



## AMANDA SHIRES

KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING  
BY KATIE CHOW

Texas-bred and Tennessee-based, with half her life spent on the road, home has meant a lot of things to Amanda Shires. On her latest album *My Piece Of Land*, the singer/songwriter/violinist stakes her claim on uncharted territory.

On first listen, her new songs are noticeably pared down from 2013's *Down Fell The Doves*, with instrumentation kept to a minimum on tracks like album opener "The Way It Dimmed" and "Harmless."

"On the *Down Fell The Doves* record, I kind of enforced my will on it and was more into trying different things and was more experimental," Shires says. "By the time I got into the studio with Dave Cobb, I had worked with him before and understood how he worked, and he likes to bring in the songs without demos so none of us know them very well. It keeps you from being married to things. If you practice the songs out and play them out, then they become kind of set. If you bring them to Dave and you work on them together, you stay more true to what the center of the song is."

Shires previously worked with the producer on her husband Jason Isbell's albums *Southeastern* and *Something More Than Free*, as well as a pair of covers the Americana power couple released as the *Sea Songs* EP. On her own material, paring things back puts her evocative vocals – and words – on full display.

Shires' striking, detail-oriented writing can't be confined to just one medium; she's currently finishing an MFA in creative writing at Sewanee. The collection of poems that she'll be submitting as her thesis will include lyrics to songs that didn't make it onto *My Piece Of Land*.

"Songwriting and poetry, they're such different animals," Shires says. "You can learn things that would also apply. I just feel that when I'm editing my songs now, I feel more strongly about my word choices. Even with prepositions, it's like, 'No, not exactly that one.' It's a little bit tedious, but I think that when you're writing, even really tiny, small things can open a song up to be tighter. It can make your ideas more clear, that what you're presenting is tighter and cleaner and more precise."

*My Piece Of Land* is particularly striking in capturing a brief but powerful time of productivity for Shires, who started writing the album last July while seven months pregnant and finished the bulk of recording the next month, just a few days before giving birth. It's an intimate portrait of the artist on the brink of a major life change, isolated while Isbell was still on the road and smothered by the relentless Southern summer heat.

"In the middle of it, I didn't see the end of it," Shires says. "I was like, 'Is this what my life's become? Am I just stuck here at the house?' It turns out that's not true, you end up having a baby and life continues on. You think a lot of crazy things while you're pregnant, you get anxieties about your life and it could be anything, really. The pregnant mind is a crazy mind. It was strange, it was really strange."

Her daughter, now a year old, stands to inherit a unique time capsule of Shires' life as she processed a future of balancing touring and parenthood.

"I haven't spent a whole lot of time apart from her," she says of her baby. "But it's good for us both, because I want to be someone where when she grows up, she can think, 'Oh, I can have a

child and have a career and still have a good life.'"

After years of marriage and touring, Shires and Isbell make a fine team on much more than parenting. The two co-wrote "Pale Fire" and album centerpiece "My Love/The Storm," the couple's first full collaborations together.

"We've been married almost five years, and when we got together, we'd write on separate sides of the house," she says. "It's kind of like being in a candy store – you know you could write with him or you could write by yourself, but we were sort of saving it for later. You don't want to eat all of the candy at once."

Even without a writing credit, Isbell's presence is perhaps most potently felt on the bracing album closer "You Are My Home," from which *My Piece Of Land* takes its title.

"I've found that home is the people you surround yourself with," Shires says. "The house you live in can be your home, or your tent or whatever, but when that idea came up, I was just thinking, 'It doesn't matter where I live with my husband, because no matter where we go, we're having a good time and we're together.' So for me, home isn't in our house or home isn't on the road, because when we're separated, it sure doesn't feel like home in the house. To me, home is with my person, and he's my person."

There is nothing abstract about the track. It's just a pure, powerful expression of her love for her husband, punctuated by urgent violin stabs and a searing guitar solo.

"I try to get as personal as I can," Shires says. "I feel like as time goes on, I gain new experiences and things to talk about, and I hope that people can connect with that. And if not, maybe they'd just like to be friends and hang out." ★