

TexasMonthly

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ARTIST INTERVIEW

Amy Cook

by Jeff McCord



Photograph by Alexandra Valenti

*The San Jose–born singer relocated to Marfa in 2004 and Austin in 2005, after growing restless pursuing a music career in Los Angeles. Her latest, **SUMMER SKIN** (Roothouse/Thirty Tigers), out August 28, was produced by Craig Street and features bass playing by Meshell Ndegeocello and guest appearances from Patty Griffin, Ben Kweller, and Robert Plant.*

Did your parents give you the music bug? They encouraged it. They weren't musicians, but my dad loved music. He had a stereo fetish—he had these giant speakers, and he liked to impress his friends by showing how they could blow out a candle. They were huge. But he liked folk music, so he'd blow out the candle with "Bridge Over Troubled Water." My mom had a guitar up in the attic. I never really saw her ever play it, but I dragged it down when I was little and learned to play.

You moved to L.A. at age eighteen. I went to Pepperdine, and I would go over to North Hollywood and do open mikes and stuff. I had started writing songs in high school. They weren't good songs. One of the songs I wrote when I was eighteen or nineteen got put in a bunch of TV shows. I'm embarrassed when I hear it.

Your music was getting placed on television shows. You had a regular gig. Then you pulled up and moved to Texas. What happened? I think when you're in an industry town you can get lost trying to make your career work instead of trying to do something good and beautiful. In Los Angeles I always felt a little bit like I

didn't know who to be or how to be. It was hard to get together with other musicians and play. I just didn't feel fulfilled.

What was it about Texas that drew you in? I had some friends in Austin, and I went to visit, and I really liked the warmth, both literally and figuratively. I just wanted to go somewhere where I could dig into myself and figure out what kind of songs I wanted to write. Austin is supportive; right away you can fall into a group of people and start playing music.

You're critical of your past work. Do you remember the moment you wrote a song and said, "This is it"? "Hotel Lights" [from 2010's *Let the Light In*]. And "Summer Skin."

Which is the title track of your new CD. It seems like a goodbye to L.A. Oh, it totally is.

Do you write a lot of songs? I record a whole lot of ideas, then I weed through those. I probably had fifty songs before I went in with Craig Street. I like to write. Performing makes me completely want to throw up.

Really? Oh my God, yes. I mean, once I get up there, I'm fine. But it's just really hard.

You've said that *Summer Skin* was one of the easiest records you've ever made, but it seems like you'd feel a lot of pressure working with a big producer like Street [who has worked with Norah Jones, k.d. lang, and Cassandra Wilson].

Craig's process is just hanging out with me and my friends; by the time we got to the studio, he really understood what I wanted to sound like. In four days, we recorded fourteen songs live. They were completely done, except for some overdubs.

Patty Griffin and her significant other (and transplanted Austinite) Robert Plant are on this record. He's super-nice. I wanted Patty to sing on "It's Gonna Rain," but we were both singing in the same range. We weren't feeling it. So Patty said, "I think it needs a male vocal," and Robert was like, "Do you mind if I give it a go?" And I was like, "Um, well, I don't mind at all." He'd literally never heard the song before, and he's obviously not known for being a backup singer. But he sang it twice, and it was done. It was really lovely.