

## Mary Chapin Carpenter

Five-time Grammy-winner Mary Chapin Carpenter's 15th studio album, *The Dirt And The Stars*, finds the singer-songwriter pondering life's intimate, personal moments and exploring its most universally challenging questions at an unprecedented time. Written at her rural Virginia farmhouse before stay-at-home orders became the "new normal," the songs celebrate invaluable experiences and irreplaceable wisdom, while also advocating exploration of the best in all of us. As one of just 15 women voted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, with over 15 million albums sold, 5 Grammy awards (from 15 nominations) and the recipient of two CMA and ACM awards, Carpenter's now-classic hits include "I Feel Lucky," "He Thinks He'll Keep Her" and "The Hard Way." Produced by Ethan Johns (Ray LaMontagne, Paul McCartney, Kings of Leon) and recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios in Bath, in southwest England, *The Dirt And The Stars* marks Carpenter's first collection of all-new material since 2016's *The Things That We Are Made Of*. Below she reveals some of the inspiration behind *The Dirt And The Stars*.

### **Is there a particular theme for this album?**

The writer Margaret Renkl contributes regular columns about lots of different things to *The New York Times*. She wrote a deeply insightful one in which she said, "We are all in the process of becoming." That doesn't stop at a certain age. To be always a student of art and music and life, as she says, that, to me, is what makes life worth living. It's certainly what makes me want to still write songs. No sugar coating, the songs are very personal and they're difficult in some ways, and definitely come from places of pain and self-illumination, but also places of joy, discovery and the rewards of self-knowledge. They arrived from looking outward as much as inward, speaking to life changes, growing older, politics, compassion, #metoo, heartbreak, empathy, the power of memory, time and place. So, I suppose I could say there are many themes, but they all come back to that initial idea that we are all constantly "becoming" through art and expression.

### **Is your method for writing songs pretty much the same as it's always been?**

It's remarkably the same. The only thing that's really changed over the years is that the device I use to record my ideas just keeps getting smaller and smaller. I still sit down with a yellow legal pad and a pencil and eraser, whatever the device is, and guitar sitting in my lap. I work at my kitchen table. It's where I am most comfortable writing. The writing process remains as fascinating to me today as it did when I first began writing as a teenager; the excavation, the digging through things that become an exploration of life, it's the most satisfying thing I know.

### **And you still do your 'song-walking' around the property, working on the songs in your head?**

Yes, living here where I can walk for miles and never see another soul, it's a big part of the creative process for me, being outside, riffing aloud as I walk and editing in my head.

**Did any particular song on the album spring from song-walking?**

Well, all of them took their various turns and chalked up miles along the way but “Farther Along And Further In,” and “Nocturne” – there is no way those two songs in particular could have been written without walking. They just took so many different paths to arrive at their finished selves. It brings me happiness and solace to be in nature, losing myself, but it’s also very much about working things out. My brain can go anywhere it wants that just feels very different than being tethered to the kitchen table. I think many creative people have some sort of thing they do, to help them plug in to a different place. “Farther Along And Further In” is about recognizing that something has changed, gradually but distinctly. In the last few years, I feel as if my life has altered its compass readings. For so long I had been following one path but the changes that come with growing older has opened up a new way of seeing and experiencing the world, from a deeper place. Perhaps it’s a recognition of choosing, or of respecting the spiritual over the practical.

**Like your 2018 album, *Sometimes Just the Sky*, you made this record at Peter Gabriel’s studio in England. What is that like?**

It’s an amazing place. You can be completely immersed in your work 24/7. They feed you, they put you up, they take brilliant care of you, so that all you need to think about is the work you’re there to do. That is a genuine privilege nowadays when technology permits us to email our parts and budgets limit our gatherings. At Real World, in the beautiful “Wood Room,” being able to be in the space all together playing live, recording head-on, singing live, no overdubs, it’s just sublime. That said, it’s incredibly hard, focused work, but it’s the best kind of hard work because it brings songs into being from every chair. And that just couldn’t have happened without all of us being in the room together.

**Ethan Johns, who produced the last record, did this one as well. What is there about his process and approach that appeal to you?**

Ethan has this extraordinary kindness about him that brings out the best in people. He has a stellar resume, having been tapped by the most incredible artists and musicians of every era, age group, genre, style...and our gifted engineer Dom Monks brought a quiet knowledge and technical excellence to the proceedings that informed every moment. What I love and value most about Ethan as a producer is my belief that his natural kindness opens the door to everyone feeling like they can contribute without hesitation, without doubt, without shyness. Experiment! Be fearless! It was a lovely fit, with much of the record being about empathy and compassion for one another, because we’re so imperfect and we’re so flawed. Use your head, use your heart, use your kindness. Rules for life as well as recording sessions...

**Those concepts seem to have been lost on the main character in “American Stooge.” What inspired that song?**

I suppose I was reading too much about Lindsey Graham. When he was running for president,

he was scathing in his disdain and criticism of the man who is now the current president. Then he simply pivoted and became one of his most prominent defenders, his main yes-man, his lackey, his stooge. He is unapologetic in his desire to remain relevant and the way to do so is to hitch his wagon to the biggest star in the universe. I found that to be breathtaking in its honesty, but so calculating and damaging to the greater good. Where is your soul, man? How do you face yourself in the mirror? There are many just like him along the political spectrum, but perhaps just not as honest and transparent about their choices.

**The title track includes an incredible part spotlighting your longtime guitarist Duke Levine. The moment the song captures must have been a pivotal time for you?**

I was 17 years old; it was the summer that I had graduated from high school. It was one of those moments you remember, being with your friends, with a gauzy nostalgia, because you're young, without responsibility, without any sense of limits. The sense that everything unknown is ahead of you brings feelings of being both liberated and lost...It was 1 in the morning and The Rolling Stones' "Wild Horses" was on the car radio. I remember leaning my head back, closing my eyes. It may have lasted only 30 seconds, but the lyrics had a through line to my heart and I felt suspended in time. I was imagining it was the happiest I had ever felt and the saddest at the same time. Isn't that duality at the heart of every mystery we experience as human beings? It was just one of those moments I wish I could put it in amber, hold it forever. That [guitar solo] is just like the part of the movie with the car going down the road on this luminous, humid night. Fast-forward to where I am now. I'm still in one piece, and I still believe that most people are good. I still believe in the innocence of first love, perfect songs and a sweet buzz from a can of cheap beer. Everything I've ever felt, every place I'll ever dream of finding as well as every place I've ever been, can be found in a trance-like memory of riding in a car on a hot summer night listening to the radio. To quote another song, that's where the beauty is...

**What do you think we will all have learned from the events of the past several months?**

Currently we're all in our own minds, homes, rooms, captive in our own vessels. When we get to the other side, when we arrive on the opposite shore of all of this, hopefully we will remember where the good, the important things come from, where the empathy lives, for ourselves as well as others. As has been pointed out by far more eloquent voices than mine is that while we're trying to stay apart from each other, we know we have never needed one another more than we do right now. We are going to need one another even more when we gradually emerge back into the sunlight, blinking, wondering, questioning, worrying, fearing, dreaming, exhaling...We all hope that this is not going to last forever, but we're going to be forever changed by it.