

Neko Case turns low point into artistic high



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There's a theory -- one despised by the purveyors of relentless positivity in our culture -- that the greatest art is born in extreme pain. Most artists of any medium seem to peak when they're at the nadir of their emotional experience.

Adding ammunition to that argument is Neko Case's new album with the Fiona Apple-approved title "The Worse Things Get, The Harder I Fight, The Harder I Fight, The More I Love You," due Tuesday, five days before she headlines at Pioneer Courthouse Square on the final night of Musicfest NW.

It's her first record since 2009's Grammy-nominated "Middle Cyclone," and the creative result of depression brought on by the death of several family members and the realization that her life choices had left her very much alone.

"I'm in a world that doesn't really think it's very normal to be single, not have any kids and be a straight American woman in her 40s," Case told Billboard in July. "It's like, 'Are you crazy? Why don't you have these things?' I had to go through all of my personal paperwork and go, 'I really did choose that. I own it.'"

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That someone who has been on her own since the age of 15 thinks feminism is underrated and unabashedly digs potty humor feels that way illustrates the ongoing push-pull that, even now, dogs women who choose art or career over a more traditional path.

Part of accepting the life she's created can be seen on the ink that now adorns Case's forearms. The tattoos, which read "Scorned as Timber" and "Beloved of the Sky" (references to the work of artist Emily Carr) were something she says she's wanted for 20 years.

It's all part of a continuing evolution for the Virginia-born, Tacoma-raised singer-songwriter, who first gained serious attention as an alt-country sweetheart with 1997's rockabilly-tinged "The Virginian." Five more solo albums later (and as many more as a member of Canadian indie-pop band the New Pornographers), she's far removed from retro not only in style but in subject matter.

"The Worse Things Get" is full of poetic ruminations that are at once painfully personal and yet universal enough to feel like an emotional gut-punch to anyone listening. For every abstract line, there's another to follow that will make you laugh in recognition.

"I remember the '80s/I remember the puffy sleeves," she scoffs on the sparsely arranged "I'm From Nowhere." That track is followed by the full-on jangle-pop of "Man," which features Portland's M. Ward, of She & Him, on guitar and explores Case's ambivalence about gender roles.

"I think I just want balance," she recently told The Guardian. "I want to be equal parts man and woman, no matter what I am at the gynecologist."

The album is equal parts experimental pop, rock and folk. That may have to do with the fact that it was recorded with an army of Case's favorite collaborators in several cities -- including Tucker Martine in Portland. While many of the songs lack a conventional structure, they're affecting nevertheless, mainly because of Case's expressive vocal delivery, which lures you in with its clarity and moodiness -- then bites.

"When you catch light/You look like your mother," is the opening line of "Wild Creatures," the first song on the album. There's no instrumental preamble and no mistaking the fact that whether Case is singing about herself or someone else, it's not intended as a compliment.

And then there's "Nearly Midnight, Honolulu," a melodically wandering, completely a cappella account of a parent's careless verbal abuse, and a validation of the child on the receiving end of it. Hearing it feels like witnessing an emotional drive-by shooting you were powerless to stop.

The echo-heavy, sonar-infused "Where Did I Leave That Fire" closes the album by revealing a woman who has nearly lost the will to create. "Where did I leave that fire?" she pines. Then later, a voice tells her, "I do believe we have your fire, lady/You can pick it up if you come down with ID."

She obviously did: With the help of therapy, medication and self-expression, Case is no longer trapped in a midlife miasma. She's already working on the follow-up to this album and says there's fresh New Pornographers music on the way as well.

"I feel like I kind of fixed my engine," she said in the Billboard interview. "I went and got a rebuild from Chevy, with all new parts. I've got a nitrous button now. I'm back."