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## CD Release – Wendy Bird – Natural Wonder

Wendy Bird is one of the great secrets of the Vancouver music scene. A natural singer, blessed with a deep blue voice, and a lot of soul.

Alas, not too many people have ever heard her. She was the original singer in the Lost Durango's, a fabulous country punk band in the mid-80s, but the recordings she made with them were never released. A few years later she hooked up with Jeff Hatcher in the Sugar Beats, an offshoot of Canadian country-rock greats the Blue Shadows. They recorded a great album, but it also was never released. And she more or less faded from sight, working a day job and singing as a hobby, often at the urging of partner Colin Nairne, guitarist for Barney Bentall and the Legendary Hearts.

She's always been modest about her abilities, but other musicians knew how good she was. So when Craig Northey needed someone to record a "sound-alike" version of Lynn Anderson's 1971 country classic *Rose Garden* for a movie, he called her up.

She came in, nailed it, and went home.

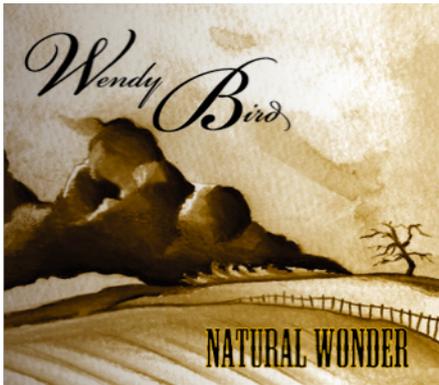
"I did a whole 70s Nashville arrangement that sounded like *Rose Garden*," Craig relates.

"When I sent it in they said 'this is fantastic! What is it?' I said 'It's what you asked for.' They said 'No no, we've got the rights for *Rose Garden*, we wanted you to do a cover version.' I went 'Oh.'

"I called her back that same day cause I had to re-deliver and cut *Rose Garden* with her. And it ended up in the film."

Craig's cohorts from his band the Odds played on the session. Drummer Pat Steward thought it sounded so great that Wendy should do a whole album in the string-laden 70s Nashville sound.

So she did.



They talked about it for months, throwing song ideas back and forth. Jeff Hatcher songs always cropped up in the mix, so Craig made another suggestion, to do a whole album of them.

After talking about it for about a year-and-a-half, the actual recording was quick – two sessions at Bakerstreet Studios in North Vancouver, with string and pedal steel overdubs later.

They did it old style, an A-list of local players sitting down and recording live in the studio. A bunch of friends setting aside a couple of days to have fun in the studio, recreating the magic of another era.

"Twelve songs, ten musicians, fifteen hours, and one big Indian meal," Wendy laughs.

"We'd run through [a song] a couple of times, then we'd do two or three

takes. We were doing about a song an hour."

The Blue Shadows versions of some of the songs were so stamped in Wendy's mind she was leery to do them, particularly Billy Cowsill's tour-de-force *Deliver Me*. But Craig came up with a fresh, lightly swinging arrangement, propelled by the strings of two members of the Calgary Symphony, viola player Morag Northey (Craig's sister) and violinist Brigit Knecht.

Colin works with Elvis Costello's management, and Elvis agreed to add a guitar solo. Voila, the Blue Shadows' trademark song became something completely different.

A lot of imagination went into the arrangements, starting with the strings.

“I hired two horn players (Terry Townson and Steve Hilliam) to do the arrangements, and spoke through what kind of vibe I was going for,” Craig explains.

“Sometimes I would say ‘This one is like *Wichita Lineman*, I want to have that kind of breadth to it.’ I chose horn players because usually the way they write melodic parts is a call-and-answer, like those old arrangements. They think that way; the parts have a particular ‘hookiness’ to them. They did brilliantly.”

The vibe in the studio was great, with the musicians playing off each other and digging the session. Some songs took on a life of their own, notably *Natural Wonder*.

“I think some of the instruments chosen, like the clavinet and things, combined with the other stringed instruments in a way to create that big instrument [which] you don’t know what it is,” says Craig.

“The Brian Wilson phenomenon, the *Pet Sounds* thing. All of a sudden in *Natural Wonder*, you don’t know what that is. It’s all swirling around, the acoustic guitars and the 12-string and the clavinet pianet, which is like this big baritone guitar thing in there.

“When I took that home and put it on in my own studio I went ‘Oh my God, I can’t tell where anything is, but it’s so great.’ It’s like the idea of the Santa Ana winds and some of the things in the lyrics are so fluid and so much about the environment around him, it just seemed to be swirling around.”

Another song that took off was the stately ballad *We’ve Both Been There*, which sounds like a long lost, hit from 1962.

“That one I think is one of Jeff’s home runs,” says Craig.

“It is one of those things that comes along in your songwriting career. As a songwriter, you kind of know those are five-year songs – you get one every five years that sounds like somebody wrote it, you can’t tell who, and anyone can sing it.”

“We slowed it down,” says Wendy, who used to do an Ian and Sylvia-style version of the song in the Sugar Beats.

“Barney Bentall came up with this great guitar line that took it somewhere else. Then he wanted to do the backing vocal, and he really pulled it all together and really took it somewhere special. I didn’t expect that song to be that good. I was really surprised and really happy at how it turned out.”

Which could be said of the whole session.

“It was scary going in there, thinking ‘What am I doing, is this going to work out?’” Wendy admits.

“I was worried I wasn’t going to be able to step up to the plate, that I was going to let everybody down. It was hard for me, being a less experienced musician. I do this mainly as a hobby; it’s a passion, really. I thought ‘Oh, I’m going to go in there and make a fool of myself.’ But I was among friends, I didn’t feel intimidated. Everybody was so great.

“The record was made with a lot of love. Everybody came together because they wanted to. I can’t afford to make a record – if I had to pay full price to do a record like that, I never would have been able to do it. It was a hundred buck project; everybody got paid a hundred bucks. The fact that those guys all were willing to do it made it such a great experience. And everybody loved Jeff’s songs.”

“We joked about it afterwards, but it was totally serious, that we would all pay to do it,” says Craig.

“As a club. We all want to form a club, and we put in 150 bucks and we have a studio for a day. Pick someone who will be the beneficiary, and say ‘You got 10 songs?’ And we’ll do it. And we’ll all pay, and somehow that’ll pay for dinner as well. It’ll never, ever pay for the beer, but it could pay for the dinner.”



– John Mackie –

**For more information on Wendy Bird, go to [www.beaumontclassicrecords.com](http://www.beaumontclassicrecords.com)**