

ON 'DAKOTA AVENUE'

This piece began as an email conversation. It took place over a few months in mid-2011 while I was living in New York and Sherry in Melbourne.

It started when Sherry sent me a rough cut of 'Dakota Avenue'. She wanted to know what I thought.

I didn't know Sherry from her rockstar days. I hadn't been living in Australia at that time, so I missed that era of her music. The photos look cool, though.

I first met Sherry while I was living in LA and she was passing through town on her way to Nashville with Ashley Naylor to do some recording for The Grapes. I think we all went bowling somewhere in West Hollywood that night, though Sherry & I didn't become friends until we met again in Melbourne a few years later, when we both ended up living there for a while.

'Dakota Avenue' was written and recorded between those two meetings and it had always been part of the lore in our friendship in that: I really liked her songwriting and loved the record she'd done with Courtesy Move - so I kept asking to hear these songs, but that was always too hard because they were unmixed and in a box under her bed...

When I was first listening to the record in my Brooklyn apartment I had so many questions. I knew the background. That Sherry had started recording it in the USA in 1999 and finished it in Australia in 2011. That the songs had been co-written with either Jay Bennett or Nashville songwriters. That the record had been produced by Jay Bennett, and

recorded at Wilco's Chicago loft, with some of the Wilco sidemen and some impressive Nashville session players contributing.

This was all interesting & notable even before the tragedy of Jay's untimely death, but I also wanted to know everything about how it was put together. I was intrigued by the stretch of time from recording to completion, and I had 100 questions about the creative process.

I suggested to Sherry that others might have similar questions and that we should conduct a conversation that would illuminate some aspects of the making of this album.

I'd like to say that if we'd been in the same town this conversation would have been conducted over late night whiskeys in a favorite bar but the reality is, its more likely that we would have been sitting at a kitchen table, drinking tea.

As it is, the conversation took place via email.

Miriam Johnson: How did this album come about?

Sherry Rich: Jay and I had been writing some songs together... he drove down from Chicago to Nashville a couple of times... and we planned to 'demo' them together. Four songs on 'Dakota Avenue' were written with Jay. Then he suggested recording more of my songs to make it into a full album. At that time he was in Wilco and had free run of the Chicago loft where all of their equipment was stored. Their management company worked out of it too. They said it was OK for him to record there at night...so we'd start at 8 or 9pm and go through to 3am.

MJ: How did you come to know Jay Bennett/how did the songwriting relationship start?

SR: When we recorded 'Sherry Rich and Courtesy Move' in Nashville Jay and I got along well and kept in touch. He didn't do a whole lot of co-writes so he was keen to collaborate when I sent him some ideas on cassette!

MJ: How did you work together in the studio? Were you there for it all, or did he spend time on his own messing with tracks?

SR: I was there for it all!

We recorded the basic band tracks on tape and then transferred straight onto ADAT. We all met for the first session at the loft in Chicago in '99 and then a second time in 2001 for overdubs. Straight after that second session we drove to Champagne Illinois and worked with Adam Schmitt in his studio laying on some extra tracks. Then Jay sent the tapes down and I did some lead vocal and harmony vocal recording in Little Black Dog studio in Nashville with Rick Plant.

MJ: Did you have an overall or specific textural/production plan for the songs before you started, or was it experimentation ie: seeing how each song worked with the musicians & what developed 'live' in the studio?

SR: Some of the songs ('41 going on 17', 'Same Old Paradise') had already been 'demo'd' in Nashville with my co-writers and session musicians. I knew Jay would take them in a completely different direction and that was what I wanted. Otherwise they would have ended up sounding like pretty straight Nashville studio recordings. So we had no plan and yes there was a feeling of just seeing what ideas people threw into the ring when we were recording. I have a tendency to get overwhelmed by the possibilities of a song... the different ways you can take it. Jay was very good at listening to a demo and straight away having an idea for an overall sound in his head. He was always referencing other songs and parts that he liked from his favourite bands and records.

MJ: How long did you have in the Wilco loft working together?

SR: 2 sessions ... about a week each time.

MJ: Are there any more songs from this session that aren't included in this album?

SR: No

MJ: You recorded the tracks with Jay 12 years ago in Chicago and there was a long time between recording and mixing. Did you and Rick work into the record in any way (solos/textures etc) after you finished working with Jay?

SR: Like I said above we re-recorded some lead vocals and added harmony vocals with Tim Carroll and Pat Sansone and Will Kimbrough in Nashville.

But nothing was added in Melbourne. Shane O'Mara (Yikesville Studio producer/engineer) heard about the project and was keen to be involved as he is a fan of Wilco and Jay's work. He and Rick Plant were the driving force behind the completion of the project.

MJ: How do you feel about the finished record?
What has it been like working from this distance of time?
How does it feel to hear your voice from so many years ago?

SR: I am really comfortable listening to it all and I still feel like the songs and sounds are current and hold their own today. The only 'cringey' lyrics for me honestly is the first verse in 'Same Old Paradise' but it's still an important song for me because I wrote it during my first summer in Nashville when my situation was close to ideal. This is the first record I've released where all of the songs are co-written and because of that I feel like it belongs as much to my co-writers and the musicians who played on it and the friends from that time who inspired me. Also I feel it is a time capsule of my first years in Nashville and a tribute to Jay's fine talents and because of that it will always be close to my heart.

MJ: How different are you now, from the Sherry who wrote those songs?

SR: Well the most obvious difference is that back when these tunes were written I was single and younger! My experiences and lifestyle are different now but I can still change my headspace to that time and those feelings when I need to.

MJ: How has the timeframe affected the sound of the album? Do you think the final record would have sounded different if you'd mixed it and finished it soon after you recorded it?

Do you think Jay would have liked what you've done with it?

What are your hopes for the record?

SR: Luckily Jay was a real detailed note-taker and that has been great because I have all his handwritten track sheets and mix suggestions for each song. So when it came time to mix I felt like he was 'in the room' you might say. So I don't think the long wait on the mix has made much difference to the final result...and I believe that he would have liked it the way it has turned out. As far as my hopes for the record well I am just glad that after so long it is finally out of the box under my bed! It's a great excuse to put a band together and play these songs out and prove to people that my story isn't over yet.

'HOTEL SONG'

Personnel:

Sherry Rich – lead vocals

Jay Bennett – slide guitars, B-3 organ

Rick Plant – bass

Alex Moore - drums

Leroy Bach - leslie guitar

Al Perkins - pedal steel

MJ: This could be my favorite song of yours ever. There's such a feeling of loss tinged with memory and regret. I love it. (And have lived it.)

Why did you write this? Who was it about?

You and Jay wrote it together - who wrote what? Did you write the words and Jay the music - or did you both write both?

Did you write it in a hotel room? Please say you did, on the road somewhere between Chicago and Nashville, just to create the myth.

SR: The first idea for this song came to me on a road trip ... I think driving from Nashville to Texas and back or maybe from Nashville to Boston, or Nashville to Chicago...it's a blur... probably on highway 41. I remember looking out the window and wondering about all the people staying in those funky little old vintage motels right beside the highway...the ones with pastel curtains and old telephones... and thinking about lost loves... the transient nature of relationships. Down the line I was listening to a cassette that an old flame had sent to me with song ideas on it and I heard the sound of him drawing back on a cigarette and the chorus came to me ... makes me sigh for times gone by. When I worked on it with Jay he suggested the third chorus theme... alligator keychain etc...the little things we found along the way. He also changed some chords and was adamant to include 'Left Banke Song' whereas I would have been happy with 'Neil Young Song'.

For such an intense song I remember really having a fun time writing this with Jay and later when we lost touch and now that he's gone I will always think of him when I listen to it.

MJ: The production is muted, thoughtful and lingering, like the song. Whose idea - or did it just develop that way?

SR: It's hard to recall because after all it was (over) ten years ago! This one was tracked with the band in one room with screens in between, and atmosphere in mind. The electric bass with muted strings and Jay's soulful guitar. We recorded Al Perkins on steel in

the Nashville studio and it definitely made the track 'weep' beautifully. One of the amazing things about Nashville is that there are legendary musicians like him living there who are still happy to come to your backyard studio and do a session for \$50!

'HOPEFUL HEART'

Personnel:

Sherry Rich – lead & harmony vocals, acoustic/12 string guitars, claps

Jay Bennett – 12 string/nylon guitars/backward guitars, synth, sitars, claps, e-bow guitars, mellotron, pump organ, bowed bass, vibes, piano

Rick Plant – acoustic/nylon guitars, claps, piano

Leroy Bach - acoustic guitars

Will Kimbrough - harmony vocals

Pat Sansone - harmony vocals

Glenn Kotche - tambourines, shakers, chang-gu

MJ: How did this come about? Who did you write it with, and why them? What were the circumstances for writing the song and what were the inspirations?

I love the drum machine intro - that is a drum machine, isn't it? Was their alot of producing trickery - ie things played backwards?

To me the vocals have got a bit of a Jayhawksy feel - I can hear their kind of layered harmonies, even though they're not actually there (is that just me?). And then theres a Beatleseque/Sgt Peppers feel to the melodies & textures - whose idea was that?

SR: I had the idea for this song and approached Nashville songwriter Will Kimbrough to help finish it. I asked Will because I felt like it was the kind of melodic pop that he is into. Inspired by my early days in Nashville where I was hanging with a group of musicians and songwriters who would have a lot of parties at each

others houses and go to the legendary old country bars downtown, drink and get philosophical about life and love. The demo of this song sounds nothing like the way it turned out. Jay had the idea of layering acoustic guitars... four of us sat around one mic playing guitars and then we tracked it 4 times. So 16 guitar tracks on 8 different kinds of guitar on that song! It has an old school drum machine that we used as a 'click track' and that's what you hear at the start. There is a track that is just a bunch of us clapping in time and of course the backwards guitar was Jay's idea to really push the psychedelic angle. The banging at the end is Jay dropping the top of the piano and that's him laughing at the very end... we had to keep that in. Will Kimbrough and I laid down the harmony vocals afterwards in Nashville. I guess it sounds 'Beatlesque' because of the mellotron and weird keyboards that Jay was into. There's pump organ and also sitar, ebow, bowed bass and vibes on there. It's got a bit of everything.

PANDORA MINK

Personnel:

Sherry Rich – lead vocals, acoustic guitars

Jay Bennett – slide guitars, vibes, B-3 organ

Rick Plant – bass

Alex Moore - drums

Glenn Kotche - percussion

MJ: Who wrote 'Pandora Mink' & under what circumstances? Whose idea was the production? There's lots of great textures throughout - the percussive intro and the subtle organ. And the vocals have a very different feel to the other songs - how come?

SR: This was a song that arrived very quickly... The title inspired by a restaurant in Florida called 'Pandoras' but the theme just came out of nowhere because it was before I had children. The middle section is actually similar to an ABBA song. Pamela Bloodworth was at my house the day I wrote it and I played it for her and she helped with some of the 'professions' at the end...which I consider to be a very important contribution.

The vocals sound different because it's one of the few songs on the album where I double tracked the lead vocal. So it has a shinier, stronger pop feel. Jay had the idea of the 'chucka chucka' percussive muted guitars at the beginning. That was 5 of us sitting around a mic again all playing guitars with our hands muting the strings.

The production ideas on this one was a combo of Jay and myself. I really wanted the bell 'ding' after 'Welcome to the World' and the guitar scrape that sounds like a plane in the last verse. I could also really hear the slide guitar parts in the middle section.

BAD DAY

Personnel:

Sherry Rich – lead and harmony vocals, harmonica

Jay Bennett– lead guitars, bg vocals, tambourine, Wurlitzer, b-3 organ

Rick Plant – bass, 12 string guitar, bg vocals

Alex Moore – drums

Leroy Bach – electric guitar

MJ: This song is so groovy - its a perfect pop/rock song... Who did you write it with? Its got a beautiful lush production with lots of layers and textures. Whose idea was the lovely subtle organ, the perfect harmonica & who played the lead guitar? - thats such a great break! I also love the unrelentingly groovy guitar leads/licks through to the end..

SR: I wrote this with a terrific guitar player and songwriter – Pat Buchanan – who has played with pretty much everyone in Nashville ... Inspired obviously by a bad day... I had the verses and Pat and I worked on the chorus together. Production-wise I pretty much just let Jay do his rock thing on this one. He was going for a 'Faces' kinda feel. We added the guy backing vocals on the chorus to give it more depth of sound and more fun feeling.

MIRROR BALL

Personnel:

Sherry Rich – harmony and lead vocals, acoustic guitars

Jay Bennett – electric guitar, mellotron, piano

Rick Plant – slide guitar, bass

Alex Moore – drums

Pat Sansone – harmony vocals

Glenn Kotche - tambourine

MJ: Another classic, though in a quieter way.. What were the circumstances for you and Jay to write this song?

Whose idea was it - yours or Jay's?

What do you think of the Jay Bennett version?

How does his treatment differ from yours?

Did Jay record any of the other songs that you two co-wrote?

SR: As far as I know Jay recorded his own versions of 'Mirror Ball' which he also called 'Cigarette Machine', 'Puzzle Heart' and also 'Hotel Song'.

I wrote this song about a guy in Nashville - a kind of new folk hero who used to hang at the Exit Inn and drive all the gals crazy because he was so mysterious and good looking...and of course underrated! In this song I imagined I was working behind the bar and observing him. I had all the words. Jay worked out the tricky key changes and chords in ways that I never would have.

Jay's version of this song uses exactly the same backing track and you can hear my lead vocal like a 'ghost' vocal behind his. So it's (his version) the same except for his vocal instead of mine. My version also has lots of killer layered harmony vocals that were added later by Pat Sansone.

MJ: Whose idea was textures and the backing vocals - the oohs etc. What were the influences/references?

SR: I reckon backing vocals and harmonies are my specialty! These ideas were worked out with Pat Sansone referencing all of

the mega 60's pop that we mutually love.

Miriam Johnson is an artist, writer, photographer, filmmaker & fashion designer who is fond of alt-country, putty cats and flamenco dancing and divides her time between NYC and Tasmania.

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