

Becca Stevens - WONDERBLOOM

Since making her debut with the 2008 album *Tea By Sea*, singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist Becca Stevens has tested the limits of musical identity, mining everything from jazz to Irish folk to indie-rock in her striving for complete and authentic expression. In her latest musical endeavor—the five-track EP *WONDERBLOOM* and a soon-to-follow full-length of the same name—the North Carolina-bred, Brooklyn-based artist again defies all expectation, this time dreaming up a groove-heavy, dance-ready sound infused with elements of pop and funk and R&B. But despite its brighter textures and uptempo rhythms, *WONDERBLOOM* finds Stevens achieving a profound complexity in her lyrics, ultimately redefining what’s possible in creating music that elevates and edifies.

Centered on the captivating vocal presence she’s showcased as a member of David Crosby’s Lighthouse Band, *WONDERBLOOM* telegraphs an unabashed joy that Stevens partly attributes to the project’s production. In a bold new turn for her musical career, Stevens co-produced and co-engineered *WONDERBLOOM* alongside Nic Hard (Snarky Puppy, Ghost-Note, The Church), overseeing every aspect of the recording and claiming a sense of agency that had long eluded her in the studio. “Nic and I truly worked as equals, trusting each other to get the job done, and it was an incredibly empowering experience for me,” she says.

In another major departure, Stevens purposely brought a communal sensibility to the making of *WONDERBLOOM*—an undertaking that resulted in more than 40 musicians contributing to the album, including Vulfpeck guitarist Cory Wong, longtime collaborator Jacob Collier, and all of her Lighthouse bandmates (keyboardist Michelle Willis, Snarky Puppy bandleader Michael League, and David Crosby himself). “My earlier records were all written by me, arranged by me, then performed by me and my band,” says Stevens. “But going into making this one, I made a rule for myself that anytime I had the instinct to turn inward and tough it alone, to instead stay open and share the process. And each time I did that, I was rewarded tenfold by what we all created together. Even with so many collaborators, the end result feels more honest than ever.”

In selecting songs from the dozens of demos she’d recorded in recent years, Stevens landed on 14 tracks rooted in her finely detailed, emotionally layered storytelling. “Some of the stories are very personal, some are from other people’s lives, and the rest are a bit more like fantasy,” she says. Co-written with Grammy-nominated musician Kaveh Rastegar, *WONDERBLOOM*’s lead single “Good Stuff” represents the album’s autobiographical component, emerging as a distinctly timely anthem. “It’s a song about things I’ve gone through in my career, and the struggles that so many women face in this industry,” Stevens says. Proving her ingenuity as a songwriter and performer, Stevens transforms those struggles into a triumphant pop epic, channeling a radiant confidence in her vocal delivery and embedding the song with soul-stirring gospel harmonies - which is actually just 64 layers of Michael Mayo singing in 50 different personalities/vocal timbres.

A far more darkly toned track, “I Will Avenge You” shows the immense depth of Stevens’s imagination. “That was inspired by a script that Michael Showalter sent me for a pilot he was directing/producing called ‘In The Dark,’ explains Stevens, referring to the actor/producer who directed the Oscar-nominated 2017 film *The Big Sick*. “The show is about an

alcoholic/self-destructive blind woman who's determined to solve the murder of a young drug dealer who saved her life." With its jagged guitar work and mesmerizing vocal performance, "I Will Avenge You" attains a cinematic intensity all on its own, gracefully unfolding as a narrative of irrepressible power and raging passion.

While much of *WONDERBLOOM* embodies the sheer effervescence of tracks like "Good Stuff," the album ends on the heavy-hearted meditation of "Heather's Letters to Her Mother" - a beautifully slow-building piece written for Heather Heyer, the 32-year-old woman killed while peacefully protesting at the 2017 white-nationalist rally in Charlottesville. "David Crosby and I were on the tour bus one day, and he challenged me to find a song in the moment when Heather met the driver of the car that took her life... that these two humans should have met in some other way... any other way," Stevens remembers. "After trying a thousand approaches to the song, I ended up thinking of the lyrics as little messages from Heather to her mother, leading up to the event and then finally from beyond the grave asking her mother to finish what she started." Quietly heartbreaking and ineffably tender, the starkly arranged six-minute track takes on a subtle hope as a choir of children (including Stevens's nieces and nephews, Hard's teenage daughters, Crosby, Willis and Michael "Maz" Maher) lend their voices to the song's breathtaking finale.

All throughout *WONDERBLOOM*, Stevens imbues her songs with unfiltered emotion, an effect achieved through equal parts spontaneity and intentionality. "From the beginning I set a goal for myself to be more direct, both lyrically and musically," she says. "I have a tendency to overthink and over-edit, but for this record I really challenged myself to just say what I wanted to say and leave it at that." Driven by a desire to "create music that allows and inspires me to be real, raw, and human when I perform it," Stevens sometimes introduced a deliberate physicality into her performance. In recording the album-opening "Low on Love," for instance, she conjured the track's delicate ennui by lying down on the studio floor. "I was depressed and run ragged when I recorded my original home demo, so it felt right to get back to that energy tracking the song in the studio," says Stevens.

Although most of *WONDERBLOOM* came to life in Brooklyn, Stevens journeyed to Los Angeles, North Carolina, and France in order to capture certain performances. Those travels included a trip to Paris to work with harpist Laura Perrudin, where the two musicians spent five days holed up in Perrudin's apartment. "Laura is like some kind of mad-scientist fairy," Stevens says. "She'd sit there turning knobs on her pedals, then take a shish-kebab skewer and put it to the strings and whack it with a padded drumstick, and suddenly it sounded like Satan's cocktail party or something. "Laura created so many other worldly sounds like nothing I'd ever heard before."

In reflecting on the six-month-long process of recording and producing *WONDERBLOOM*, Stevens recalls the relentless focus and often 18-hour workday with an unequivocal fondness. To that end, the album's title nods to the Titan Arum, a plant whose singularly massive cluster of flowers takes a staggering eight years to blossom. "What inspires me about the Titan Arum is how hard it works and how long it takes to bloom, and how beautiful the payoff is," says Stevens. "It's about working for the long game rather than instant gratification, and resisting that temptation to get hung up on all the little things on the way to something great."

For Stevens, the most glorious payoff in *WONDERBLOOM* lies in her utter delight in the album's outcome. "This is the first record that I feel inspired to dance to, and I think that has everything to do with how much I shared the experience as I went along," she reveals. And with the release of *WONDERBLOOM*, Stevens hopes that her audience might feel a similar lightening of the spirit. "I feel very strongly that music is a lifting force, and that many people don't realize how deeply we need that right now," she says. "I would love for people to have fun to this album, and to enjoy it in happy times and in sad times—the same way I find strength in all my favorite records."