**Samantha Crain**

***Under Branch & Thorn & Tree***

**2015 Bio**

*“I don’t write protest songs in the traditional sense,” Samantha Crain says, talking about the songs on her new album, Under Branch & Thorn & Tree. “But I’m always listening to the voices of people around me. These stories are told from the perspective of the underdog, the 99% of us that are working people. They might not be literal protest songs, but the lives of the people within these songs speak at the same volume if you listen.”* — Samantha Crain

Crain’s songs are full of expansive melodies that veer off in unpredictable directions, with lyrics that explore conflicting emotions with uncommon insight and compassion. She has a jazz singer’s phrasing, often breaking words into rhythmic fragments that land before and after the beat, stretching syllables or adding grace notes to uncover hidden nuances in her lyrics.

*Under Branch & Thorn & Tree* was recorded at Tiny Telephone Studios in San Francisco, with John Vanderslice (The Mountain Goats, Spoon), who also helmed last year’s *Kid Face*. “We both like spontaneous creation and analog sound,” Crain says. “We recorded straight to two-inch tape on a Studer 24-track machine and mixed down to 1/2-inch tape on an Ampex machine. The pre-amps were tube and we never used a computer. Our effects were done manually through tape looping and manipulation. Most of the arrangements happened in the moment, as we recorded. My guitar and vocals are all first or second takes.”

These intimate vignettes are marked by Crain’s careful attention to the tiny details that often escape us, supported by the subtle musical settings she crafted with Vanderslice and the backing musicians. Jesse Aycock’s (Hard Working Americans, The Secret Sisters) lap steel mimics the smooth, icy sound of a country guitar to compliment Crain’s high-spirited vocal on “Big Rock,” the album’s most exuberant track. Anne Lillis adds rhythmic tension with her stop and start fills on the chorus. Bright, chiming keyboards from John Calvin Abney sprinkle “Kathleen” with stardust, as Crain’s heartfelt vocals drift through an expansive soundscape that suggests the comforting warmth of a long summer night.

The Magik\*Magik Orchestra’s plush strings (led by Minna Choi) and Crain’s bluesy acoustic strumming fill “When You Come Back” (featuring vocals from the Dodos’ Meric Long) with an aching melancholy as Crain describes the pain of seeing an old flame with his new spark. “Buried heartbreak can become very public in a small town,” she says. Crain’s propulsive fingerpicking, long sustained notes created from looping tape recordings of Aycock’s pedal steel and the sonorous strings of the Magik\*Magik Orchestra bring a poignant sadness to “Elk City.” The song describes the fate of a working class woman left behind when a boomtown goes bust. The album’s overall tone may be somber, but Crain’s vocals and the sensitive, striking arrangements bring unexpected flashes of light to even the darkest scenarios.

“This album is definitely social on many levels,” Crain explains. “Much of it is about the plight of the working class woman. We are multi-dimensional individuals, not silly emotional creatures who depend on men. And it baffles me that I feel the need to bring light to that in 2015 but I feel strongly that the truth of that message is still hushed.”

A Choctaw Indian, Crain grew up in the small town of Shawnee, OK listening to her father’s Dylan and Neil Young records, and trying her hand at writing short stories. Crain didn’t get serious about songwriting until after high school when she picked up the guitar her father had given her when she was 12 and reworked a series of stories into her first songs. The songs became her self-released EP, *The Confiscation: A Musical Novella*.

“I wanted to be a writer in high school, but then I heard [songwriter] Jason Molina (*Magnolia Electric Co.*, *Songs: Ohia)*. His songs use plain-spoken language, but they’re pure poetry. I wanted to learn to speak in that language and wanted to see the world, so I naively threw myself into a wayfaring sort of life and started booking my own tours with barely 10 songs under my belt. I fell in love with the troubadour’s life and ten years later, here I am.”

She began performing as a guitar and drum duo with fellow musician and at the time, roommate, Beth Bombara. She moved on to a full band, Samantha Crain and The Midnight Shivers, getting attention for her dark vision and unique singing style. She signed with Ramseur Records and made *Songs in the Night* (2009) with The Midnight Shivers, before going back to being a solo artist for *You (Understood*). She worked with Vanderslice on the “Simple Jungle” seven-inch and then on *Kid Face* in 2013. The album created a dense, sorrowful atmosphere and set the stage for the expansive emotional expression of *Under Branch & Thorn & Tree*. “It’s important that art is still being made by the folk, the common people. This album focuses on being a part of and continuing that tradition.”

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