



The Ticket



Music
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Amanda Shires finds her new right thing

New album embraces pop-rock sound, synthesizers and effects pedals

"Look how big this is."

Singer-songwriter Amanda Shires points to a shaky video on her phone of a finger-sized green hornworm creeping along a vine. "It turns into a moth the size of a hummingbird. Ate my tomato plants in four days, him and his stupid buddies."

If the pests in Shires' garden are the most well-nourished worms in Middle Tennessee, she has only herself to blame. While working on her latest album, she ran her rejected songs through a paper shredder and added the fragments to the compost pile that feeds her plants.

The songs that escaped the shredder became her new album, "To the Sunset." The record finds Shires — whose music career began more than 20 years ago as a teenage fiddle player with venerable Western swing outfit The Texas Playboys — embracing a pop-rock sound, synthesizers and effects pedals.

Singer-songwriter and violin player Amanda Shires has a new album, "To the Sunset," which is scheduled to be released today.

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Shires

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For Shires, songwriting requires quiet and solitude, scarce resources when there's a toddler — Mercy, her two-year-old daughter with husband Jason Isbell — underfoot.

"I love to (make music) with her, but she kind of plays out of key, and way off-tempo," she joked one recent morning at 1892, a restaurant in Leiper's Fork. "It just wasn't working."

So to write "To the Sunset," Shires locked herself in a closet with an auto-harp and a stack of notebooks. For days.

"Being in that small space for 10 to 12 hours a day, I just started hearing sounds," she said, then clarified: sounds reminiscent of classic recordings by R.E.M. and The Pretenders.

When working on previous records, potential songs stayed in a desk drawer until she deemed them ready for other eyes. This time, she stuck her in-progress work to the walls with blue painter's tape because there was nowhere to hide it.

"The idea of someone seeing your process is the most intimate thing ever. It's like (they're) seeing the insides of you, not just your body and skin," said Shires.

'Break out the champagne'

Last year, she earned her MFA in poetry from the Sewanee School of Letters, defending her thesis via Skype while on tour with John Prine. On "To the Sunset," she wields words as deftly as her fiddle bow, addressing topics like abandonment, mental illness and near-death experiences.

A year ago, her mother retired and moved from Texas to Tennessee. Their subsequent conversations inspired sev-

eral songs on "To the Sunset," including the scorching "Eve's Daughter" and reflective "Charms," on which Shires

sighs, "I'm darin' to do what she couldn't do / Gonna stay and make different mistakes / Isn't it just like a daughter to

throw it in your face?"

"I was looking to talk about the things that concern me, and also try and find some way to make it lighter, because everything is so dark right now to me," said Shires of the album's sound.

"Break Out the Champagne," the album's standout track, is simultaneously its darkest and lightest. Shires wryly sings about apocalypse, an emergency plane landing and a devastating breakup ("all the ways you think the world is ending all around you," she explains) over peppy guitar riffs. The chorus reveals that, were the world actually ending, she would be a fun companion during those final moments: "Break out the champagne, everybody look out below...Here goes a toast: Adios!"

The right thing

Like her last record, 2016's "My Piece of Land," "Sunset" was produced by red-hot producer Dave Cobb, who encouraged Shires to experiment with pedals and other new-to-her sounds.

"First I was like, 'No. None of this cheesy bulls--,'" said Shires. "But he has a way of making things work, showing you how things work and making it feel OK to make a bunch of terrible, terrible sounding things until you find the right thing."

With "To the Sunset," she's found the right thing, and come into her own as a writer and musician.

On Aug. 12, she'll perform at the Ryman Auditorium. The concert, which will also feature singer-songwriter Caitlin Rose, is part of the "Americana at the Ryman" summer series. Shires has played there several times before (and will again in October) with Isbell and the 400 Unit, and as an opening act, but this will be her first headlining date at the historic venue.

She marvels, "Isn't that crazy? What else do you need? Nothin'."

If you go

What: Americana at the Ryman: Amanda Shires and Caitlin Rose

When: 7:30 p.m. Aug. 12

Where: Ryman Auditorium (116 5th Ave. N)

Tickets: \$40.50, ryman.com



Amanda Shires, photographed July 9 in Leipers Fork.

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