NO DEPRESSION
ROOTS MUSIC & CULTURE

STORIES

A 'Reckoning' Is Beckoning and Mary Gauthier's Songs Are The Answer

David McPherson 23 Sep 2026 · 7 min



Mary Gauthier - Photo by David McClister

Every single one of us could use some mercy now.

That refrain sung three times to end Mary Gauthier's most-covered song, "Mercy Now," is simple, yet, those 10 words say so much. The title-cut from the singer-songwriter's major-label debut on Lost Highway (after three self-released efforts) vaulted her into the hearts and minds of a nation. The rave reviews that followed, including year-end accolades from esteemed publications such as *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone, Billboard*, and even this magazine, changed Gauthier's life.

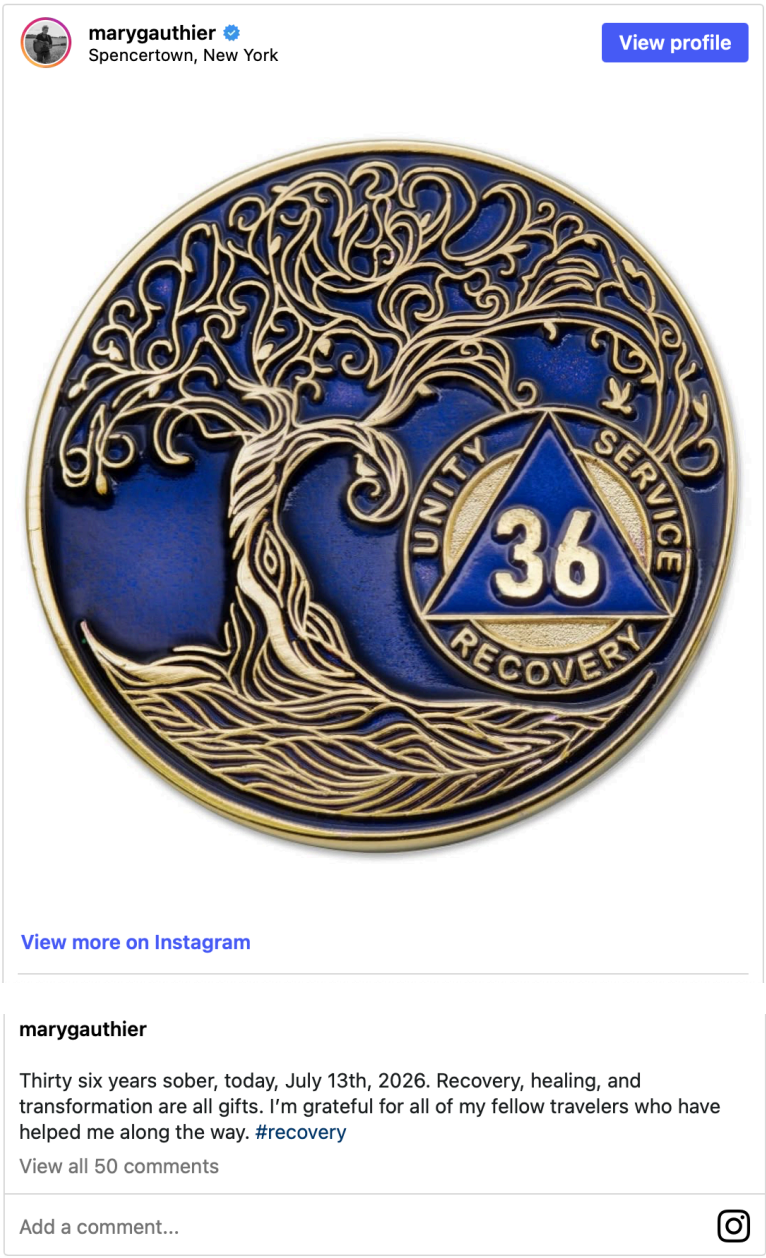


“Simple, in songwriting, is the hardest thing to get to,” says Gauthier, via Zoom, a month before the release of *Reckoning*. “We confuse simple with easy, but simple is hard. To get to the simple emotional truth, you have to wade through so much complexity and layers of confusion.”

Long before she became a songwriter, Gauthier’s origin story, and formative years, were marked by trauma, confusion, and plenty of trouble. Born on March 11, 1962 in New Orleans, she was immediately abandoned by her mother, left and orphaned at the St. Vincent Women and Infants Asylum — a harbinger for the insanity that followed Gauthier like a dark, unwanted shadow for the next couple of decades. As a child, she stole cars and left her adoptive mother and grandparents at 15 years old to live on the streets of Crescent City. Early stints in rehab in Kansas and Louisiana to treat drug and alcohol addictions never stuck. In her 20s, a second chance, a change of scenery, and working in the restaurant business in Boston ended with an arrest for drunk driving; that rock bottom, at 28 years old, led to recovery. After finding the gift of sobriety, along this road to recovery, Gauthier started a new career, healing herself through the power of song.

“I started writing songs three or four years into recovery and that became my purpose,” she says.

This past summer, Gauthier celebrated more than three and a half decades clean; she posted this milestone on social media and wrote the following: “Thirty six years sober, today, July 13th, 2026. Recovery, healing, and transformation are all gifts. I’m grateful for all of my fellow travelers who have helped me along the way.”



Gauthier's most profound and poignant songs, like "Mercy Now," "I Drink," and the rage-filled title cut on *Reckoning*, are the ones where she widens the lens, verse by verse, from the personal to the universal so that by the time the final refrain arrives, a shared truth is revealed, leaving listeners pondering her words not only for days, but decades. She creates honest, relatable characters, and through their eyes, audiences glean wisdom on universal themes like mercy, trauma, and grief. Her latest rumination reckon or suggest, but never preach, to choose a righteous path.

"It all goes back to Woody [Guthrie]," Gauthier explains. "Woody said, 'I'm no entertainer. I'm a teacher.' I also feel that way. Folk singers bring the stories that teach, and it's not from a high place. It's like, 'Hey man, have you ever thought of it this way? Take it or leave it.' Preaching is just boring in song."

Like Guthrie, the 64-year-old Gauthier belongs to a rare pantheon of artists that includes John Prine, Steve Earle, Townes Van Zandt, and Bob Dylan who other musicians refer to as, “songwriter’s songwriters.” Each, in their way, have managed to capture the zeitgeist without taking sides. Instead, these masters offer commentary on the human condition. Gauthier is an empath, a gift she uses to tell character-driven stories in a way that lets listeners decide where they stand. In these divisive and turbulent days, now, more than ever, Gauthier’s compassionate voice is needed.

Due out September 25 via Soundly/Thirty Tigers, Gauthier’s tenth album marks her first collection of new material in four years, following 2022’s emotionally charged *Dark Enough to See the Stars* and 2018’s Grammy-nominated *Rifles & Rosary Beads* that she co-wrote with wounded American war veterans and their families.

The nine narratives on *Reckoning* are all Gauthier originals and co-writes (except for a cover of Tom Mason’s “Thought I Heard a Train,” which ends the record) that offer parables and poetic reflections needed for everyone, no matter the political leanings, races, or creeds. They are also laced with lyrics that demand repeated listens, deeper dives, and candid conversations with friends — and strangers, alike — to fully grasp.

As Gauthier writes on the album’s outer sleeve, “a reckoning can be personal, political, or spiritual, and these songs inhabit all three realms at once. When the truth finally arrives, it carries consequences. These songs live in the aftermath of that moment.”

The Mystery of Songwriting

Songs come in many ways. Some take years of writing, rewriting, and agonizing over every syllable. Others come unexpectedly, sparked by a single word or phrase. That’s how the title track arrived. Before entering the studio, Gauthier had selected all the songs except that one.

“This record came together in an organic way,” she says. “I had a co-write with Aaron Lee Tasjan booked at my house, and we didn’t have an idea. I was looking through this massive pile of ideas I had saved and the word ‘reckoning’ popped out. I’ve been holding on to that idea for quite some time, and I said to Aaron, ‘let's try to write that.’ As it started to come alive, I immediately thought it might be the title track as it’s the summation of everything I’ve been trying to say in these songs.

You can cut down all the flowers, but you cannot stop the spring
There's a pendulum in motion, and you can't outrun the swing
Push too far in one direction, a force will push right back in kind
Voices shoved into the shadows, will join and rise in time
A reckoning is breaking through, a hidden hand is moving by design



"Songwriting is a funny thing and it's also mysterious as hell," Gauthier adds. "Almost every character in these new songs is at a reckoning place. I didn't do that intentionally. It just came out that way. When this song started to be born, I realized, 'Wow, this is the summation of where I'm at as an artist, and what I see happening.' Aaron and I went back and forth and back and forth for a couple of weeks and finally nailed it ... it was not an easy song to write, but we were fierce about it, and we worked our asses off."

With the title track written, Gauthier brought this song along with the other bare-bones demos — just her powerful voice and faithful Gibson J-45, 1950s-era acoustic guitar, to Neilson Hubbard and Dylan Alldredge (Skinny Elephant Recording) in Nashville to gently sculpt, mix, master, and engineer. Her only instructions to the duo who she'd worked with on her two previous records, was this: Let Bruce Springsteen's 1982 stripped-down masterpiece, *Nebraska*, be your sonic guide. The co-producers heeded Gauthier's advice by using slap delay on the vocals and analog techniques — mixing the entire record through a Fostex reel to reel tape machine.

“Mary’s stories and songs are the whole deal, so you just have to try to support it,” Hubbard says, who is a songwriter as well as producer. “She really wanted to do a kind of nod to a *Nebraska*-style album, really intimate…a record that’s small in the sense of instrumentation, but massive in what it’s talking about, and the effect it can have on people.”

History Lessons

Two of the most poignant compositions on *Reckoning*, apart from the title track, are a pair of history lessons in song, “Soldier of Fortune,” a co-write with Eliza Gilkyson, and “Some Times,” written with Vince Gill.

“‘Some Times’ is a reflection back by one man looking over his whole life as a Black man in America,” Gauthier says. ‘Soldier of Fortune’ is me realizing these characters, what we in the US call ICE, are very similar to the Roman guards that worked for Pontius Pilate and escorted Christ to his execution. They are also similar personality types to the Gestapo and to the Klan…they were all working for money and working for what they thought were righteous beliefs; and, they were all doing a hell of a lot of damage.

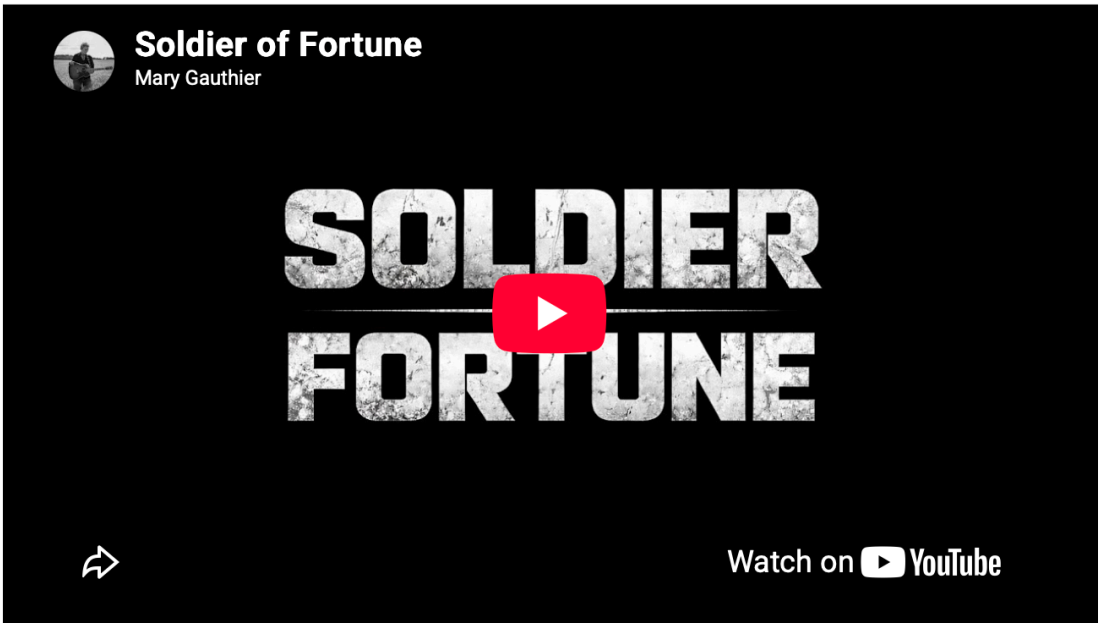


“That was my realization,” she continues. “We collectively think, ‘This is new,’ but no, this is a dynamic that has always been and it’s just horrifying this is part of human history and our shared reality, that there’s brutal people who will hurt other people in the name of God, and for money; that’s the underlying idea behind ‘Soldier of Fortune.’”

Gauthier's own personal history is one that she can't outrun, nor does she want to. Two decades after the release of her most-streamed song, "Mercy Now," she offers some thoughts on its inspiration and legacy, and how great works of art are timeless, but it always takes time for that legacy to occur.

"That song is one you pray you can write ... one that holds up over time," she says. "It was inspired by a series of events that you could not ever control — the build-up to the war in Iraq, the state of my father's health, nuclear testing by North Korea, and the Boston Spotlight Team shining a light on the pedophile priests. All of that happened in that little bit of time; that convergence is where the song came from; yet, it doesn't exist in that time; it exists outside of time.

"You always want to write songs that 50 years later are still true and relevant and 'Mercy Now' is one of those," Gauthier concludes. "There may be a couple on this new record, but you've got to go through time first to see whether the song comes with you or whether it gets left behind."



Mary Gauthier's *Reckoning* is due out September 25 via Soundly/Thirty Tigers.