

NO DEPRESSION

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BEHIND THE SUNSET

Amanda Shires on where poetry and music merge

by Erin Lyndal Martin

“Nothing helps more than poetry workshops and professors that aren’t scared to tell you where your problems are.”

Amanda Shires



ON AMANDA SHIRES’ LATEST album, *To the Sunset*, her songs tell stories of family strife, plane crashes, and romantic disasters. Shires tells these tales with sharply detailed imagery of ordinary things like parking lots, charm bracelets, and cameras. The songs belong neither to the realm of the hyper-real or the fantastical. Rather, her songs are succinct, melodic tutorials about making sense of one’s struggles through musical re-imaginings. Given Shires’ lyrical acumen, it’s unsurprising that the songwriter loves poetry. She reads Shel Silverstein to her daughter, quotes Philip Larkin when describing parenthood, and regularly looks up recordings of poets reading their work. Yet, it’s still noteworthy that an established singer-songwriter-multi-instrumentalist of Shires’ caliber would go back to school to get an advanced degree, a Master of Fine Arts, in poetry.

Shires enrolled in the M.F.A. program at Tennessee’s Sewanee: The

University of the South, completing her degree in 2017. Her undergraduate studies at Texas Tech encompassed sociology, geography, and urban planning. Wanting to write with greater precision gave her the drive to seek out an M.F.A., she says, cringing when she talks about her early poetry.

“I wanted to figure out how to write with more than just instinct and because also instinctively I knew that I could be better if I could study more. Nothing helps more than poetry workshops and professors that aren’t scared to tell you where your problems are,” she says by phone from her home in Nashville.

Andrew Hudgins, Shires’ professor, remembers that the singer’s musical background gave her an impressive ear for rhythm and language. “In class, her experience as a songwriter and her knowledge of music stood her in good stead. Like any serious professional who wants to improve, she wanted and sought out criticism. The engagement

with poetry not only made her a good poet but helped her songwriting, too.”

Since earning this degree, Shires feels that she can identify problems with clichés, tone, and diction more easily and even choose the best preposition more quickly. Workshops also improved her editing process. “I have these voices in my head from my professors saying, ‘If you’re going to mix your metaphors, you better have a good reason for doing that.’ I like having the strength to be able to defend the choices that I make on the page. Not just the strength, but the confidence.”

The M.F.A. experience made Shires hold herself to a higher standard while writing *To the Sunset*, released in 2018. In particular, she says, she sought to improve metaphors and imagery in her lyrics. For Shires, poetry helped her “cut the fat” in her lyrics. “There’s not as many ‘and, but, for, nor, or’s’ and there’s not as many filler words. If you just read the words on the page, there’s not a lot of trying to fill the tempo like

Autumn Tritina

Autumn sneaks in, into the leaves
of trees and busts the summer open
proving it mortal. Before me, my path

resumes. Lined with naked vines, my path
is worn and smoothed, a road that leaves
perpetually. I'm going again to open

old wounds among strangers in open
rooms, singing. I feel the pull of the path,
its drawing and drag, the trailing leaves —

leaves waving open-handed and the path, apathetic

— Amanda Shires

the words and phrasings that you use to hit the beats." Writing poetry has made Shires especially conscious of choosing significant words, not just eating up syllables to make the melody work.

Poetry introduced Shires to a realm of constraints that presented new challenges, such as poetic forms. Shires enjoyed the challenge and even wrote a tritina, an especially difficult eight-line form with strict rules about repetition and rhyme. Hudgins was impressed. "Her thesis contained a [tritina] that was so good I send it to Adam Vines, who snapped it up to publish in the *Birmingham Poetry Review*. I've certainly never written [one] half that good, and her experience with music and songwriting obviously gave her insight into how such a musical form with so much repetition should work."

While Shires enjoys the sparse nature of poetry that forces meaning on every word, she's also drawn to the way songwriting allows her to deviate from so much literal significance. "In poetry you have your words and a piece of paper. In songs, you have the sonic landscape to use and then you can also

sing words like 'la la la.' Like, for example, I love this Nathan [iel] Rateliff song from his *In Memory of Loss* record called 'You Should've Seen the Other Guy.' There's one part where he's wailing and I feel something and those aren't words."

Lines and Lyrics

Singling out the poetry in Shires' songs isn't to discount her musicianship (fiddle, ukulele, and Mellotron), voice, and sense of melody. Poetry and music have both been key in Shires' life since childhood, with Shires acquiring her first violin at age 10. Her first solo release, 2005's *Being Brave*, is mostly instrumental songs, her country fiddling the main focus. Shires quietly worked at her singing, songwriting, and fiddling, and subsequent albums got her more critical acclaim. It wasn't until 2016's *My Piece of Land* that larger audiences began to recognize her on her own merit, not merely for being Jason Isbell's wife or a member of his band, The 400 Unit. The album, masterfully produced by Dave Cobb, showcases the

intimate warble of Shires' voice with unexpected lyric imagery, and in 2017, she received the Americana Music Association's Emerging Artist Award.

There's definitely something writerly in how her songs are informed by autobiography but not taken over by it. In "Charms," on *To the Sunset*, Shires works through anxieties about her own mother and motherhood. "My mom gave me her gold charm bracelet when she left me on my own / I can't remember what the charms were or the color of the stone," the lyrics open. By the chorus, Shires muses "Maybe bein' human is an orphan condition and what's missin' isn't meant to be found," expanding the theme to a universal one. Elsewhere on that album, "Wasn't I Paying Attention?" is an up-tempo, devastating song about a man's addiction, and it's heartbreaking to know part of her is singing about husband Isbell's struggle with alcoholism. In "Break Out the Champagne," one verse reimagines a scene from Shires' plane crash scare when an engine failed at 35,000 feet off the coast of Newfoundland. "In a split second I made an executive decision / I

said 'break out the champagne!'"

To the Sunset clearly benefitted not just from Shires' elevated poetry skills but also her improved work ethic. Through editing, she gradually strengthened songs like album opener "Parking Lot Pirouette," replacing lines with more precise language to describe the shape of constellations and the haloed moon seen through her window. She also kept an ear to the sound of the words, working to improve the rhymes of "Eve's Daughter." Shires adopted a habit of taping her work-in-progress to the wall so her daughter couldn't color on them, and she'd meticulously edit what she wrote.

Shires plays down how much of a commitment getting an M.F.A. was on top of her already huge commitments to two touring acts, marriage, and motherhood. "Playing music is traveling and sitting in a plane, sitting in a car, and sitting in a van. It's really boring and then I feel like my mind isn't getting any exercise. I work on stuff all the time while I'm sitting around doing the waiting thing that we all do," Shires says.

"When I'm on the road without [my

daughter] Mercy and Jason, I bury myself in work to be productive and try not to go down any rabbit hole of wondering if I'm making the right choices for my family. I'm doing everything for the right reasons, but sometimes in the late hours of the night you really question. Is what I'm doing going to make a good difference in raising a brave woman? Or am I going to be hurting her?" Here, Shires references the famous opening line of Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse": "They fuck you up, your mom and dad," she says with resignation.

Shires' most important takeaway from her M.F.A. coursework is the inspiring assertion that "there's no such thing as writer's block. There's just not. Otherwise we would never ever be able to finish any kind of education or the work that we do on the daily." For Shires, writer's block just means that she needs to explore new influences or do writing exercises. She frequently sets timers or uses apps like FlowState to force herself to write without editing. "In the end you have all these tools and there's all these rules. Do you break them or do you not?

I think that comes down to intention. It's nice to write a song instinctively, but you know, you can write it and then go back and edit it later."

Though Shires has only published the one tritina so far, she's hard at work on a poetry collection. "I'm not sure how you decide if your work is good enough to send around," she says modestly, also citing her long revision process. She does like the idea of publishing a book that contains poems in their early drafts as well as their finished versions.

Enclosed in the special edition vinyl format of *To the Sunset* is a fragment of one of Shires' poems. "It's part of a poem that's not done. I put that on there on the inside of that because I felt like that it was mimetic of the process that I used in writing the songs," she says. On the insert, there's a photograph of Shires with a stargazer lily reaching from behind her ear. Despite the colorful picture, what's immediately compelling are the lines of poetry. "I will never sit still / always shining around you," they read. In poetry or in music, it's a given that Shires will rarely be still, always looking for a better way to shine. ■