

YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO SOUTHERN CULTURE

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Family Harmony

Amanda Shires returns with a new album steeped in the rhythms of home

by MATT HENDRICKSON

IN TUNE

Singer-songwriter Amanda Shires, photographed outside Nashville.

Hair and makeup by Marwa Bashir

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photographs by DAVID McCLISTER

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AMANDA SHIRES OFFERS A WARM GREETING AS SHE opens the door to the house she shares with her husband, the musician Jason Isbell. At first glance, their place looks like many chockablock Nashville subdivision homes built with standard-issue bricks and vanilla-colored trim. But inside, the decoration reveals their rock-and-roll reality, which these days is equal parts walk-and-roll. While a giant rack of guitars lines the dining area and Isbell's two Grammys adorn the fireplace mantel in the living room, a bowl with stuffed animals sits next to a brightly colored cart that the couple's one-year-old daughter, Mercy, often pushes as she learns to teeter about. ¶ Dressed in a light red blouse with flowers and black jeans cuffed just above her bare feet, Shires fires up the coffeemaker and heads to the small back porch. It's a little after 11:00 a.m., and Mercy is upstairs taking a nap, this after what has become

her now-regular ten to twelve hours of sleep a night. "It's such a game changer," Shires says of Mercy's new schedule, laughing. "I don't know how we survived the first six weeks."

Motherhood figures prominently in Shires's new solo album, *My Piece of Land*, a tender, compact collection of ten songs, most of which she wrote in July of last year, alone in the house and seven months pregnant, while Isbell was on the road. "I had so much anxiety, and was thinking, like a lot of women do, 'He's going to find another girl who isn't fat and pregnant. Off he goes...'" she trails off. "Being pregnant makes you crazy." The song "Nursery Rhyme" is a jittery greeting to Mercy, and one of the album's highlights, the pensive "Slippin'," tackles those feelings of lonely despair and Shires's worries of losing Isbell—whose return to sobriety nearly five years ago has been well documented—to temptation while on tour. "My fear was what if Jason falls off the wagon and then our marriage is crumbling and I have a baby," she says. "You never know when there might be a trigger. Every day for him is a test. Nothing is permanent, even though you want it to be."

Born in Lubbock, Texas, Shires earned her stripes as a fiddle player accompanying the Texas Playboys when she was just fifteen, eventually touring and recording with artists that included Ryan Adams, John Prine, and Justin Townes Earle, as well as Isbell. She's become an insightful, vivid writer as a solo artist, able to wring rich detail out of just a line or two. "I've learned exactly which of the floorboards groan and how the AC exhales when it kicks on," she

sings on the jangly rocker "When You're Gone." Much of her prowess comes from her work toward an MFA in poetry from the Sewanee School of Letters. "Going there made me more precise," she says. "Even down to just prepositions or articles."

My Piece of Land was produced by the sought-after Dave Cobb and recorded at Cobb's Nashville home studio, Low Country Sound, where Isbell cut his 2013 breakthrough, *Southeastern*. Although the recording took place in the days prior to Mercy's birth, Shires remained fully engaged. "She has amazing lyrics, but I love the way her songs feel," Cobb says. "Even in the deepest moment, there's hope. She really writes like she is as a person."

A storm has kicked up, so Shires heads inside to see if Mercy has awakened. Isbell has just finished a stint on the elliptical machine. "Hey

PACKING A PUNCH

The Texas native, fiddle player, and new mom heads out on tour this fall.

baby, I think I just wrote a song," he says casually, as if telling her he had just taken out the trash. "Oh, that's great," Shires says. "Can't wait to hear it." The two have become trusted sounding boards for each other's songwriting, though it's taken some time to develop. "We're getting more comfortable showing each other our work," Shires says. "Criticism can be hard, but we have the best intentions. We're good at calling each other out on stuff."

Mercy is as precious as advertised by her mother, with a full head of wispy brown hair and bulging cheeks above a radiant smile. This fall, the three will literally move to their own piece of land, a farmhouse on eight acres south of Nashville, before heading out on separate tours. Mercy will ride with Isbell and a nanny on a tour bus while Shires travels cross-country in a van. "I'm not terrified," Isbell says, with his trademark deadpan humor. "But in reality I'm more terrified for Amanda."

Shires, who will go as long as three weeks at a time without seeing them, is steeling herself mentally for being apart. But maybe there's some comfort to be found in her own words from *My Piece of Land*'s last song, "You Are My Home." The album swells to an emotional peak, with Shires playing a mournful fiddle and Isbell firing off a soaring electric guitar solo, and the song is an affirmation that her "home" is now much more than an address. "It's not the places that you miss," she says. "For me it's being here and present. With my family." ©

