

# Amy Speace

*"Who is talking to me, when I'm talking to myself?"*

In his liner booklet notes celebrated music critic/author Dave Marsh sums up *HOW TO SLEEP IN A STORMY BOAT* as: 'the most daring, confident, ambitious and beautiful album Amy Speace has made since she began recording.' My five star album review (of it and the accompanying EP) appears in this issue and sums up my feelings. On the booklet's rear inside page among many Amy thank you's is the cryptic: 'Dave Marsh and the conversation that started this little idea.'

We began by talking about Dave Marsh and that April 2011 conversation. "I was interviewed on his Sirius XM radio show soon after *LAND LIKE A BIRD* came out. We got into this conversation, on air, about theatre and my background in theatre." That summer through a mutual friend in Connecticut they met again for lunch. "Marsh called me an art-song person in the midst of this folk songwriter genre. We talked about the arc of a set, putting songs together with stories between, and: 'What if you could present that performance as a one-woman show in a theatre—no pyrotechnics—as a narrative arc.' I'd actually thought about doing that. Following that second conversation, the songs I wrote came from a really short, specific time period. Relative to that time period, they all spoke to each other and spoke to the experience, even if it wasn't directly my own experience. Drama develops out of that, and a story develops. His conversation offered me, I guess, the encouragement to think about how to put together the next record."

As time passed, the pair kept in touch. "We emailed back and forth, as I wrote the songs. I knew he would be somebody I'd want aboard if I thought I was even near successful at this." Amy continued: "I wanted to send him the record, and get his approval. He's Dave Marsh. I respect and admire him and his writing, but also his history and knowledge of music."

That November, Amy lost her voice. "It was a sudden thing—part allergies, part stress and strain—from overuse and overwork, and not using my vocal technique. I was also grieving a relationship that was very, very important to me. Crying or arguing, affects a singer's vocal chords. I was told to rest my voice for two months. Somebody told me about a meditation technique called Vipassana that gives you the physical experience of impermanence, where you gain an understanding through your body that things change. You ride the wave is the simplest way I can put it."

Amy booked a ten-day retreat at the South East Vipassana Centre in Jessop, Georgia. "You meditate in silence. You can't talk, you can't gesture, no reading, no writing. Nothing in. Nothing out. I thought it would be a blissful and beautiful experience. It was nothing like that. It's the scariest thing I've ever done, and I fought it." From 4.30am to 9pm with breaks and mealtimes the participants meditate. "They take away all your comforts. The first day I thought: 'There's no way I can do this.' I've run two New York City marathons, that's the only thing I can liken this to. I went into a marathon mindset. While fighting this panic, song lyrics that I'd written in the past year—and it wasn't conscious—would come into my head and go out."

Amy continued: "I thought 'Why did that line come to me?' A meditative state definitely gets you thinking—Is there anything

else out there? Who is talking to me, when I'm talking to myself? What is the nature of a soul? Then lines and dialogue from Shakespeare started running at the lyrics. Lines from my song *Hunter Moon* clashed with a line from *Othello*. That kept happening, and I stopped fighting. Instead of considering the loss of my voice as an injury, I started thinking of it as a gift."

Post retreat research by Speace, a former Shakespearean actress, established links between the *HOW TO SLEEP IN A STORMY BOAT* lyrics and the bard's work. In the liner booklet, relative to each song, that connection takes the form of at least one Shakespearean epigram. The album was produced by Neilson Hubbard.

"Neilson and I met eight or nine years ago. A television production company in Arkansas had this syndicated indie music show, where the invited musicians played a 20-minute set and then talked about the nature of their songwriting. We didn't really have time to talk because they flew us in, gave us dinner, did the taping the next morning and flew us out. I remember liking Neilson's music, it seemed emotional, grounded and sad. Concurrently, I was making my first record and I was separated. It turned out that Neilson's marriage was also ending. Over the next eight years his name kept coming up." Mississippi bred Neilson eventually relocated to Nashville, became a producer, and went on to work with Kim Richey, Garrison Starr and others.

Amy continued: "I moved to Nashville in October 2009 and signed with Thirty Tigers. David Macias was my manager. Nancy Quinn is one of his partners. David said: 'We're going to hear some music and Nancy is bringing her boyfriend Neilson.' I said: 'Neilson Hubbard' and he said: 'Yes.' Neilson walked in the door and immediately had this look on his face 'It's you.' He told me that in Arkansas he'd wanted to talk, feeling I might understand what he was going through. We agreed to write together. He came over the next week and we wrote *Drive All Night*. It's



Amy Speace (vocals, acoustic guitar) – Singer-Songwriter Stage, 2013 Wildflower! Arts & Music Festival, Richardson, Texas  
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Mainstage at Kerrville Folk Festival 2013 – L. to R. Thomm Jutz (electric guitar), Dirje Smith (cello) and Amy Speace (vocals, acoustic guitar)  
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the lead track on *LAND LIKE A BIRD*, which he produced. The minute we got in the studio it was the easiest flowing musical relationship I've had in my life. I feel like Neilson hears what I can't articulate. He paints cinematic landscapes."

On *HOW TO SLEEP IN A STORMY BOAT* the drums in particular are muted, so what was their approach to recording. "The drums are there, but we wanted just a subtle hint of rhythm. The first step was Kris Donegan the guitar/lap steel player—baritone as well—sat down with me and played through each song live. Next, I did a scratch vocal although some were cut live. The base was two acoustic guitars, and that took three or four days to complete. The finished vocals took one full day. Having worked with a vocal coach my voice was at full strength. Two or three days were set aside for vocals. I walked in the first day and started singing and my voice, not only was it physically in a healthy place, I felt like this open channel. I was ready to do it. Neilson sits me at the control room desk with a microphone. No booth, no headphones. I sing, like I would to a friend, intimately. Finally, overdubbing the parts by other musicians, including Neilson, took a couple of days."

Accompanying Speace's album is a six-song EP. "Because this record was partly funded by fans, I wanted something for them—a deluxe version as a gift. We had recorded more songs than we could fit on the record, because you always do. Plus, I didn't want this to be a long record. It had to be short because I knew it was going to be pretty emotional. I didn't want people in that space for too long—that's cruel and unusual punishment. What is interesting about the EP to me, these are the songs that led me to the story. They speak to the story, but don't sit inside the story. Like research material."

Amy self-released the album on Wind Bone Records. "I like the clash of those words—they don't go together. They create a feeling. Wind Bone to me is like the truth, but the cold truth, the harsh truth. I was on tour in Minnesota one winter, during a blizzard, and there were all these bare trees leaning away from

the wind. That's when the name came to me."

Amy's *LAND LIKE A BIRD* featured cover art by Vietnamese born artist Duy Huynh. "Duy lives in Charlotte, North Carolina. I didn't want the cover to be a photograph of me, I wanted a piece of art. There's a gallery down the street from me in East Nashville called Art & Invention and I came across his paintings there. They're ethereal, they're whimsical, but they're also deeply emotional and there's a sense of sadness in them."

With *HOW TO SLEEP IN A STORMY BOAT* approaching fruition, Amy sent Duy a copy of her guitar and vocal demos. Amy recalled their subsequent telephone conversation. "He said: 'I have a couple of things that might work, but what I'd really like to do is paint something. I'm really inspired by this music.' He did two paintings specifically for this record. In one, you've got a woman sleeping in a boat with a phonograph. The phonograph music sends her off to sleep. The bird to me is the bird from *LAND LIKE A BIRD*. That's just my thought, I've never asked him where he got that idea. It was his conversation to me about my music. I love that mingling of disciplines."

During late September/early October, Amy Speace is scheduled to tour the UK with John Fullbright. The Oklahoma bred, Grammy nominated musician guests on her new album. "I first met him at Folk Alliance a long time ago, when he was starting out. I've played the Blue Door in Oklahoma City that Greg Johnson, his manager, owns. Greg gave me John's demos. This was long before the live CD. He said: 'I'm working with this kid and you've got to hear these songs.' I went to one of Fullbright's Folk Alliance showcases and was blown away. I love his voice."

Thomm Jutz guests. "For about two years he's been my live guitar player. Thomm can be a band in a guitar. We brought in Thomm to see if he added a different flavour. We tried a few songs out, and what he did on *Perfume* was so special." Solo artist Ben Solee contributes cello to *Lullabye Under The Willow*. "He came into my head during that retreat. I love how he utilises the cello. I asked him to play a part that sounded like nature. Not many cellists would reply 'I got it.' I knew Ben would get it, and he did." Mary Gauthier contributes backing vocals to album opener *The Fortunate Ones*, and co-wrote *Left Me Hanging*. "My original song wasn't working. Mary said: 'I think you have two songs in there, but *Left Me Hanging* really speaks to me, I'd love to work with you on it.' I went to her house and we finished that song."

In my review of the album, I refer to *The Sea & The Shore*, her collaboration with Robby Hecht, as a 'goose-bump inducing treasure.' "Robby's voice is very tender but I needed a gruff voice." John Fullbright voices *The Sea*. She continued: "The thing that really impressed me is he didn't try to nail it in one take. He sang it through once and said: 'I really want to find a sadness' and there's sadness in his music for sure. He was seeking the character, because it wasn't a song he'd written. He's a young guy and to have the co-writer standing in the room with him—no matter how incredible you are, that's a challenge. He wanted to honour the words. He'd sing a line or phrase and you'd hear him go 'God no' and Neilson would whisper: 'We're keeping that. It's brilliant.' He just didn't know how perfectly it was coming out."

Is it foolish to dream that, ere long, U.K. audiences will enjoy live renditions of *The Sea & The Shore*? **Arthur Wood**