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MAKING ROOM

Amanda Shires brings expansive skills and new sounds on *To the Sunset*

BY BRITTNEY MCKENNA

When Virginia Woolf wrote that securing “a room of one’s own” was a requirement for a woman to write fiction, she didn’t specify the size or shape of the room in question. So Amanda Shires writing songs—fiction’s distant cousins, which deal in both facts and emotional truths—in her bedroom closet seems well within the scope of that still-relevant piece of writerly advice. And that’s precisely how Shires came up with the bulk of her stunning new album *To the Sunset*, out on Friday.

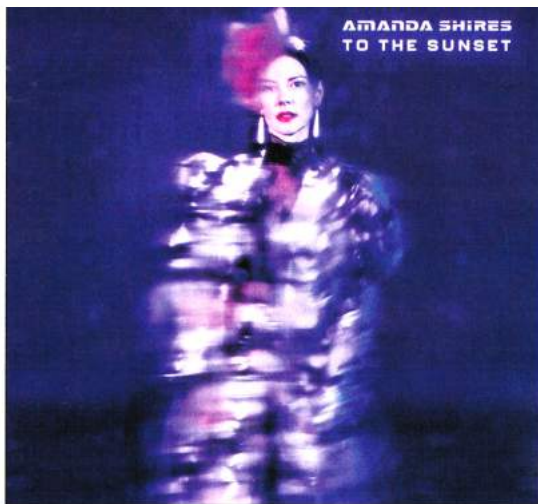
“I started writing in my little space with my desk and everything, and that wasn’t working out too well, because every time I’d try to play a song, my daughter of course wanted to jam out, too, and play her harmonica in the wrong key,” Shires tells the *Scene* via phone, calling during a rare bit of downtime at home. “My whole process for writing changed.”

Shires dragged everything she needed—“all of my instruments and my papers and my paper shredder”—into her clothes closet, shut the door and sat down to work, often for 10 or 12 hours at a time. When she gave her a way to visualize her writing progress and also protected against, as she describes it, “crayons and tearing from happening.” It also, as she explains it, became an exercise in vulnerability and self-acceptance.

“Doing that, taping things up to the wall, was really hard, because I live with another songwriter, my husband,” she says. “I’m not looking for criticism early on. But in the end I feel like I gained a lot more confidence in my own process and style of writing, and a little bit more self-acceptance and whatnot.”

Shires and her husband and fellow songwriter Jason Isbell live just outside Nashville with their daughter Mercy, who was born in 2015. The couple have been together since 2011, and they’ve been frequent musical collaborators, writing songs together, performing on each other’s albums and sharing the stage many times. But Shires’ creative process is its own thing, and she says she shares her songs with Isbell only once they feel complete.

To the Sunset, Shires’ sixth full-length album, follows her critically acclaimed 2016 release *My Piece of Land*. That collection has brought Shires, who had initially carved a niche for herself playing fiddle, heaps of well-deserved respect for her songwriting. *My Piece of Land* also played a role in her being named 2017 Emerging Artist of the Year at the Americana Music Association Honors and Awards. While the two albums do share



similarities—poetic lyrics, subtly acrobatic vocal performances—they are markedly different in sound. Both were produced by Dave Cobb, but while *My Piece of Land*’s primarily acoustic arrangements served as a bare-bones soundtrack for Shires’ inner world, *To the Sunset* finds Shires building brand-new worlds from scratch.

“When I got the collection of songs I

and asked him if he would go to lunch with me so I could talk to him about the direction, and if we could pull it off,” she says. “I’m not a technical person. I’m not good at the technical parts of recording. So when I explained it to him in my own way, I feel like he was able to translate that into the sounds that I was looking for, and would also find new ones I wasn’t expecting.”

Sunset’s opening track “Parking Lot Pirouette” is one of the best songs describing the delicate balance in a relationship that has ever come out of Music City. It begins with a haze of electronic blips and soulful electric piano, and Shires’ voice comes in gently before soaring into the chorus. Needles of electric guitar pierce the wall of sound throughout the song, reverb occasionally accentuating the natural trill in Shires’ voice. A run-of-the-mill Americana song this is not, and her working method in-

self,” says Shires. “In a lot of ways, I just started hearing noises [laughs]. Then I’d try in my own way to describe a guitar tone or try to think of ways to compare it, like, ‘I kind of hear a musical-saw sound, or wind in my brain.’”

Shires has a kind of writer’s brain that never stops scavenging, and she’s an avid journal keeper. A stray piece of dialogue or the ring of distant wind chimes can just as easily prove fodder for a song as can a meaningful personal experience.

“You do want to have those things at your fingertips so you can try to sort the world out for yourself, and hopefully for others,” she says.

Some of the scraps Shires has collected over the past few years were inspired by the current social and political climate. Shires has long been an advocate for women’s representation in music. “You have to be twice as good because it’s a patriarchal setup,” she told the *Scene*’s Steven Hule in an interview last year, “and they [pit] you against one another because there’s only one spot—so the competition, it’s rigged.” Several songs on *To the Sunset* explore the experiences of women, including “White Feather,” which starts with the narrator trading clothes with a scarecrow.

“In that song I was thinking, ‘Man, God or Jesus or whoever is up there is just laughing their asses off at us, because we aren’t doing anything, and we’re not paying any atten-

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tion," Shires says. "In the first part, I got the idea when I was at a gas station during the presidential campaign, during all the pussy talk and stupid crap, and I started realizing that at that gas station, the level of catcalling has gone up now. It's become OK to treat women a certain way or for people to talk a certain way. ... I thought, 'How badass would it be if I could just put on that person's clothes, be that person for a day? Would I treat somebody that way?' And the answer is no, because I know my own experience.

"Now I'm getting existential. Crap!" she says, laughing.

Shires' "oh crap" existentialism is one of her greatest assets as a writer. Her penchant for reflection and soul-searching means her own past work is fair game for new material, too. Accordingly, another standout track on *To the Sunset* is "Swimmer," a reworking of her 2011 *Carrying Lightning* song "Swimmer ...," an intimate look at a close relationship that's slipping away. In its new incarnation, the song retains its lyrics and melody, but trades banjo and acoustic guitar for warm keys and electronic flourishes. It's an object lesson in the lifespan of a song, which remains a living, breathing thing long after being cut to tape.

"That song is still very important to me," Shires says. "I wrote that song a long time ago. That whole situation and those images are as fresh today as they were then, and it's not something I'm ready to let go of."

Shires' experience earning a Master of Fine Arts degree in poetry from the Sewanee School of Letters also affected her approach to songwriting. While there, she participated in a workshop-style curriculum that, like a far more intense version of taping lyrics to her closet wall, left her vulnerable to the critiques and opinions of her professors and fellow MFA candidates.

"It really keeps you in a place in your mind where you can really identify the problems that are on the page," she says. "I had a professor that would make people cry. Sometimes he would lay his head on the table and just start fake snoring. If you need to learn quick, that's the way to do it. It also proves to you if you have the stomach for it, if you can take the criticism. Once it's out there, it's not yours anymore."

Shires will headline the Ryman for the first time Aug. 12, just a week and change after giving up her new songs to others' ears. She has already performed at the Mother Church plenty of times as a support act or a sideperson, as well as the night she won that coveted Americana trophy. This time will be different, though.

"Never in a million years when I moved up here and became a waitress would I have thought I'd get to play my own songs there," she says. "I thought I would do it as a fiddle player, because I'm not bad at the fiddle, but my own songs? For real? What if nobody comes? That's going to be so awkward! Even if I fall down or get a run in my tights, it's still gonna be a fun time."

For a night, the Ryman will be another room of Shires' own.

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