

FLIRTING WITH DISASTER

SONG COMMENTS

This is the first of my albums to be made up wholly of romantic love songs. The songs that my collaborators and I wrote, emphasize the risk that goes along with giving your heart away: “Any time you fall in love, you’re flirting with disaster.”

FLIRTING WITH DISASTER

The title tune for *FwD* was written with Eddie Arkin; I think his arrangement is masterful, bringing out the personality of everyone in the band. It begins with Bartok-inspired vocal harmonies, Grant Geissman creating ethereal volume-pedal effects and mimicking a baby whale on slide guitar. Eddie once said to me that he can always count on this band to make his arrangements of our tunes come alive. We were both blown away by Russell Ferrante’s blazing solo at the end of the track.

A couple of people who read the lyrics first and then heard the song, remarked that they would not have expected a song with “Disaster” in the title to be so upbeat. Eddie and I wanted the music to play against the title, giving the feeling of someone being swept away and loving it.

FEELS LIKE SNOW

I liked the expression “Feels Like Snow” as a title idea, and developed it into a lyric that compares the breathless expectation of a first snow, with the realization that a great love is entering one’s life. After Russell’s and my first get-together, we worked on this song quite a bit long-distance. I was very taken with the Debussy-like intro, and so enjoyed singing the vocal backgrounds, which originated on synthesizer (synth is tucked under the vocals on this track). Carlos Del Rosario wouldn’t let me listen to the backgrounds until he’d recorded all the parts so I’d get the full impact of the harmony. I later told Russ, “That last note, on the word ‘snow,’ is the prettiest note you ever wrote.”

I’D BE DOWN WITH THAT

This is another Russ collaboration. As with “Snow,” the title popped into my head as a possibility for a good lyric. I wanted it to have a feeling of reckless abandon, the idea that you’re madly infatuated with someone but aren’t making any predictions one way or the other. It could be the greatest romance in the history of the world, or a total dud. At the recording session, Geoff Gillette commented that Russell, Mike Valerio, Mike Shapiro and I are each barreling along doing our own thing but it somehow goes together. I told Russ that Geoff had said this and Russ agreed. He said, “It’s like, ‘Meetcha at the coda!’ (Coda: The final section of a piece of music).” A drummer of my longtime acquaintance reminded me that what Shapiro is playing on this track is called a *songo* groove.

OFF-CENTER

When I’m working with Eddie, I’ll share various thoughts I have about a possible direction for a song, and then hang out with him while he noodles around with countless ideas on the piano or guitar. I have most or all of the lyrics written, and sometimes more sections than we might

need, so he can pick and choose. I wanted there to be some sort of vocal counterpoint at the beginning of "Off-Center," and we kept the lyrics to a minimum there: "When will I know your sweet heart, sweetheart?" The way Eddie has the melody jump up on the title, always makes me smile; it's so odd and so cool. He plays baritone guitar on this track.

BE MY MUSE

Shelly Berg wrote the music for both lyrics I gave him during two writing sessions in LA. "Be My Muse" changes "feels" with each section. He wrote the intro last. All I had to say was, "This would be something completely different, stylistically, like ..." and he composed it instantly. I marveled later at how the classical-type intro seemed to tie in subtly with the beginnings to several of the other composers' songs. Shelly said, "We know you, that's all. Your lyrics must have suggested it in each case." The wordless vocal quote at the end is from a tune my dad wrote, a 5/4 piece entitled "Bass Reflex." This song idea began not with the title, but a line that wound up in the first verse, "Gobbling inspiration like a shark on steroids."

LATER

"Later" is an Eddie Arkin collaboration, and he plays guitar on it too. Though the chords and melody are as sophisticated as Eddie's always are, the tune is fairly simple, "A" sections and bridge. In this lyric, two people have started to care about each other deeply, but it's early on in their relationship and they're both a little tentative. They long for each other, but they wonder if this is the real deal; all kinds of hopes and fears are swirling in their heads, as well as the opinions of their respective friends, who know a bit about what's going on. At the end, the woman takes a chance and replies to her boyfriend's note by telling him that she loves him.

THE LAST WAVE

I liked the idea of a song with this title, but didn't want it to have ominous implications like the Peter Weir film of the same name. I wrote the last verse first, and ran several versions by Eddie until we were both happy with it.

Sometimes we wind up an initial writing session with a whole song sketched out; in the case of "The Last Wave," we wrote all of it except the bridge in the first session, then put it aside for a record amount of time, several months. Eddie had a couple of ideas for the bridge, but when we finally came back to the song, something entirely different presented itself. It's hard for me to believe, now, that it wasn't all done at the same time.

DISASTROUS CONSEQUENCES

When Russ and I were doing a festival in Juneau, AK, we were talking about classical music we liked. He told me about the work of György Ligeti, and when I got home I checked it out. Ligeti once described his work as "neither tonal nor atonal." There was nothing I could imagine adapting to include lyrics, but the avant-garde tonality and rhythmic complexity fascinated me. I sent a voice memo to Russ with the lyric for "Disastrous Consequences" spoken over a Ligeti piece. Russ created an ostinato (a musical phrase repeated over and over during a composition) that was similar to something Ligeti might do but more accessible to the average ear, kept the

irregular phrasing, and told me what section he thought should remain spoken. The basic melody is really very simple. At the session, Charlie Bisharat called it a “musical Escher painting.”

BIG TIME

Dave Grusin joined us on *Attachments*—for my lyrical adaptation of his “Memphis Stomp,” and Dave’s arrangement of a Bach piece he suggested, “Air on the G String.” Working with him was a delight, and I asked Dave if he’d like to write something together for *Flirting with Disaster*. I gave him the words to “Big Time” in September of last year, and when we got together a couple of months later, he had a fully-formed idea written out in pencil. The songwriting process is a bit different with each of the guys. Dave made immediate changes on paper whenever we tweaked some element of the song, and we finished it over the course of three days. He always has cool phrasing ideas for the vocal, but he’s very laid back and open-minded too. This is the bluesiest song on the album. At the mix, Geoff and Carlos gave me a hard time (good-naturedly) about using the word “comeuppance.”

WAIT FOR IT

Dave and I met for our last writing sessions at the home of JoAnn and Artie Kane on Whidbey Island; I live in Washington State, so it was convenient for me, and a great place to work. At dinner one night, JoAnn was mentioning how she always loved Dave’s 1980s composition “Bossa Baroque”; I hadn’t heard it in some time, and when I listened to it later that night I thought that it might work with lyrics. The next day, I asked Dave if it would be okay for me to lyricize it and he not only said yes, but wrote a counter-melody for me to sing in the opening fugue-like section. We agreed that unlike the original version, it would be completely acoustic. To my ears, the result has something of a Brazil 66 vibe. For the last, wordless choruses where the band fades out, we added Carlos Del Rosario on surdo drum, a large bass drum often used in Rio-style sambas.

THE STAIRCASE

When I wrote the lyrics for “The Staircase,” I knew I’d probably put it last on the album, because it represents the end of a search.

Shelly has said that if I give him a lyric in advance, he doesn’t like to commit to a melody before we get together in case I don’t connect with it. This time, though, I had given him quite a specific musical direction I thought we might like to try, and he’d already come up with something lovely when we got together. For some reason, it didn’t feel like a good fit for my voice. Shelly sat at the piano for a couple of minutes in silence, pondering, and then sang me the first two lines, “I will open up the door,/Knowing what I know,” with a different melody. Immediately, I started to tear up. After that, it took us a couple of hours to finish the song, which is now one of my favorites in the Shelly-Lorraine catalogue.

There’s a non-musical collaborator I’ve had the pleasure of working with for the three albums now: designer Michael Ticcino. Mike always creates a look for the album package that seems perfect for the music inside. The graphic he chose for the disc here is called a “little planet.” It’s made by rotating the camera frame by frame, then piecing together the wide-angle images. You seem to see the woods from above, and it looks like, well... a little planet.