

Track by Track - WESTERN SUN – Nell & Jim Band

1 By Stars and Sunrise - 4:28 (Chris Wadsworth, Nell Robinson, James Nunally)

One of the Emigrant Trails traveled before and during the Gold Rush was through the area now known as Texas when there was a hotbed of conflict there between white settlers (many of whom were slaveholders), free African Americans, and Comanches and Tejanos (Mexican-Texans). This song is from an immigrant who fell in love with a Tejana named Luisa. They had 2 sons born in destitution, and he was driven west to seek their fortune alone. One of the lucky ones, he returns with his pack filled with riches.

“I have been steeped in learning about the Gold Rush era and the mass western migration on the Emigrant Trails. I wrote 5-7 instrumentals that captured some of the feels of the Trails and immigrant experiences. I shared this instrumental with Nell and Jim, I wanted a success story and a feeling of triumph for this one.” - Chris Wadsworth

“I listened over and over to Chris’s melody and read some stories from the southern routes taken through Texas out to California. I imagined a man coming to Texas and marrying a Tejana, then having to leave her and their children. I wrote the chorus first and we lived with that for a while, then I drafted story verses and worked with Jim to tell the tale.” - Nell

“‘By stars and sunrise’ is how immigrants made their way across the country. They had the eastern sun at their back for the daylong journey, they stared at the sunset as day came to a close, using the western sun to navigate as they slowly made their way to the promised land.” - Jim

2 The Fire - 6:20 (Nell Robinson, Chris Wadsworth, James Nunally)

“This melody is another from my compositions inspired by the stories from the Emigrant Trail. I like melodies that don’t have very distinct resolutions, the modal feel that embraces uncertainty. The mode of this song is F modal but could also be considered Dm.” – Chris

“The modal feel and surprising chord changes felt heartbreaking to me as I worked on lyric ideas. The story is based on a great novel by Denis Johnson, *Train Dreams*, about a prairie fire that devastates a homesteader family and the recovery and madness of the farmer who returned home to find his house, wife, and child gone. He goes mad looking for them.” – Nell

3 Clinch Mountain Backstep – 5:03 (Traditional, Ralph Stanley)

“Our take on the classic banjo tune. The confluence of various musical styles has always formed the backbone of American music. In this tune, we begin with the African origins of the banjo. Alex created an improvised percussion intro, then we blend into the jazzy bass call and response with the drums. When the flute comes in, we hear the Irish influence, when the banjo arrives, we are into the Scots-Irish influences as heard in the Stanley Brothers music and this, their tune, in particular.” - Jim

4 In My Beautiful Dream – 2:55 (James Nunally)

“This is a song I wrote in the early 1990s and recorded with Dix Bruce. The theme of not wanting to wake up from a perfect dream is one we probably all have. In this case, the central person is suffering in the real world of lost love.” – Jim

“We wanted to have a couple of duet vocals on the album and we worked this one up. Jim’s song sounds happy and is upbeat, but if you listen closely, it’s a sad song. That, to me, is country music.” - Nell

5 Hurricane – 4:40 (Nell Robinson, James Nunally, Chris Wadsworth, Lowell Levinger)

This song is in loving memory of Nell’s niece Gigi, who died of an overdose of heroin laced with fentanyl in 2018. It is dedicated to all those who are suffering from addiction and to the people who love them.

“As I sang this song over the past year or so, the lyrics subtly changed, from hopelessness to hope. The final version was written in the studio where ‘Banana’ suggested a small change that made it finally feel right. Every time I sing this song, someone comes up to me and says they lost someone too.” – Nell

“I wrote a melody and Nell used it to tell the story. We worked with Chris on the vocal arrangements and with the band on the overall arrangement. The bass fiddle and percussion intro create the weather, an impending hurricane, for this song.” - Jim

6 Limonaia - 4:23 (James Nunally, Nell Robinson)

Inspired by the true story of Princess Ghyka who lived in the Villa Gamberaia (Italy) in the 19th century. According to the legend told by locals, Ghyka was a world-renowned beauty but at just 19 she veiled her face for what she saw as the flaws of aging. She lived there with her American companion, Florence Blood, who painted the portrait that still hangs in the Villa. Ghyka is said to have died at age 24.

"I had in mind not only the story of Ghyka but also the idea that she and her 'companion' may have been in love. 'Companion' was a term sometimes used for same-sex couples at the turn of the 20th century. Also raising my daughter in this society that still drives women to great lengths to fit a strange view of beauty, I was very aware that the story of Princess Ghyka still plays out today." - Nell

7 Bassfiddle Fanfare – 3:00 (James Kerwin)

Jim Kerwin says, "This tune is based on a 'lick' - a musician's term for a series of quickly played notes that seem to just flow together. I started playing this lick on the bass one day over and over until I began singing a simple melody over the top. On a string instrument there is usually a 'trick' to the fingering, picking or bowing that makes a tune 'dance' - that's fiddling. A bass fiddle is a string bass that plays licks that dance. A fanfare is an energetic piece that announces: HERE WE ARE!"

8 Sequoia Gold – 3:36 (Chris Wadsworth, James Nunally, Nell Robinson)

"I spent a lot of time around Caspar Creek, south of Fort Bragg, in my rambling and research about the great western migration that happened during the Gold Rush. For those who didn't find gold, there was the redwoods and lumber business - a frenzy of clear-cutting to feed the explosive population growth in San Francisco. In a very short time, the City went from a sleepy pueblo to a town of 500,000 people, housed in first growth redwood." – Chris

"Chris' lyrics on this are spectacular, capturing the jargon of the time and place. We added a verse at the end and worked together on the chorus. The three of us had a ball playing with the harmonies." - Nell & Jim

9 Periwinkle Wreath (Mój Wionecku Z Barwinecku) – 3:34 (Traditional)

The periwinkle flower has multiple meanings in folklore, it signifies both marriage and death.

"Nell found this gem of a Polish song as we were preparing to perform for a Polish Festival in Seattle." - Jim

"We fell in love with a few Polish pieces that are included in this album. Periwinkle Wreath was published in a book by composer and music historian Felicjan Szopski, who was a teacher to Joachim Mendelson." - Nell

10 Travelin' the Road West – 3:18 (James Nunally)

"Jim has written a couple of songs about his family history. During the 1930s the Great Migration West took place as southern and midwestern farmers fled one of the worst man-made catastrophes in history." – Nell

"I can remember my Dad said he had been called an Okie. But he was from Arkansas, his Dad was a sharecropper there. And he, his parents, and sisters moved out west looking for work and a better life in the "Golden State." Reading *The Grapes of Wrath* inspired me to write about my own family's history." - Jim

11 Poland – 2:49 (Derek and Brandon Fiechter)

"Our intern from Poland, Jagoda Trybuszkeiwicz, recommended we learn this song for the Polish Festival we played in Seattle. We have learned about the historic Polish communities throughout the US that introduced the polka and created its most popular form. It was composed of two brothers as music for a video game but the melody became very popular in Poland well beyond the game. It feels like a song with a good sense of humor." – Nell & Jim

12 Handsome Medley (Handsome Cabin Boy & Handsome Molly) – 5:45 (Traditional)

"The first tune was brought to the band by Jim Kerwin, who played it with Jerry Garcia and David Grisman. We had fun combining it with the story of another handsome woman, Molly." – Jim

"The Handsome Cabin Boy originates from the Scottish Bothy Ballads though it traveled through England and Ireland and shape-shifted to slightly different versions. Handsome Molly seems to have been introduced to Scottish folksinger Jeannie Robertson by American folksinger Jean Ritchie during a song swap at the home of Alan Lomax!" - Nell

13 Winnemucca – 3:51 (Nell Robinson, Chris Wadsworth, James Nunally)

“When I composed the melody, I was thinking about the area around Winnemucca, one of the most dangerous parts of the journey west on the Immigrant Trail. There is a 40-mile stretch from the end of the Humboldt River to Truckee or Carson that was littered with bones (human and animal) and belongings were thrown out to lighten the load for travelers. Those who traveled at night to avoid the desert heat often ended up lost, traveling in circles.” - Chris

“I wrote a modern description of Winnemucca, though. I had written a poem about the enchantment of the scrappy little desert town after spending two music trips there, one with Ramblin’ Jack Elliott. The lyrics are based on real people I met there.” - Nell

14 Isaac in Kolomej- 3:59 (Traditional)

“Rob Reich found this Polish klezmer tune and brought it to the band. We love it.” - Nell

“One of the most fun things to do as a musician is to take your playing to another level, in this case, tempo. This song’s intensity and forward motion have you imagining at the finale of the tune, you can see dancers nearly falling over with exhaustion and joy as the allegro ends.” - Jim

15 Woe Is Me – 5:17 (Nell Robinson)

“I was feeling sorry for myself one day and this little song is what came out. I had the honor of singing this song with Garrison Keillor – such a brilliant story-teller - on A Prairie Home Companion some years ago. It’s silly but actually, it has a message and I mean it!” – Nell

“Imagine yourself in a gospel choir, everyone is supporting you, they know how you feel, they have been there too. Then the band steps it up a tick to really carry the message, they understand, they understand!” – Jim