

A Song by Song commentary from Jen Porter on her 4th album, "Closer to the Surface" ©2009

Produced by Chris Steinmetz of Stonecutter Records, Chicago, IL

Article written by Angie Gallop

It was a historic night when Jen Porter, her producer Chris Steinmetz, and their eclectic group of backing musicians gathered to start the final recording for her new album Closer to the Surface. Less than a mile away, in Chicago's Grant Park, thousands were gathered to hear Barack Obama make his first speech as U.S. president.

"It was so cool and significant to us that we were starting the serious recording on this album at the same time we were starting a new era in the U.S.," says Jen.

Closer to the Surface marks a significant phase in Jen's career because Steinmetz pushed her like no producer has ever done before.

"I've always been somewhat of a one-take wonder vocally and previous producers have let me get away with that," says Jen. "Chris would say, 'That's good. Now let's try another one.' He pushed me to go outside the boundaries I'd conceived, which could be difficult at times."

Work started on the album more than a year earlier, when Jen first showed her songs to Steinmetz and the two recorded a scratch track of her accompanying herself on either the piano or guitar.

From there, Steinmetz worked with Jen to shape the songs.

"The way Chris and I approach recording is to ask the question, 'What does this song want?' It's no longer about what I want because, yeah I wrote the song, but now it's not about me, it's about the song. We talked about that a lot and we're both of the same belief that we serve the song." So while Jen had written the songs, Steinmetz pushed her to take a second look, cutting the intro to one, adding a new structure to another, as well as helping her tailor which instruments and backing musicians she chose for each.

"There are infinite possibilities, so we built in a lot of time to just listen, making sure they feel right. In the end, we created this sonic landscape," says Jen.

CLOSER TO THE SURFACE SONG-BY-SONG by Jen Porter

Clever Compromise — Most of the songs on this album were inspired by encounters with people — momentary meetings, relationships gone awry, quirky personal stories. Clever Compromise started with these lyrics inspired by my drummer friend Taylor: "Pardon my headspace, he says, not only in passing, flashing a smile. I'm an ADD drummer with kept time and feet-swept indulgence." After that, the song just sort of fell out. That happens sometimes, songs just come together and it's all I can do to get them down and remember them.

Discarded — Many listeners will be able to relate to the frustration in this song. It tells that all-too familiar story of unrequited love and that feeling of a broken heart before even having a chance at a relationship. Discarded is an example of how relationships of high passion and high emotional content can inspire a highly emotional song. It's all about heartbreak and despair, which can be difficult to play and hear, but it's also about recovery and picking yourself up, so that makes it ultimately redeeming.

Closer to the Surface — I tend to write lyrics before I write music. This song is no different. It came from a dream. I woke up and wrote the lyrics in that space where you're not yet quite awake. They sat in my book for a year and then one day I was sitting at the piano playing the figure that underpins this song and I remember flipping back in my book and saying, "This is it!" Sure enough, this song became the title song for an album that brings me so much closer to where I want to be as a musician.

Long Winter — Long Winter is more of a love song to a place than to a particular person. It reflects my experiences working in the Caribbean for the past couple of years. The idea to perform in places such as Aruba, St. Maarten and Miami during the cold months started as a solution to the winter cash crunch that happens in Chicago, when people don't go out as much. But the experience has become about so much more than steadying the cash flow. Working on the islands has given me some balance. I've met people from cultures all over the world, which gives me more of an international outlook. I feel calmer, more relaxed and fulfilled, even though I'm working harder than I ever have before.

Prove Me Right — I love to hike and make sure that I get out at least a few times a year. Trips often help me to re-connect with my muse and write. So, I was hiking a few years ago on the Superior Trail in Northern Minnesota (It's an awesome trail! Check it out: www.shta.org). I met a gentleman and a boy, who was about 14. He was on a 40-day trek and it became obvious that his parents had sent him out to figure some stuff out. I ended up sharing a campsite with them and the next morning the boy got up and couldn't find the brown sugar for the oatmeal. When he finally found it, he said, "Now that is going to make this day alright." I immediately thought of the line, "It's that kind of day when brown sugar makes it all OK." I wrote the entire song about this boy, who I met briefly, but the encounter impacted me enough to get a song out of it.

Another important thing to mention about this song is my friend Jordan Taggart, a brilliant writer and rapper who came in and changed the song completely. Jordan is great because he raps about real urban issues, like a Starbucks taking the place of the Mom-and-Pop shop where he and his brothers used to hang out when they were growing up in Chicago.

Now is Then — This is the one song on the album I didn't write myself. This song was a collaborative effort between Jamie Mica and my producer, Chris Steinmetz and then I added to the song. It is a beautiful piece. Chris thought it would be a good one for my voice and playing style and he was right.

Bursting Water – This song has been a long time in coming. It's about my very best friend Mercer. We've known each other since we were 15 in high school together. We really did perform in our pajamas in living room theaters and beach front stages. And, at one point, we were going to move to New York and we ended up being called back to Chicago. Mercer played percussion across this album, but I made sure he was playing tambourine on this track especially.

Wasn't Her Time – On the same hiking trip that inspired Prove Me Right, there was a humongous storm that lasted all night. In the middle of it, I heard a huge thump near my head. When I got out in the morning, I realized it was a tree, a good 20-foot tall and half-a-foot in diameter. I was calm about it, if in a little shock, but I decided it would be OK to not go on for the last three days because the trail was washed out. I checked into a strip motel. While chatting with the owners, a married couple, I told them the story and the woman very calmly looked at me and said, "It just wasn't your time." The line struck me and I knew it would be a song at some point. So I used my story alongside one about my aunt Debbie who thought she was having love pains after re-uniting with a high-school sweetheart. It turned out to be a heart attack, but we caught it so it wasn't her time. The third story is about my friend Kamelia who was hit by a car but luckily survived. So, this song celebrates these three women who cheated death.

I Don't Really Know You – This comes from an interesting period in my life where I was hanging around with a guy 10 years younger than me. I remember being really struck by how much we connected and how I felt so comfortable, as if we had known each other forever. I wanted it to be this intimate, wonderful thing, but in the end, the reality was, "I don't really know you." So that's how the song started and from there it turned to deeper stuff about being able to just enjoy the moment for what it is and not having to make something bigger of it.

Another Sign of Life – This song is inspired by same affair as I Don't Really Know You where I realized I jumped in like we had known each other forever and, as the song says, I played it all wrong. Luckily, we figured it out and are friends, but at the time, the relationship inspired me to think about what I was doing with my life and relationships. I've definitely found, being a professional musician, it is difficult to be in an intimate relationship. I often laugh and say, "I gave up my social life for my social job," but there is a lot of truth in the joke. I'm starting to come back around to wanting to put the people I love first in my life. It's a struggle in this line of work.

Christain Church – No, it's not a typo. The Christain Church is in Bloomington, Indiana where I recorded my third album. Jake, the guy who owns it, converted the church into Farm Fresh Studios. I'm a preacher's daughter, so it was amazing for me to be able to record in a converted church. I was out strumming on the front step and I noticed the stone tablet above the door says, "Mount Gilead Christain Chruch 1912." I guess back in the day, someone made a spelling mistake and no one bothered to fix it. I couldn't help but write a song about it.

My Own Hand —This is the first track that my producer, Chris, and I worked on together. He found me playing at my favorite bar in Chicago, The Underground Wonder Bar. Chris was working on a compilation album Acoustic Chicago (www.acoustic-chicago.com.) I actually broke a piano string in the studio while recording this song. It was a bass string too! Not an easy feat. Chris said, "Roll it up and really hit it hard." I did what he said and broke the string! But it broke perfectly in time and it is actually in the recording. I felt bad about it, but the guys in the control room thought it was awesome. When I listened to the song, I realized Chris made me sound better than anyone ever had. After that experience, I knew that no matter what it took, I was going to make my next album with Chris. And, here we are.