

Alice Howe knew. There she was, recording at the legendary Fame Recording Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, standing on ground soaked in soul, and she knew the truth.

She had to dig deeper than ever before.

Her voice had carried her this far in folk circles, but now she needed to tap into the spirits of the musical titans pictured in photos on the walls. They called to her, demanding nothing less.

“There is so much history there, and I did feel like there was a certain amount of pressure to deliver and be a singer,” she recalls. “I’m in this room with Aretha Franklin and Etta James looking down on me, and it’s like that Mona Lisa thing where the eyes follow you around the room and you’re like: ‘Hi, ladies!’ Those are singers with a capital S.”

Channeling Fame’s ghosts, she mined her heart, poured everything into her vocals, and created her second and latest album, *Circumstance* — 11 stirring tracks that pull no punches weaving together a vibrant tapestry of southern rock, country, folk, classic soul and blues. As an old soul inside a 30-something millennial, Alice put her stamp on American music’s timeless strands with standout originals evoking both classic singer-songwriters and the sounds that once filled airwaves, roadhouses and juke joints with desire and heartbreak.

“This album tells a story of coming back to myself, and to my power,” she says.

To reach that pinnacle took a pair of Muscle Shoals sessions two years apart. The first session in 2019 happened on a whim, but the results were pure gold, enough to convince Alice she needed to return for the rest of an album. Despite delays, she made good on her promise to herself.

“It really hit me that there was something special in that room, and with that band, and there was something that it brought out in me that was just very compelling. Right away, I could tell that I wanted to go back.”

Three of the original tracks she wrote solo, with the remaining seven co-written with her creative partner, Freebo. A veteran rock and folk musician who was Bonnie Raitt’s bass player during the 1970s, he backed Alice on the album on fretless bass as well as produced and arranged it.

She’s justifiably proud of the result, as much for the vocals as the lyrics.

“I think that what I do with my voice is the result of everything I’ve taken in throughout my life, listening to other singers and learning along the way,” she says. “What I was able to do on this record is the best representation of that, the culmination of where I’m at right now in my life.”

Her powerhouse record bears an apt title, considering that a series of pivotal circumstances has led her to the exciting point of breaking out of the folk mold and into the wider Americana music world.

For starters, take her childhood in Newton, Massachusetts. In her parents' eclectic record collection, she found a treasure trove of influences: from the blues of Muddy Waters, Mississippi John Hurt and Taj Mahal to the folk of Joan Baez and Kate and Anna McGarrigle to the rock of James Taylor, Joni Mitchell and Jackson Browne. Their emotional honesty and evocative lyrics appealed to a girl feeling out of her time and compelled to write stories about her life, even surreptitiously during math class.

"I always felt really connected to the music I listened to growing up," she remembers. "My parents had this great record collection, and I would listen to the folk and rock and '70s songwriters that I connected with. They just always hit me on an emotional level. Like the lyrics: I was always really tuned into how somebody was saying something. What is it about the way Jackson Browne describes an emotion? How can I do that in my own way too?"

Summers in Vermont at rustic camps or her family's cabin also shaped her with tranquil days that nurtured her imagination and sharpened her powers of observation and reflection, paving the way for the future introspective songwriter she would become.

"I am very sensitive to the people in my life, and I feel this compulsion to describe them in my poetry," she says. "I want to share what I know about life and say it in a way that I think will resonate with other people, because I think that nothing I'm saying is unique to me. It's all universal human experiences, which is why I love history, too. I always said in college that's why I studied history, because I was always fascinated to read things that were written a long time ago and notice how a lot of our experiences are unchanged throughout history. There's just a timeless aspect to songs. Even the folk songs I listened to growing up, they would tell stories of events that happened long ago, but they feel like you could know those people in those songs if you applied them to your own life."

Her life took a momentous turn in Seattle. She was a Smith College graduate with a medieval European history degree working in the Dusty Strings Music Store, camping on the weekends and playing local gigs. Everything seemed comfortable, but an inner restlessness stirred, a calling beckoned.

Alice listened.

She moved back to her hometown, broke off a longtime relationship and threw herself into being a musician, releasing a five-track EP *You've Been Away So Long* that she recorded just before leaving Seattle. It yielded a top song on Folk Radio, *Homeland Blues*, which gave her some momentum until another fortuitous circumstance got her truly rolling.

Attending the Northeast Regional Folk Alliance conference, she met Freebo, a prolific Los Angeles musician who has accompanied numerous big names, including Maria Muldaur, Jackson Browne, Ringo Starr and Dr. John. He heard her play, and she made an impression. When they ran into each other again the next year in Kansas City at a national conference, a

friendship formed, the start of a fruitful partnership. She accepted his offer to assemble a band, book a Bakersfield, California studio, and cut a full album.

“It was her voice that I heard, the sound of it,” he says of what drew him to her. “I thought, ‘Wow, that’s really unique. It’s the timbre, the legitimacy and the honesty. There’s a natural, enrapturing, unaffected beauty to Alice’s voice.”

“I mean what I say, and I mean what I’m singing,” she notes. “The way I’m singing it, it’s just who I am and just how I feel. I think people respond to that.”

Those three days in Bakersfield produced her 2019 *Visions* album, a “modern love letter to ‘60s and ‘70s folk and timeless blues” featuring both originals and her interpretations of songs from the family record collection that shaped her musical consciousness. No longer was she a novice on the fringe. Dubbed a rising star in modern folk, she had held her own with seasoned pros in the studio and had an engaging record — with a Muddy Waters cover no less — to show for it.

But she had room to grow, and a chance encounter opened the door. She and Freebo bumped into an old friend, guitarist Will McFarlane, another ‘70s Bonnie Raitt band alumnus who spent decades with the Fame house band. McFarlane offered to set up the first Muscle Shoals session and play on it to boot. Months later, they took him up on the invitation, bringing together a band of all-star session musicians that included Seattle-based guitarist Jeff Fielder, an old friend of Alice’s whose playing has graced all three of her releases.

The session yielded three finished tracks, and Alice was hooked on the Muscle Shoals sound. She was planning her return when COVID-19 struck, placing the project on hold. In the end, however, the delay turned out to be yet another defining circumstance.

“I was so disappointed to not go back right away, but what that actually did for me was it gave me all this time to write and arrange the songs with Freebo, and to go back and forth with the choices of the songs, to listen to what we had done in the first session and think about what I could do better. I even had the time to take some vocal lessons, which I had never done. I was really prepared, so by the time we finally went back, everybody was so ready on every level. I knew I was ready to complete the project, that I had a clear purpose and vision for why I was there.”

The final result covers a wide expanse of emotional ground, with Alice’s deeply personal lyrics chronicling a journey of grief, reflection, discovery and renewal — all painted with a varied musical palette ranging from haunting ballads to driving rock ‘n’ roll.

“You’ve Been Away So Long,” a remake of her EP title track, leads off with a resolution to make peace with the turmoil of the past. From there, the album kicks into high gear with “Somebody’s New Lover Now,” its chiming guitar and Hammond B3 organ creating a perfect fusion of modern country and soul. “Love Has No Rules” features catchy opening guitar hooks, and the B3 returns in the rocking, ebullient “What About You,” gliding over crunchy chords like an

unburdened spirit. Even higher soars “With You By My Side,” a serious groove with tight horns and smooth background singers that could have come from Fame’s R&B archives.

But there’s also quieter energy that burns just as brightly. “Let Go” calls forth pensive guitar and lilting piano to tell a tale of healing, while the atmospheric “Something Calls to Me” evokes a mist-filled bayou night and “Travelin ’Soul” serves a shot of country blues straight up.

“I definitely went through a lot of change, on a personal level, in leaving a long relationship and feeling like a huge shift happened in my life and I was striking out on my own in a new way,” Alice says. “So I think there’s a lot of that in this record. There’s a lot about discovering your own inner power and your independence, and then finding the people or the relationships that serve you in this new phase, the people who get you in your new form. We’re always changing and shedding the old version and coming into a new version of ourselves.”

As a reflection of her evolution, *Circumstance* turned out to be everything she hoped for — a personal, soulful nod to her influences and the music she loves, all of it sung old-school without auto-tuning. In spirit it draws from admired singers — Alison Krauss or the 1970s Laurel Canyon circle — but its soul is pure Alice Howe.

“I was just trying to be myself. That’s all it is,” Alice says. “It’s not trying to be a throwback. It’s not trying to be anything other than: This is who I am as an artist, as a singer and a writer, and that’s what you get.”

A formative childhood. A crossroads decision. A momentous reunion. A golden invitation to step inside musical history. A creative lull. Each circumstance led her to this point, with the road stretching ahead and singing its siren song.

“I long for the platform to share what I do with an audience, and to find the people who my music resonates with, and I think you can’t do that at home,” Alice says. “You have to go out and find that.”

*“I’m guilty, I got nothing more to say
I’m not a bad girl I’m just used to gettin ’my way
I got a dreamin ’soul from another time
A willing heart and an open mind
If you should care to find
You can read me line by line”*

— “Line by Line”

Bio by Chris Rosenblum