



Skylar Gudasz - *COUNTRY*

Skylar Gudasz has an easy way about her as she contemplates the futility of trying to order the world into shapes of convenience. “It’s wild, the ways that humans try to make boundaries out of things,” she says. The subject of this restless, eternal wrangling has been on the singer-songwriter’s mind as she’s watched the world splinter into jagged, conflicted pieces. With her third LP, *COUNTRY*, Gudasz interrogates borders of land and sea, mind and body: the limits of the lines we draw for ourselves.

Gudasz has concentrated her attention on matters of the mind and heart, last issuing a solo record with 2020’s *Cinema* (“★★★★ a career-making star turn” —MOJO) after her 2016 debut *Oleander* (“the Joni Mitchell the South never had” —Bitter Southerner). Between her LPs, Gudasz has registered a long list of extracurricular credits, taking up playing in the live bands of Hiss Golden Messenger, Eric Bachmann, Big Star’s Third, and spearheading the *Ask Me Anything* super trio tour with Libby Rodenbough and Kate Rhudy. She’s staked out her own poetic corner as a songwriter, drawing upon influences that span rootsy surf, witchy rock and roll, cinematic Southern twang, and dreamy art-pop.

Raised in Virginia and based primarily in North Carolina, her deep, lifelong affection for the ocean comes into focus on *COUNTRY* amid her reckonings with a world in crisis. Gudasz plays with ideas of power, genre, pride, gender, and perspective, her approach informed as much by a summer night sky of stars as the pacifist tenets of her Quaker upbringing. “This country’s trying to kill you,” she sings on “Outlaw,” steadfast in her protection of tender spirits. “Australia,” meanwhile, is a powerful account of unchecked egotism against a backdrop of man-made environmental destruction. The raw-edged, seven-minute version that appears on *COUNTRY* was Gudasz’s first take of the track.

A turquoise underdog of a semi-hollowbody guitar that Gudasz dug out of a closet became the songwriter’s conduit to an album as she worked out the shimmering “Fire Country,” around which eight more songs fell into place (“They followed me around like a humming cloud and I just tried to show up to finish them.”). Daily walks in the woods deepened the connections that Gudasz felt with the natural world. “A lot of the songs were written in movement, and then after walking, coming back, and putting them on the piano,” she says.

Gudasz recorded most of *COUNTRY* with her longtime pal Ari Picker, whose self-built Goth Construction studio in nearby Pittsboro made for a potent outpost for their work. The fragile pandemic conditions of 2021 and 2022 demanded a delicate logistical dance. The music, too, took on a new cast. “There was no playing the songs live, no testing them out for an audience,” Gudasz explains, adding, “It was a very internal experience.” The pair occasionally recorded outside, giving numbers a glow of ephemeral ambiance. “That was pretty magical, to be able to sing to the trees next to a bonfire while you’re doing takes.”

Gudasz’s players on *COUNTRY*—a venerable North Carolina version of The Wrecking Crew including Casey Toll, Chessa Rich, Sarah Louise, Joe Westerlund, Peter Lewis and more—recorded their parts in one-on-one sessions, including a few with producer Jeff Crawford. As she navigated her new way of working and creative flow, Gudasz got into the habit of partaking in her own little rituals to connect with her deepest self. Some of these—leaving offerings to nature or building tree side altars to muses—fueled Gudasz’s working mind. “I don’t think songwriting

comes from a necessarily logical place. It makes sense that you would have to make some mystical moves to get into the headspace of being with the songs,” she says.

In songs like the sly “Truck” and stately “No Body,” Gudasz upends ideas about traditions with allusions that she leverages to explore ideas of heroes and heroines, and the prize of freedom; in the former, Gudasz offers a tour of her musical family tree with nods to Lucinda Williams, Emmylou Harris, Rosetta Tharpe, and June Carter Cash. She takes a more direct angle on maternal influences in “Mother’s Daughter,” where she shares some of the wisdom imparted to her by her singular “old soul shittalker” Sagittarius mom. “You can have it all, just not at the same time,” she croons.

It’s an idea that bears folksy charm and wit, and yet is the sort of clear-eyed good sense that undergirds *COUNTRY*’s sense of conviction. As Gudasz tangles with the contradictions and unanswerable questions of her being, *COUNTRY* pierces at the human desire—the *need*—to live free, unbound, unlimited.

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