



Amy Cook: Summer Skin

By [Steve Horowitz](#) 8 October 2012

Another Great Record from Austin

The weird thing about Amy Cook's latest disc is how normal it sounds at first listen. Her lush, aching country-rock voice resembles that of many other female singers on the FM dial. The dozen tunes are of a conventional length and feature the same basic guitar, bass, drums, instrumentation one hears on many top-selling records. (Cook's backed by such talented musicians as bassist Me'Shell N'Degeocello, guitarists David Garza and Chris Bruce, and drummer Jonathan Wilson.) But the more one hears, the stranger the songs sound. There is more going on than what initially meets the ear.

In Cook's world, airplanes do not fly. They drive down the roads and byways. Cars fly on roads like California's legendary Highway 101. And Cook finds that those who engage in other forms of transportation, well—walking while on fire is a difficult task. These images are spread over three different songs as the one constant on the record is that everything is changing, from the seasons to our skin to our state of mind.

The worst thing a person can do is nothing, Cook notes on "Waiting for the World to End". "The one thing I won't do / Is sit around with you," she complains. Yeah, maybe civilization as we know it will end in self-destruction. Maybe we have no control over the bad things that happen. That's no reason to just hang out. In fact the opposite is true; that is the reason to do something. Still, Cook is cautious. On another song, she puts rocks in her pocket to slow her down because she understands going faster and faster can just leave dizzy by seeing the "Sun Setting Backwards".

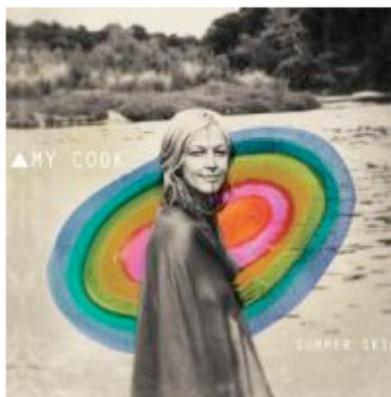
Cook conveys her thoughts and feelings through vocal restraint. Even when she sings loudly about the pain of loss, as in "It's Gonna Rain", it always

sounds like she's holding back. This adds a formal feeling to the pronouncements. And the same is true when she croons about happiness, like on the fable-esque "Levee" as Cook goes from a chorus of "helpless, helpless" to "holy, holy" while singing about family matters. Her ability to keep from yelping or shouting, laughing or crying, while singing about deep emotional matters allows her get as odd as she wants. It's like the way one can say a deeply insulting remark to an authority in a civil tone with clean language, and be complimented for one's positive feedback. While if one just loudly spouted a two-word epithet that begins with an "f", one's opinion would not be considered seriously. The two expressions could be identical in meaning.

Which leads to a mention of the most idiosyncratic tune, "Hello Bunny". At first, this just sounds like a paean to those yard varmints that run through suburban lawns. Soon it turns into a morality tale where mom runs away to the hills, the baby's hooked on pills, and danger lies in the basement. The bunny is advised to get a Bowie knife to literally save her hide from those that would kill her for her skin. The singsong rhythms, light syncopation, and gently sung lyrics belie the violence of the cruel world. The result can simply be called weird: That seems an apt description of a little rabbit, who's prepared to name names and wields a large pointed blade for protection against enemies.

But then again, Cook relocated several years ago from California to Austin, Texas: a city with the motto "Keep Austin Weird". She's a regular performer at Lambert's (Details about the place would only make you drool with hunger), and Cook is joined by an other Austin female demi-goddess, Patty Griffin, on other songs. In fact Griffin's main squeeze, Robert Plant, even joins the action on two tracks. The result? *Summer Skin* seems a seminal Austin product.

Rating: 



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