

ME & MAY

Stories Behind the Album

She Said, I Said



Songwriting notes and recollections
by Paul Wargo

Inside the album

An introduction, the stories behind twelve songs and a bonus track, and a closer look at the album's emotional journey.

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A NOTE FROM PAUL WARGO

I made the album I wanted to listen to.

I knew I wanted to make a second Me & May album, and I knew it would be country. That was about as much of a plan as I had.

Then I wrote *She Said, I Said*. That was an album title if there ever was one! I liked the story I ended up writing and wanted to pursue the two characters. What else happened between these two people?

I was stuck on how to pursue that idea. Then I remembered seeing my son play the male lead in a Los Angeles production of Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years* years earlier. That musical stayed with me, so I jumped in to see where its influence would take me. As the album developed, I began thinking about Me and May as two people wanting different things at different times - and not necessarily realizing when those differences were pulling them apart.

I didn't map out their whole relationship. I let the ideas wander.

Some songs were new. Others came out of my shoebox of lyrics, song fragments, and things I'd thought were worth saving. Some had been waiting thirty years to be seen and heard! A songwriting exercise from my high-school classroom found its way onto the record as well. So did memories of the weekly phone calls my wife and I shared while we were dating three thousand miles apart.

Later, when I thought the album was done, I asked my wife to listen. Afterward, she asked why the girl always had to be the victim.

Good question, and I had no idea! So back to work I went, and *Honey, I'm Home* was born. That got May another song on the album!

Musically, I wanted to bring in the things I loved hearing, especially in the music of my youth: superb singers, background vocals that get their chance to shine, memorable guitar solos, great production, and no filler. Every song had to stand on its own. There's old-time country here, some rockabilly, a little reggae, and other influences that showed up along the way.

A friend once gave me *Art & Fear*, a book I've read over and over. One idea especially stayed with me: don't judge what you're making before it's time. I've finally reached a place where I can trust my instincts and follow them.

There's a ton of freedom in the lack of fear.

I made the album I wanted to listen to. I'm excited for you to hear it.

- Paul

TRACK 01 / ME

She Said, I Said

The song

Me sees May across a crowded bar, and a dance becomes the beginning of something neither seems interested in stopping. Before long, they're driving backroads, holding hands and discovering how quickly a few simple words can change everything. Sometimes forever begins with nothing more complicated than - she said, I said.

Behind the song

This was the first song I wrote for the album, although at the time I didn't know there was going to be an album built around it. I knew I wanted to make a second Me & May album, and I knew it would be country, but that was about as far as I'd gotten.

Like most of my songs, this one started with the title. *She Said, I Said* popped into my head, and I followed it. I liked the story that came out of it - the idea that two people could experience the same relationship and come away with different versions of what happened. More importantly, I liked the two people in the song. I wanted to know more about them.

That's when one song started becoming something larger.

Years earlier, I'd seen my son play the male lead, in a Los Angeles production of Jason Robert Brown's musical *The Last Five Years*. The musical stayed with me, particularly the way Brown tells the story of a relationship through two people experiencing it from very different places. I didn't want to retell that story, but it opened a door. What if Me and May weren't simply right or wrong? What if they wanted different things at different times and didn't always recognize what was happening while they were living through it?

That became the starting point for the album.

I didn't sit down and map out their relationship or decide exactly what twelve songs I needed to write. That's not really how I work. I had *She Said, I Said*, I liked the story it had started, and I let it wander from there.

TRACK 02 / MAY

Two Hearts, One Love

The song

May still believes in forever, but something tells her it may be slipping away. She reaches for Me with all the certainty of someone trying not to acknowledge the doubt underneath. One more touch might last a lifetime - or it might be the last time.

Behind the song

I've wanted to write a song called *Two Hearts, One Love* for a very long time.

When I was in choir at Cal State Long Beach, I had a friend who also wrote songs. While we were on choir tour in Salt Lake City, he told me he'd sold a song called *Two Hearts, One Love*. I never heard his song and never read the lyrics, but the title stayed with me. I remember thinking that someday I'd like to write a song with that title myself.

Years later, here it is.

I always liked what the title says in the simplest, most romantic sense: two separate hearts coming together and becoming one, poetically speaking. I already knew that Me and May would eventually go their separate ways, and I wanted this song to belong to May.

Interestingly, I originally imagined the music differently. Knowing where the relationship was headed, I had something more bittersweet in mind - perhaps a minor key with some dissonance underneath it. But as I wrote, the words had other ideas.

And they won out. They should.

That's increasingly how I work. I follow whatever my instinct tells me should be the next word, note or harmony rather than stopping along the way to judge where it's going. One of my composition teachers used to say that a composer really has only two jobs: **What is the next note or word, and how do I avoid cadence?** In other words, keep going. Once you've finally arrived, the song is over.

There's also a musical moment near the end of *Two Hearts, One Love* that I particularly love, when the background singers really open up. My wife and I are both choral musicians, and when she first heard the album straight through, those background vocals were one of the things that immediately caught her attention.

Sometimes the words know where the song needs to go before the songwriter does. *Two Hearts, One Love* was one of those times.

TRACK 03 / ME

Back to Our First Kiss

The song

Me looks back at a love that began when he was young and at everything he and May have lived through since. Dreams, bills and difficult times have changed their lives, but they haven't erased the feeling that started it all. After all these years, Me still knows exactly where to find it - back at their first kiss.

Behind the song

Like every song on this album, this one began with the title. *Back to Our First Kiss* came first, and I initially imagined it as a nostalgic look at the beginning of a relationship - that period when everything is new and there's a kind of magic in almost every moment. The idea was really about finding a way to keep some of that feeling present as the relationship moves on.

I wrote the chorus first. Then, as often happens when I'm writing, the song began having ideas of its own.

The verses didn't really become nostalgic at all. Instead, they became more about the ordinary course a relationship takes - almost a "this is how it goes" acceptance of what happens after that first magic inevitably changes. Me isn't pretending that everything can stay exactly as it was. He simply isn't willing to turn off the light on that first feeling. For him, that first kiss remains something worth carrying along.

Musically, I think this song may be more important to the album than it is to the story of Me and May. It's energetic, it's fun, and it has some great musical moments, including a guitar solo I particularly love.

One of the things I wanted from this album was something I don't always hear as much as I'd like anymore: great singers really singing, great production, and instrumental playing that gets its own chance to shine. Most of all, I didn't want filler. Every song needed to stand on its own.

Back to Our First Kiss does an important job for me in that regard. It moves. It gives the album some energy. And it's simply a song I enjoy listening to - which, in the end, was one of my main goals for the entire record.

TRACK 04 / MAY

Baby

The song

May can feel something changing between them even while she reaches for the love they used to know. The memories are still there, but the person beside her seems to be slipping farther away. Sometimes the hardest goodbye is the one that hasn't quite been spoken yet.

Behind the song

This lyric was already half written when I started putting the album together. It had been sitting in what I think of as my shoebox of treasures - a collection of things I've written or come across over the years and thought were worth keeping. I can't date it precisely, but I'm fairly certain part of *Baby* was written at least thirty years ago.

I've always saved things. One of my composition teachers used to say that if you write something you think is really good and you're in a hurry to get it out into the world, that's exactly when you should put it in a drawer for a year. Then pull it out. If you still think it's good, maybe you've got something.

Well, this one spent considerably longer than a year in the drawer.

When I began working on this album, I went back through a lot of that old material. I also had certain kinds of songs I knew I wanted on the record, and one was an old-time country song - something I could imagine being sung by Patsy Cline or one of the other great singers of that era. *Baby* seemed like the right opportunity.

This one was probably more consciously constructed than most of the songs on the album. I used word banks and some of the other tools of the songwriting trade, and at times the rhymes themselves helped suggest where the story should go. I also knew that May could really wail on a song like this, and I wanted to give her the opportunity.

Later, I realized that *Baby* and *Just Leave Me Lonely* were my own little *Grease* pairing: May gets the Sandy song, and Me gets the Danny song. Only here, May sings the one-word title, *Baby*, and Me sings the multisyllabic *Just Leave Me Lonely*.

Coincidence or conspiracy? Find out on the next album, *Me & May, Juxtaposition or Eh?*

TRACK 05 / ME

She Called Me

The song

Three thousand miles can keep Me and May apart, but one familiar voice can make the distance disappear. Letters may carry the words, but hearing May on the other end of the telephone gives Me something the mail never can. Sometimes being close to someone is as simple as hearing them say hello.

Behind the song

This one came partly from my shoebox, but the story is very personal.

When my wife and I were dating, she went to college back East while I was here in California. We were about 3,000 miles apart. We wrote to each other every day, and I always looked forward to getting her letters, but we only talked on the phone about once a week.

The letters were wonderful, but the phone calls were different. It was hearing her voice. For that little bit of time, the distance seemed to disappear and it felt as though she were right there with me. That memory became the central idea of *She Called Me*.

I wrote the song specifically for this album because that experience also seemed to fit naturally into the relationship I was creating for Me and May. The circumstances in the song belong to them, but the feeling underneath it belongs very much to me.

There's also a moment in the chorus that says something about the way I write now. The singer stretches out the words **“and in her voice...”** almost like a yell. At first I wasn't sure it belonged in such a romantic song. The safer choice probably would have been something gentler.

But I left it alone.

I've reached a point where I try to trust the instinct that produces something before I start judging it. And afterward I realized why that moment felt right to me. A yell can be primal, and there's plenty that's primal about romantic expression. Sometimes the emotion isn't supposed to be polite.

She Called Me is my favorite song on the album - musically, textually, and especially because underneath Me and May's story is a piece of my own history with my wife.

TRACK 06 / MAY

In a Girl's Room

The song

May lies awake confronting a relationship she didn't realize was falling apart. Dreams of tenderness collide with the things she is beginning to understand, leaving her caught between wanting him and wishing she'd stayed away. Alone in her room, she waits for some kind of sign while heartbreak arrives sooner than she expected.

Behind the song

You're probably not going to believe where this one started.

When I was teaching high school, I started a music technology/songwriting class. I had a choir student whom I thought might someday grow into a country singer, and it occurred to me that the songwriting class might be a good place to explore that. The beginning of *In a Girl's Room* came directly out of that class, essentially as an exercise.

We never finished the song, but I liked what we had, so into the box of treasures it went.

Years later, while digging through old material for this album, I came across it again and immediately thought it belonged here. The central image still worked for me: a girl alone in her room, trying to make sense of what's happening in her relationship. It could just as easily have been a boy in his room. That's what makes the idea universal. At some point, most of us have been alone in a room trying to figure out another person - or ourselves.

So I finished the lyrics and gave the song to May.

The musical decision was a little less predictable. I wanted to see what would happen if I combined **country and reggae**. On paper that may sound like an odd marriage, but I think it came out remarkably well. The reggae influence gives the song room to breathe and lets May tell the story without hurrying it along.

And after all, **who can be sad when the song is reggae flavored?**

What began as an exercise in a high-school songwriting class waited all those years for May to walk into the room and finish the story.

TRACK 07 / ME

Your Side of the Record

The song

Me is willing to admit that May has her own version of how their relationship fell apart - but that doesn't mean he's going to agree with it. With guitar in hand, he turns their breakup into his own song, mixing self-awareness with plenty of attitude about May and the man who came after him. He may play her side of the record, but he makes one thing clear - **it's not his song.**

Behind the song

The title just popped into my head, which is always a good place for me to start. I liked *Your Side of the Record* immediately. It sounded like a country song before I'd written a word of it.

I also thought the title gave me a natural way to tell both sides of the relationship in the same song. There was *your* side of the record, which suggested there ought to be *my* side as well. That was the plan, anyway.

Then Me took over.

Instead of giving us some thoughtful examination of two people's versions of a breakup, he essentially decided, "It's all right. We can break up. I play guitar. I'm good."

So much for my plan.

That's one of the things I love about the song. Me isn't exactly devastated, but I'm not sure he's particularly enlightened either. He's perfectly capable of acknowledging her version of what happened - as long as he doesn't have to make it his own. That's really the whole song in one line: **"It's your side of the record, but it's not my song."**

And by the end, he's even managed to convince himself that he's glad someone else came along.

Musically, the arrangement followed the personality of the lyric. It's quirky, energetic and has a little swagger to it. I wanted it to be fun, and I wanted the humor to come from the character rather than from turning the song into a joke.

One of my favorite things about *Your Side of the Record* is that, in the end, **it doesn't make either character look particularly good.**

Maybe that's the closest the song ever got to telling both sides after all.

TRACK 08 / MAY

Another Kind of Heartache

The song

May takes to the road after another relationship has ended, hoping that distance might quiet the memories she carries with her. Towns change and miles pass, but the heartbreak keeps finding its way into the passenger seat. By morning, she realizes that letting go of love may take much longer than simply driving away.

Behind the song

I wrote the chorus of this one first.

The girl in the song has a problem: she can't seem to find the right guy. She keeps choosing the wrong kind of man, he leaves, and off she goes chasing after him into the night. By now she knows the routine. Her attitude is almost, **“Here we go again.”**

Every new relationship seems destined to become another kind of heartache, another kind of love mistake. Presumably, somewhere along the way she eventually finds Me - but at this point in her story, she hasn't found the person who breaks the pattern.

What's interesting to me now is what **writing the chorus first** taught me about the way I write.

When I write a chorus before the verses, I already know where I'm going. The verses then have the job of getting me there. There's nothing necessarily wrong with that - plenty of great songs are written that way - but I've come to think it's a weaker method **for me**.

I'm more interested in beginning with a story, an image or a moment and discovering the emotion that comes out of it. If I decide what the emotion is first, I can find myself constructing a story designed to produce it. I'd rather let the characters do something and discover the emotion afterward.

Another Kind of Heartache was written the other way around. I had the emotional destination first and wrote toward it.

Maybe that's appropriate for this particular girl. She already knows where she's going, too.

Here we go again.

TRACK 09 / ME

She Has Her Loneliness

The song

Me watches May hold onto a relationship that has already taught her how it ends. He keeps chasing freedom while she keeps hoping for something real, even though neither seems able to change what comes next. In the end, he gets what he wants - and she is left with what he leaves behind.

Behind the song

Many years ago, I heard a song with a chorus that was only two lines long. I remember liking the song, but what really stayed with me was that two-line chorus. I thought it was an interesting challenge: **could you really make a chorus work with only two lines?**

Years later, *She Has Her Loneliness* gave me the chance to try.

I'm fairly certain those two lines came to me first:

He has his freedom

She has her loneliness

Those two lines are the heart of the chorus. There isn't anywhere for the idea to hide. One person gets what he thinks he wants, and the other is left with what remains.

The rest of the song is really another story about someone leaving someone. I needed a song like that for this album, and it fit naturally into the relationship I was building around Me and May. Once I had the central idea, I remember the story coming fairly easily. I had the situation and simply worked it into song form.

There may be something from my own childhood underneath how naturally that story came to me. Divorce and relationships ending weren't foreign ideas in my family growing up. I can't point to a particular event and say, "That's where this song came from," and I don't think of it as autobiographical. But our experiences inevitably become part of the reservoir we draw from when we tell stories.

What I remember most about writing this one is the simplicity of the challenge. After all the verses and all the details, everything has to arrive at just two lines:

He has his freedom.

She has her loneliness.

TRACK 10 / MAY

Honey, I'm Home

The song

May begins clearing away the noise and rediscovering the ordinary things that make her life feel like her own. With a little swagger and a new way of seeing herself, even the dishes in the sink start looking pretty good. By the time someone familiar comes knocking, May has already discovered the person she most needed to come home to - herself.

Behind the song

This song exists because of my wife.

We were taking a road trip for our anniversary, and it was the first time she'd heard the album straight through. As we drove, I gave her a little play-by-play about the songs and the idea behind Me and May. She particularly noticed the singers. We're both choral musicians, and she loved the moments when I let the background singers really open up and become part of the excitement of the arrangement.

Then we got through the album and she had a question:

Why does the girl always have to be the victim?

Fair question.

She wanted May to have a song where she finally realizes that maybe **he's the one with the problem and she's doing just fine**. Coincidentally, we'd recently watched the Helen Reddy biopic, with *I Am Woman* and its “hear me roar” spirit very much at the center of the story. I liked the film, but I didn't want to write a movement song or turn May into a spokesperson for anybody.

I just wanted her to be okay.

As usual, the title came first: *Honey, I'm Home*. I liked turning that familiar phrase around. May isn't announcing herself to somebody waiting inside. It's declarative. **She's home, and it feels right**.

That's why the ordinary things matter - the dog greeting her, the open window, the dishes in the sink, and the mirror telling her she's beautiful. She's rediscovering a life that feels like hers.

Musically, I decided to experiment again, this time combining a **1950s harmonic flavor with a rockabilly drive**. I think it gives May exactly the right amount of swagger without changing what the song really is.

And there's something I particularly like about the way this song entered the Me & May story:

May finally got a song where she stands up for herself because my wife stood up for May.

TRACK 11 / ME

Just Leave Me Lonely

The song

Me has accepted that the relationship is over, but he isn't ready to surrender the memories that came with it. He asks May not to soften the ending with friendship, conversation, or another look that might pull him back in. If loneliness is what remains, he'd rather have that - and one tender lie to remember.

Behind the song

This song has been around for a long time. When I originally wrote it years ago, it was much more of a ballad. I grew up listening to people like David Pack, America and Cat Stevens, and I wanted that kind of heartfelt storytelling - a man talking to a woman **after** the relationship is over.

He's come to terms with where he is, at least somewhat. He's stored away the parts of the relationship he wants to remember, and now, for better or worse, he doesn't want her coming back and changing them. There's something a little odd about that when you think about it. He's essentially saying, **I've figured out how I'm going to remember us. Please leave my memories alone.**

Years later, when I brought the song into this album, another idea arrived.

Grease was a big part of my high-school years, and I've always had vivid memories of Danny and Sandy and the drive-in sequence. Danny's song *Sandy* - the one that begins with him stranded at the drive-in - has always stuck with me. So has that ridiculous animated hot dog jumping around in the bun on the movie screen.

Somewhere along the way I realized I had something similar happening with Me and May. I could almost imagine *Grease* as a country movie, with Me as Danny and May as Sandy. *Just Leave Me Lonely* became Me's Danny song, while *Baby* became May's Sandy song.

Then Motown wandered into the room.

I wanted a song that put the hook right up front, the way so many of those great old records did. Think of the immediacy of something like *Sugar Pie*, *Honey Bunch*: we're not waiting around to find out what the song is about. So I took this older ballad, brought the chorus forward, and let some of that 1950s flavor work its way into the background arrangement.

That's fairly typical of the way I create. I start fixing one thing and another idea occurs to me along the way. Apparently I write songs the same way I do home repairs.

What began years ago as a straightforward ballad eventually became part singer-songwriter, part country, part Motown, part *Grease* - and somehow, to me, it all belongs together.

TRACK 12 / MAY

What We Never Said

The song

May and Me move carefully around each other, filling the quiet with morning routines and everything except the truth. Then a touch, a breath, and an unexpected kiss make the rest of the world disappear for a moment. Morning is waiting to pull them back - but some things can change everything without ever being said.

Behind the song

This song actually came out of the idea for the album itself.

As I began thinking about Me and May through the lens of Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years*, I became interested in something more complicated than a relationship simply succeeding or failing. What if two people wanted different things at different times? What if the real problem was timing - and, even more importantly, they didn't recognize what was going wrong while it was happening?

I knew at that point that I needed a farewell song.

Before I had the song itself, I started thinking about all the times in life when we replay a conversation afterward and think about **what I should have said**. That isn't limited to romantic relationships. It happens in families, business meetings, friendships - everywhere. But for this album, *What We Never Said* seemed like the stronger idea. It wasn't about one person finding the perfect sentence too late. It belonged to both of them.

The chorus came together differently from most of my writing. I had phrases and little snapshots stored up from all kinds of places - other songs perhaps, things I'd heard, fragments of life - and I started throwing them onto the page to see what stuck. They don't necessarily make sense together as a paragraph. They're sensations: a breath, a hand, a whisper, a kiss, a chill, a moment.

Meanwhile, the verses live in the most ordinary parts of a relationship: morning routines, coffee, sugar on the table, the house settling around you.

I didn't consciously set out to create that contrast, but I think it's the essence of the song. **Ordinary life is happening on the outside while something much less orderly is happening inside.**

I originally gave the song to May for a very practical reason: I thought the album needed another important song for her. Me already had a couple of really powerful ones. There wasn't anything cryptic about it. In retrospect, it felt like the perfect choice.

BONUS TRACK / ME

She Needs Someone to Care For

The song

May is left trying to understand how a relationship with years behind it can suddenly be over. Memories pull her backward even as he walks out the door, leaving her to face what comes next alone. What she wants now isn't just somebody new - it's someone who will stay.

Behind the song

This is one of the songs where I don't really remember a particular moment that caused me to write it. It's another song that came out of my old shoebox of material - things I'd written over the years and kept because something about them seemed worth saving.

The song is about divorce, but from a particular point of view. The father has walked out, and the woman is left trying to understand what has just happened. She's not simply angry. She's almost negotiating with herself: **Was it really that bad? How did we get here?** She's trying to make sense of a situation that has already changed her life.

I can't say that the story came directly from my own family, but divorce certainly wasn't an unfamiliar subject to me growing up. My father was married five times. Whether any particular experience found its way into this song, I really don't know. But those things become part of what you know about people and relationships, and inevitably some of that finds its way into the stories you tell.

That's really where this song lives for me: not in the leaving itself, but in the person left behind trying to make sense of it.

TWO VOICES. TWO SIDES.

The emotional journey

Me remembers. May questions.

TRACKS 1-2

He remembers how easily it all began. She wants forever, but already wonders whether it can last.

Me believes. May feels it slipping.

TRACKS 3-4

He can still find the love they started with. She can feel something between them disappearing.

Me feels connected. May feels alone.

TRACKS 5-6

For Me, hearing her voice makes the miles disappear. May is alone with questions he may not even know she's asking.

Me tells his version. May lives hers.

TRACKS 7-8

He turns the breakup into a song. She takes hers onto the road - and discovers that leaving doesn't necessarily mean letting go.

Me says she's lonely. May says she's home.

TRACKS 9-10

He thinks he knows what the ending has left her with. May has a rather different answer.

Me asks to be lonely. May leaves us with what was never said.

TRACKS 11-12

He's left protecting the memories he still has. And May brings their story to an ending that may - or may not - be an ending at all.

SHE SAID, I SAID

Album credits

Lyrics

Paul Wargo

Music

Paul Wargo and May Callahan

Music arrangements

Paul Wargo, May Callahan & Snap Callahan

Special thanks

To the many musicians who made this happen and to the city of Nashville.