



Allison Moorer - *Blood*

*Why do I carry what isn't mine
Can I take the good and leave the rest behind
Can I let go and watch it all unwind
Can I untie the ties that bind*

When Allison Moorer wrote *Blood*, she never intended to make a companion record. Having received a Masters of Fine Arts in Writing from NYC's New School in 2017, the Alabama-born songwriter who'd spent ten albums plumbing the complexities of human interactions and emotions realized with her new tools, there might be songs.

What emerged was more than songs. *Blood* may well be the best record of the Oscar, Grammy and Americana Music Awards nominee's career. Stark, haunted, emerging, often just guitar and voice, Moorer and producer Kenny Greenberg crafted a meditation on the meaning of family, trauma, love, bonds and finding one's way to the surface.

"I've been playing the see me/don't see me game for 20 years," she says in a voice like soft combed cotton. "And it's always been an uneasy relationship. It's been a difficult thing for me as an artist, and I'm not completely sure why. I thought when I wrote 'Cold, Cold Earth,' I was answering all the questions; but I'm not John Prine, I couldn't do that in three verses."

"Cold, Cold Earth," the second track on *Blood*, first appeared as a hidden track on Moorer's sophomore *The Hardest Part*. Even then, the copper blond was playing hide-and-seek with the inevitable. Sighing, she says, "Every publicist asked every writer *not* to ask. They all did anyway. So, I was giving journalists what I thought they wanted...*The Hardest Part* was loosely based on my parents' relationship.

"In 1999, I'd scribbled down in my notebook three verses and a coda, summing up the details. My then husband found it riffling through my things, because he was that kind of guy, and said I should include it. He was ultimately right, but I was 25, and I didn't have the skills to do it properly. All I'd done was document the details."

Now a twice-divorcee, mother to John Henry, essayist/blogger, off-Broadway veteran with "Rebel Voices," the stage adaptation of Howard Zinn's acclaimed *Voices of a People's History of The United States* and wife to Americana mainstay Hayes Carll, Moorer has more life and "learnin'," as she calls it, to master her craft. The more she turned over the stories of what happened, the more dynamics the recently returned to Nashville songstress recognized. Upon revisiting "Cold, Cold Earth," she understood the depths of what happened in a more grown up way.

"Just because my Daddy made the choice that he did," she offers, "doesn't mean he wasn't worthy of compassion, consideration and contemplation, you know? He *is* worthy. I made my Mama the hero. I needed to do that, and she is absolutely for so many reasons, as is my sister. They *all* deserve that. And he deserves credit...understanding...recognition...compassion...and love."

For those who are not aware, Allison Moorer and her sister Shelby Lynne are survivors. After a turbulent marriage, their mother took the girls and moved into a home away from a charismatic, if troubled man who tried to get a foothold as a songwriter, couldn't make his way and ultimately, murdered their mother then turned the gun on himself in the pre-dawn hours.

"He was remorseful in 1967, when he wrote 'I'm The One To Blame' before my sister was even born," Moorer explains. "My parents had a story between them. My sister and I were bit players. In my mind, they were Olympian in their beauty, their love of life and embrace of it. That he wrote songs is huge to me, that he was a musician...and my Mama created beauty so easily wherever she was, whether she was sewing, or singing, or cooking, or sparkling. That is a big part of their story, as much as what happened, and I'd be absolutely full of shame if I felt I didn't do (all that) justice."

Justice – and her work as an important literary voice – are well served here. Moving through time (present, past, past present) and characters (her mother, her father, her child self), Moorer explores the voices, hearts and perspectives that colored everything that happened – and the struggle she's been immersed in ever since.

"It was important to make this record with Kenny Greenberg," she says of the rock/roots guitarist/producer, "because he's been there since the beginning. I trusted him, and knew he understood. He understood me, my story, my voice, my fears and especially my will to do the right thing by these songs. I couldn't have done this with anybody else."

Intimacy makes *Blood* the whispered truth shared only in the safest place. But it also allows the listener the space to hear, feel and take in the Southern gothic truth and transcend conventional readings. What emerges, beyond the black and white facts, is how love binds like kudzu.

"It's sparse because I didn't have any money," jokes the woman who writes "can't exactly say we're on the upswing" in the Mama's voiced "The Rock and the Hill" swamp boogie. "But the truth is more practical: I didn't know if it worked with a whole lot of stuff. The songs were good enough, Kenny and I figured we should let them breathe, because (these songs) are really me looking at this."

Whether the whispered "Nightlight," sung by a scared child to her sister, her father's entreaty "Set My Soul Free," the grown-up power-strummed admission "All I Wanted (thanks anyway)" or the powerfully emergent self-recognition of the piano-anchored closer "Heal," (written with Mary Gauthier) it's revelatory to watch someone peel away the layers of defense and the brave face previously shown to the world. Even "Cold, Cold Earth," given an almost graveside sorrow and dignity, offers a deeper sense of how this grief feels.

"As a singer, I've been through a lot of stages. I grew up in a house where you had to sing loud to be heard. When I sing now, there's a quality of just letting go. Whereas before I was more studied and calculated, I've grown into my voice. I don't even think about it anymore. When I open my mouth to sing now, everything besides emotion is an afterthought – the voice knows where to go."

The fingerpicked, softly floating "Blood," epitomizes the legacy and the breaking through the obvious as well as the unseen damage. "(A lot of this) deals with the idea of inheritance, why am I saddled with someone else's crap? That's the thing about all of this: I have no idea how far it goes back. I can look at everything; I can work to understand, to ask every question, to consider every perspective, but you can never *really* know. Somewhere, though, you believe you've done the best you could.

If she never intended to make this record, somehow it's here. Singing, "Lord knows you made a mess of me," she is nobody's victim anymore. Yes, it happened, and finally, really, it is all over. In her recognition of the things that happened, we are all the richer.

"It's taken a lifetime. I am 47 years old. But I also know you keep telling the story until the story is told," she begins. "For whatever reason, maybe this one is too big for one art form. Maybe I need the music, the lyric and what's not said and the book form to understand what happened, to show those things that aren't easily revealed.

"This isn't only a companion piece. It stands alone in its own way, shows and says things beyond words. To me, it's all part of it, and it's also unto itself. It took a long time to get here, but now, it's told."

From the moody, minor-keyed opener "Bad Weather," which finds a grown Moorer wrestling a familiar misgiving, she melts time to return to the reportage of "Cold, Cold Earth." For an album that's as much a reckoning with ghosts as it is an awakening of self-compassion, *Blood* offers insight for us all.

Economical, ethereal, yet firmly on the ground, *Blood* is hopeful in its starkness and shines light on the darkness. Having spent a career finding places to hide in the spotlight, she emerges without armor, stronger and freer than ever.

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