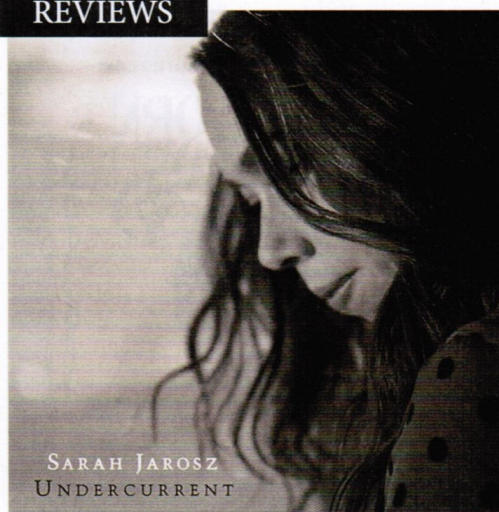


*American*  
**songwriter**  
the craft of music

JULY | AUGUST 2016

REVIEWS



**SARAH JAROSZ**  
**UNDERCURRENT**  
(SUGAR HILL) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

**SINGER/SONGWRITER/MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST**

Sarah Jarosz sounded like an old soul even on her 2009 debut as a precocious and remarkably talented 17-year-old phenomenon. Now, as a grizzled 24 year old on her fourth release, she has more questions than answers. While that's not unusual for anyone her age, those uncertainties about love, life and uncertain paths forward are funneled into compelling folk with hints of country and even subtle pop.

Vocally, Jarosz has become additionally nuanced, potent and confident after recently graduating from the New England Conservatory of Music. Her restrained hooks on the angry "House Of Mercy," where she dismisses what seems to be an over-eager suiter, shift the mood from tender to tough through modulations in the music and her supple voice.

Although the nearly all-acoustic album (only a few selections have understated electric guitar) is often stripped to just Jarosz (who plays octave mandolin, guitar and banjo) the spare instrumentation spotlights the singer's vocals, lyrics and tunes that float on beds of finger-picked chords. Tour mates Aoife O'Donovan and Sara Watkins make occasional appearances, most impressively on "Still Life," a somber yet vibrant ballad that wonders about a relationship ("Have I lost myself to lust/ Is there anyone that I can trust?"). But this is clearly the work of Jarosz, who doesn't need much assistance.

Jarosz is a talented player but she minimizes her instrumental contributions; that move highlights these splendid songs, vocals and lyrics, like those on the stark "Lost Dog," which uses the titular animal as a metaphor for life accompanied by basic banjo. The tracks are more compelling and effective with the nominal accompaniment Jarosz applies.

The result is a frequently brooding album, personal and reflective with beautifully conceived words and melodies ripe for repeated listens. Nothing is forced or rushed on this generally contemplative set but, as the title implies, its powerful undercurrents will draw you in. — HAL HOROWITZ