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Amy Cook interview: Comfortable in her own Summer Skin

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So here's the thing. If fleeting moments of accidental brilliance can provide us with "revolutionary" contraptions to locate car keys, turn on lights with applause and uh, speedily "transfer" certain beverages from inert containers to organic ones – all *important* mind you – wouldn't you think that *someone* would have devised a device to divine exceptional new music by now?

Between social media, the internet and "antiquated" distribution methods, even the most *casual* fan is literally bombarded with a daily dose of musical…*stuff*. The trick of course is to somehow pan through the ordinary "grit" to get to the nuggets.

And once in a great while, you hit the mother lode – gifted singer/songwriter Amy Cook's golden new release *Summer Skin* for instance. A first listen to the remarkable record from the California-bred, Austin-based Cook may leave you at a loss for words. But don't fret, here's one you can use – *wow*.

It's not easy to fuse a connection between the heartstrings and the hipbone, to bridge the emotional intensity of a singer/songwriter and the effortless swagger of a born rocker. But that's *exactly* what Cook manages to do on the new effort – and *has* been doing for more than a decade – winning over fans with tunes that not only connect, but also attach themselves to the very heart of pleasure.

Cook explores both sides of that melodic coin on *Summer Skin*, getting by with a little help from a remarkable group of musical friends: Bassist Me'Shell N'Degeocello, guitarists David Garza and Chris Bruce, and Jonathan Wilson on drums, as well as guests Ben Kweller, Patty Griffin and music legend Robert Plant – who adds instantly recognizable harmonies to the gently atmospheric "It's Gonna Rain" and also appears with Griffin on the moodily rumbling "Airplane Driver."

The exceptional artist has built a dedicated following through years of steady gigging – from coffeehouses to rock clubs, from festival stages to theatres. But even *those* loyal fans will recognize *Summer Skin* for the quantum leap that it is.

As Cook prepared for the stellar record's release, she spent some time with me to discuss her music and career. Truth be told, after listening to *Summer Skin* for the first time, *I* was ready to present her with the Best Kept Secret Grammy – no need for a ballot count. Hence the aforementioned one word album review. Well-deserved critical recognition aside, the upbeat artist was simply pleased to be releasing new music.

"I've been making music for a long time and I just settle into doing it. I'm just trying to figure out how to make the best music I can. Have I made something worthy of 'Wow!', you know what I mean? Maybe you're hearing it now because it's the first time I've made something that is '*wowable*' (laughing)."

"In Austin we have a good public radio station. So we do get exposed to a lot of good music. But I know that as I travel around, that isn't always the case. And the genre thing is hard to work around too – this sub-genre, that sub-genre."

"When I was a kid – when I was a *kid* (laughing) – I'm feeling old lately, I guess. It was pop/rock and it kind of encompassed everything. And if you liked good music, you bought it. And alternative came along and started segregating into sort of a fashion thing. And all of the little sub-genres become little fashion things for people."

"It's funny because all of those things that are really good at the top – like say the top three in every sub-genre – everybody can kind of agree that can be the top forty or whatever. But it's just weird. I don't know how to get around all that."

Too often the word "versatile" is used to describe a performer that, well, isn't really good at *anything*. But Cook has perfected her role as the "rockin' singer/songwriter" – as evidenced by Summer Skin's wonderfully diverse sound. And while this music fan is partial to folk tinged songs, Cook is comfortable traveling down either road.

"I grew up listening to folk music. My dad had all the folk records – Limelighters, Kingston Trio, Joan Baez, Simon and Garfunkel. He was a big folkie. So that's the earliest music I ever listened to. And they all basically fit the pop music that was playing in the day – it was basically light rock. The '60s, '70s and today was the tag line. So that kind of stuff comes easiest."

"But I've always kind of liked Fleetwood Mac and good songs and those kinds of easier melodies. It seemed easiest to me to listen to. The other stuff I got into a little later and I've had to incorporate those things that are a little harder to listen to at first."

Call it whatever you want – Cook makes great music. And while some songwriters may struggle as they navigate between different genres, it's second nature for the extraordinary performer.

"It's hard all the time to write a good song (laughing) in *any* kind of genre. What I really want is not to try to write in a genre. I don't set out to go, 'Okay, now I'm gonna write a folk song,' or 'Now I'm gonna write a pop song.'"

"Like this record, I just wanted to write whatever kind of came to me. My specific thing was, 'Okay, I don't want to worry that this is too Americana or not hip enough.' What I wanted to do was really write what came naturally to me."

"The hardest thing is to try to figure out if you are an amalgamation of everything you've heard before and it's all gonna be derivative of that. What is it that will come out of you if you're just sitting there playing?"

"You just sort of try to write the best song it can be in any of those genres. And for me I like melodies that repeat and I like the pop songs and I like the lyric that is provocative but succinct. Those are my favorite writers."

Summer Skin represents a new plateau for Cook as an artist. Even the incomparable artist recognized the special nature of the new recording, calling it "the happiest I've ever been with anything I've ever recorded." But the "blame" for *Summer Skin*'s genius really lies with lessons learned after her last release, *Let The Light In*.

"After I made the last record, I didn't know quite what to do. I had gone on the road and toured with it and wasn't quite sure what the next move should be. I got together with David Garza who played on the record – who I love – and we kind of went back into my studio and messed around with an eight track and did some weird little recordings."

"Then I decided I was gonna make a record myself on an eight track. And some people convinced me that I should *not* do that (laughing) – that I should actually keep working on it and get somebody to produce it. I met (producer) Craig (Street) and I really liked a lot of stuff that he's done."

"So I had this struggle of what I wanted to do and if I wanted to go through this whole thing and spend this money and everybody's just making their own records and I liked working on the eight track and I like making things myself… I went through this whole thing before I even *started* the process."

"And it turned the tide to go through and make those songs with drum machines and guitars and bass and just playing them and writing. I spent a long time in the back, just kind of drawing on the walls and painting – creating this world."

"I just tried to let go of the preconceptions of what of the next thing should be. It definitely freed me up. It was a really, *really* good experience to have at that time."

Experienced music fans have come to expect that certain artists will put an album's best tunes at the beginning of the record – leaving the listener ill-prepared for the inevitable "musical cliff." But *Summer Skin* starts strong and finishes even stronger, making it one of those cherished albums that you can listen to from beginning to end – with a blissful smile on your face.

"Before we had shuffle on our iPod, a lot of the records I like had a 'built in shuffle.' You could listen to them and it took you somewhere and not every song felt the same. There are a lot of records that I like, where it just puts you in a certain place and it's not about each individual song."

"But a lot of the records that stayed in my mind – a lot of Tom Petty records or Smiths records – each song is a different song and it takes you somewhere else. I wanted to make a record that I would like, that's what I wanted to do. I try to write songs that aren't like each other. And sometimes it's been a little bit of overkill (laughing)."

Vive le différence. Cook definitely practiced what she preached on the brilliantly disparate *Summer Skin*. Too many artists spend their entire careers searching for the right "formula" – something that they can simply replicate over and over and over.

"Yeah. Maybe I never got a formula because nothing's ever worked (laughing), I don't know. Maybe you'll call me back when something works and I start writing everything all the same (laughing)."

"I mean I'm always trying to do something I haven't done before to keep it interesting for me. But, I have people all around me that inspire me to do other things. Austin is full of amazingly talented people that are always working on stuff."

Since I've only been to Austin once, I'm not much of an expert on its populace. But after listening to Amy Cook's *Summer Skin*, I know that there is at least *one* amazingly talented person living there…