



***Buck Up* - Carsie Blanton**

Buck Up, the new studio album from singer and songwriter Carsie Blanton, opens with a siren. The warning – or call to (dis)arms – segues into the first notes of “Twister.” Finger snaps alone accompany Blanton’s smoky vocals, before piano, upright bass, cello, trumpet, and drums join the proceedings. You’re immediately drawn in to her riveting tale of natural – and erotic – disaster. Brimming with catchy hooks, sensual vocals, and lyrics boasting a gift for rhyme and meter, *Buck Up* is Blanton’s melodic mandate for survival following the 2016 presidential election: passion, lust, and humor. “There are two themes on this record,” says Blanton of *Buck Up*’s ten electrifying tracks. “One is the feeling of catastrophe happening in American politics, and the other is this feeling of personal catastrophe”: when you fall for “That Boy,” for example, a reckless wild child, the type who populate her life and imagination. Though *Buck Up* may be “basically about being depressed,” according to Blanton, “if there’s not a sense of humor or playfulness, I don’t want to listen to it. Music is about play.”

Over the past dozen years, Blanton has been making music that personifies play. Her work has been called “impeccably catchy” by critic Robert Christgau, with musician John Oates admiring her songs’ “sly wit and urbane imagery” that remind him of Cole Porter. She’s toured across America and Europe sharing stages with Madeleine Peyroux, The Weepies and others. Though based in New Orleans since 2012, the self-described “proud socialist” has been on the road since her teens. As a child in tiny Luray, Virginia, she began playing piano at 6 and learned guitar at 13. The budding songwriter’s life was forever changed when her grandpa sent her a batch of jazz recordings for her thirteenth birthday. “Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Louis Armstrong – that’s when it started for me,” Blanton says of the gift two decades ago that remains “the most inspiring to me as a songwriter and a singer. I’d started performing and he wanted to make sure my musical education was well rounded.” She was deeply smitten with Holiday’s recording of Irving Berlin’s “How Deep Is the Ocean”: “I just love him,” she says of the composer, “and Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hart. They’re all masters of music and words.” Such influences would surface as Blanton began crafting her own witty lyrics and using jazz phrasing in her vocals.

Blanton left the Blue Ridge Mountains an angst-ridden 16-year-old and began living within an artistic community in Eugene, Oregon, until she was 20. There, guitar in hand, “I realized by being creative, I could be a happier person and take care of myself,” she says. After more travels, she settled in Philadelphia, where she worked at a nonprofit while recording her first album. She left her job to make music her life and has never looked back. By the time she was 23, she was touring solo and as an opener for such artists as the Wood Brothers. Vocalist/guitarist Oliver Wood, an early mentor who produced a previous Blanton album, lends his distinctive fingerpicking and vocals to *Buck Up*’s exuberant title track.

Since locating to New Orleans, Blanton has “become more prolific as a songwriter,” she says. “There’s something about the spirit of the city. It’s very musical but also very dark with a lot of pathos.” Her last release, 2016’s *So Ferocious*, documented her love affair with the city, and the Big Easy vibe imbues her new album. Sequestered in her NOLA home, she wrote the first song for *Buck Up*, “Bed,” in November 2016: “I’m not gonna get out of bed today/I’ve tried to do it but what can I say/Every time I turn on the news it’s a kick to the head/Why don’t you wake me up when the president’s dead.” “That song shook loose a lot of feelings I had about the political landscape and growing up in America,” Blanton reports. “If I

can write one song that really captures the feeling of a project, then the rest come more easily.” In fact, bed imagery trickles throughout the album’s tracks.

For the recording, Blanton returned to the south Jersey studio of guitarist Pete Donnelly (the Figgs, Graham Parker), who coproduced *Buck Up* with Blanton. Joining them was her longtime bassist and sometime co-writer Joe Plowman, keyboardist Patrick Firth, and drummer Nicholas Falk.

While her lyrics grapple with some dark subject matter, Blanton’s engaging, captivating vocals are relaxed and flirty on “Jacket,” her ode to the female gaze and masturbation. She sounds wistful and sweet on the strings-and-accordion-accented “Harbor,” and sex-drenched on “Desire,” “an apocalyptic love story,” one of her favorite genres, she says. “Lust and passion and romantic energy are a beautiful, joyful source of pleasure in life,” says Blanton, “but also a source for heartache and devastation. It reminds you of how short life is, so it feels very connected to death and mortality to me. One of my major inspirations as a songwriter is feeling the erotic connection. When I get connected to the erotic force, I feel so turned on by life and also hooked up to death at the same point.” Song ideas flow when she “goes out there and looks for some sexy young man who’s a mess – that’s the muse that works for me. That’s where I get my mojo.” In addition to songcraft, her erotic life inspired her to invent “a sexy card game, *The F’ing Truth*,” says Blanton, intended for “people who f’ and tell” and deemed a “f’ing blast” by sex columnist Dan Savage.

Blanton’s thing for bad boys can bring moody moments to her songs, but her cheeky takedown of male hipsters adds lighthearted fun to *Buck Up*. The upbeat “Mustache,” a co-write with Plowman, asks, “why’d you have to grow that mustache,” while its sonics, complete with calliope-sounding keys, is her homage to another musical favorite, the Supremes.

The heart of the album, says Blanton, resides within the pop-rock anthem, “American Kid.” Its hummable tune camouflages Blanton’s downhearted lyrics detailing disillusionment that comes with the realization that “we done them wrong”: “It’s my journey from being a standard liberal moderate to being really radicalized and losing my belief in American capitalism. I want to connect with this feeling of ‘we can be compassionate and we can change what we’re doing and not take it lying down.’”

At the crossroads of nihilism and determination – the former described in the harrowing “Battle” (“I know I won’t survive the battle in my heart”) – Blanton chooses to “Buck Up,” which closes the album with mirth. “Buck Up” is a “rallying cry,” says Blanton. “Enough with the sadness and wallowing about America. We have to get people together to make change, even though it’s daunting.” Paraphrasing Tom Waits, she quips, “I hope this album will help to improve the quality of our suffering.” And with a feisty nod to the work of another hero, John Prine, she coos, “Make ‘em laugh if you can’t lick ‘em.”



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