



ISMAY – *Desert Pavement*

Desert Pavement, the sophomore release from ISMAY, is a tapestry of alternative American roots music, full of alt-country textures and woozy folk songs that transcend traditions and blur boundaries.

For Avery Hellman, the Bay Area native behind ISMAY's unique sound, the album builds a bridge between past and present. "I create music that's informed by older traditions and makes you feel the way old folk music does," they say, "but it doesn't sound like something you've heard before."

Like *Songs of Sonoma Mountain*, ISMAY's critically acclaimed debut, *Desert Pavement* was heavily influenced by the California ranch where Hellman spent most of their 20s working the land. "My mom bought the ranch when I was 19 years old," Hellman remembers. "Environmental restoration was very important to her, and I was with her every step of the way, working to develop the ranch, raise cattle, replant creeks, and tend to the sheep. The perspective of my songwriting is very rooted in ranch life."

Listening to *Desert Pavement* is a vivid (and often visual) experience, with songs that evoke the landscapes and lifestyles of rural California. "Shearer and the Darby Ram," the album's opening track, is a modern-day folk tale, blending acoustic guitars with an imaginative storyline about a larger-than-life ram whose wool changes a family's fortune. It's based upon an old British tall tale, but ISMAY breathes new life into the narrative by focusing not upon the animal itself, but upon the child called to shear it. "Stranger in the Barn" is similarly inventive. The track unfolds like a bluegrass-inspired mountain song, punctuated by bursts of mandolin, brushed percussion, and ISMAY's breezily gorgeous vocals. At its center is a storyline about a family who discovers a drifter sleeping in the sheep barn. Rather than run him off, the family embraces the newcomer like one of their own. ISMAY turns the song into an allegory about human decency. "The story is about taking down our walls, and rather than meeting the unknown with contempt and anger, instead offering curiosity," Hellman clarifies.

California may be one of Hellman's muses, but that didn't stop the songwriter from traveling 2,600 miles east — to the famed Echo Mountain Recording studio in Asheville, North Carolina — to capture these songs in a series of live takes. "We recorded 13 songs

in five days," Hellman remembers. "The whole band played together, all at once, and I tracked my vocals live. A big part of the live recording process is embracing the imperfections of a performance, and *Desert Pavement* sounds real and raw to me."

It sounds experimental, too. "The Dove, The Shrew, & The Raccoon" blends American folk influences with south-of-the-border rhythms, while "Streaming Family" — a song about modern technology's impact on our daily lives — pits traditional instrumentation against a contemporary message. While writing material for the album, ISMAY found a new collaborator in Andrew Marlin, best known as a member of the progressive folk band Watchhouse (formerly Mandolin Orange). The two came from different backgrounds — not only geographically, but musically, too — and ISMAY was intrigued by the idea of Marlin producing the album. "I didn't know what the outcome was going to be, and I liked engaging with the uncertainty of that," Hellman says. "Andrew took an experimental approach to the recording process, which I loved. He'd record a guitar part by setting up the microphone in an entirely different room, to capture the sound of the space itself. He'd record our backing vocals through a Leslie speaker. He liked being impulsive, and that was a nice change for me."

Another change was Hellman's songwriting itself. With 2020's *Songs of Sonoma Mountain*, Hellman had looked to songwriters like Leonard Cohen for inspiration, resulting in a darker, melancholic album anchored by Hellman's fingerpicked guitar. Creating *Desert Pavement* was a different experience. "I was hugely inspired by Bonny Light Horseman's debut record, and I began writing songs that were based in rhythmic strumming rather than fingerpicking," Hellman says. "I didn't know what sound I was creating at first, but I knew I was writing songs that made me curious. That was the most important thing to me. I'm not trying to copy anybody else or take a pre-determined path with my music. I'm just trying to be me, whatever that may be."

Desert Pavement is an album that owes that owes more to geography than genre. It's the unique sound of the New American West. For Hellman — who grew up attending Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, the music festival launched by their grandfather, Warren Hellman — California has always been a melting pot of cultures and art, with *Desert Pavement* serving as the newest entry in the state's musical history. "It's obvious that psychedelic music, alternative music, and the Summer of Love all influenced the music that's made our here," they say. "It's a music that's open-minded and experimental. It's music that doesn't feel the need to be boxed in."

In other words, it's ISMAY's kind of music. With *Desert Pavement*, ISMAY paves a path toward a new horizon, filling the journey with songs about the sights, sounds, and singular characters found way out west.