sang this all last summer on the road. This was the clearest way I knew of just stating, "This is where I am." It gave me strength.

9. "Soul Companion" (with James Taylor)

This is the point at which the [album's] narrative starts to shift, and you're looking outside of yourself a little bit more. With that looking outward, I think we all find hope. "Soul Companion," I just love the very sound of those two words together. It's what we all seek, and if we find that in someone, oh boy, are we lucky.

When I finished it, I just thought of James Taylor. I could hear him on it. Lucky me, he was happy to do it. It's just fabulous that he's there. It makes me so happy to hear it. I have a pretty low singing voice, so we sing in the same key. It's almost like there's a bit of a vibration there sonically, because we're so close vocally. He was just so generous. He goes, "Do you mind if I put a little guitar on there, too?" He was so gracious and wonderful. His fellowship on that song just lifts it up for me.

10. "Old Love"

So much in music is all about finding new love. I wanted to celebrate the kind of love that really only comes from endurance, living through tough times and then looking back and saying, "It was worth it." In our culture and our society, it's a rarity. People discard things because they don't want to face the trouble, the hard work. If you want something, you have to hang on. To me, that's something to admire and to celebrate. That's what I was trying to say in this song. I was thinking about what I wish for.

11. "New Year's Day"

This is the last song I wrote for the record. I had a dream just before New Year's a few months ago. In the dream, I had met up with a very, very dear old friend of mine. He and I had come up together in the clubs in D.C., and he was/is a great guitar player and songwriter. When I woke up, I remembered what I'd dreamt, and I was filled with happiness. It was as if I had actually seen this old friend in person, and we'd been able to spend time together. It was just very real. It was eerie. I wrote to him that day and told him all about it.

I just started thinking about all these things, summer dresses, scents that trigger memory, sounds, cold air through the door, the distinctive and forceful way my friend played guitar and all these other little details. What he went through the years, and what I went through, and we're all still in one piece. It's late at night, and the Baltimore skyline is silver. It was a dream. I was there.

What you want for each other are grace and everlasting flowers, kindness and peace and love. The greatest wish of any human on this earth is to be truly known by someone. And to be truly accepted for all that we are. That's how this person makes me feel. The next day was New Year's Day. So I had to quote Emily Dickinson.

12. "Fading Away"

You believe that certain details about a person or a place are forever imprinted on you. Then one day you realize you are beginning to forget those details. The realization is startling but it gives you proof that you are putting one foot in front of the other and moving on. You are starting to forget, and that's evidence that time is doing its job. It's also about strength. In this song, the finger picking is straight-ahead, determined, strong. Like the emotions in the song.

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13. "Jericho"

There are stories and myths about the Biblical Jericho, that the walls around it were in the form of a labyrinth. In the end, the invaders breached the walls, and they came down. I see a heart as being Jericho, it can be destroyed. Love is a complicated labyrinth. It protects our hearts, but my heart was destroyed by the failure of love to protect it.

It's scary to meet someone after you've been through a loss like this, to allow someone new in. So it is, "you don't know me yet; you can't hear me yet; it's going to take a long time." It was almost like a word of warning or caution, but also a plea for patience.

[Co-producer] Matt Rollings and I have a history of taking a song and just stripping it down and recording it where he and I can't see each other. We sort of intuit where each one of us is musically. I sing, and he plays. We've had a couple of really magical experiences doing that. This is one song we wanted to do this with. Matt persuaded me to make it the last song, so it just became this lovely coda.

Bonus: "The One Who's Not Enough"

The title is a quote from a friend of mine who said to me, "Isn't it terrible to be the one who's not enough?" The phrase just stuck with me. I couldn't agree with her more. The chorus is almost like an old folk song in the formality of its language: "In a loveless house I did once dwell. But held my tongue, I did not tell." The song is honest. It happened to me. This is what people do to other people. They make them feel less than.