

ARTS IN REVIEW

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MUSIC

An Economical Approach to Passion

By JIM FUSILLI

On her new album “Undercurrent” (Sugar Hill), out this week, singer-composer Sarah Jarosz prizes simplicity, presenting her latest country-flavored folk songs in an intimate environment. Moving away from the verdant, experimental arrangements of her 2013 Grammy-nominated “Build Me Up From Bones,” the 25-year-old performs four songs accompanied only by her guitar. On four others, she’s joined only by Mark Schatz’s upright bass and the guitar of either Jedd Hughes or Luke Reynolds. On all, her soprano remains pure and affecting.

This economical approach brings the listener closer to Ms. Jarosz than on any of her previous recordings, and it suits the lyrical theme of passion that, mostly, is forbidden and unrequited. Love can satisfy, Ms. Jarosz states through “Undercurrent,” but not for long. In “Everything to Hide,” she sings: “Well, I never really thought I could be a child of sin” and “When I’m with you, baby, we got everything to hide.” (That phrase, “child of sin,” also appears later in the album in the song “Still Life.”) In “Lost Dog,” she sings: “Home’s not a word you say / Something made you stray,” adding, “If I open my door, make you my friend / Are you gonna run out and get lost again?” She refuses to dilute the raw sentiments with gloss or misdirection. As she mentioned during a phone conversation last week, “I realized the meaning behind a lot of the songs would be made more powerful if they were these



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Sarah Jarosz’s new album, ‘Undercurrent,’ is out this week.

solitary things.”

Ms. Jarosz recorded her debut album, the folk-and-bluegrass-based “Song Up in Her Head,” for Sugar Hill while still in high school in Wimberley, Texas, about an hour southwest of Austin. Rather than go out on the road full-time, Ms. Jarosz chose to attend the New England Conservatory of Music to, as she said, “open my ears and incorporate what I heard into my music. I wanted an expanded knowledge of sounds for the greater good of the songs.” She graduated with a degree in Contemporary Improvisation in 2013, shortly before “Build Me Up From Bones” was released.

On that album, Ms. Jarosz revealed how much she could integrate into her core sound. Her guests included mandolinist Chris Thile, cellist Nathaniel Smith, and Jerry Douglas on dobro; Ms. Jarosz played clawhammer banjo on one tune, and on Bob Dylan’s “Simple Twist of Fate” she sang accompanied only by Mr. Smith, who plucked his cello as if it were

an upright bass. The overall effect was a somewhat exotic sonic landscape within the context of Americana, and yet she remained the controlling hand at its center.

A growth step for Ms. Jarosz, “Build Me Up From Bone” brought her much-warranted recognition: In addition to being nominated for a Best Folk Album Grammy, it was also up for the Best Album prize at the Americana Music Association’s annual Honors & Awards gala. (That year, “My Favorite Picture of You” by Guy Clark, who died last month, won the Grammy in the folk category while Jason Isbell’s “Southeastern” received the AMA’s award for best album.) Thus, it might have been expected that she would do something similar as a follow-up.

But Ms. Jarosz said she felt a newfound freedom in the notion that what became “Undercurrent” would be her first album after graduating. While recording for two months last fall in Nashville, she fought off

the temptation to repeat herself. Parker Millsap joins her on “Comin’ Undone,” the closest “Undercurrent” comes to rocking out, and “Still Life” features friends Aoife O’Donovan and Sara Watkins, with whom Ms. Jarosz toured last year as the trio I’m With Her, but she remained firm. The solo and near-solo renditions of her latest compositions “felt truest to me,” she said. “It was so essential to keep simplicity intact.”

While the arrangements may be simple, there is a kind of conspiratorial complexity to her stories. Repeatedly, Ms. Jarosz lays out a sketch in which the listener becomes a partner in exploring the song’s meaning. In “Take Another Turn,” she asks: “What does it mean to be lonely?” While she says memory provides a balm, she doesn’t answer the question. In “Jacqueline,” Ms. Jarosz plucks an electric guitar as she unreels a song that uses what one assumes is the image of Jacqueline Kennedy in “your pillbox hat and your pink dress.” The significance of her appearance is anything but explicit.

Ms. Jarosz began her American tour on Sunday, and it will run into mid-August before she heads to the U.K. She said she will play by herself and with Mr. Hughes on guitar and Jeff Picker on bass. She intends to present the songs of “Undercurrent” as they are on the album: direct, unadorned and thoroughly beautiful.

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