

jaimie harris

Jaimie Harris turned 30 during the pandemic. It's a milestone that is a rite of passage even during normal times. But for this Texas-born singer-songwriter, it came in the midst of one of the strangest and most tumultuous periods in American history. When the world stopped during lockdown, **Harris**, like many others, found herself gazing back into the past, ruminating on the nature of her hometown and family origins, and reckoning with their imprint on her. The term 'nostalgia' derives from the Greek words *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain), and if **Harris's** *Boomerang Town* can be regarded as a nostalgic album, it is only nostalgic in the sense that the longing for home is a desire to return to the past and heal old wounds.

"I'm at an age where I'm wrestling with trying to understand the nature of my family," **Harris** says. "There's been suicide, suicide ideation, and there's certainly been addiction all through my family. My dad's father died of suicide when he was 25 and I was 5. I couldn't imagine not having my dad right now."

Harris's sophomore effort, *Boomerang Town* marks a bold step forward for this country-folk-leaning singer-songwriter. It is an arresting, ambitious song-cycle that explores the generational arc of family, the stranglehold of addiction, and the fragile ties that bind us together as Americans.

For **Harris**, the album began gestating around 2016, a time of great loss for many in the Americana community, with the songwriter losing several musicians close to her. The shift in the nation's political landscape had ushered in a new level of polarization that saw whole swaths of cultural life being demonized. For someone who grew up in a small town outside of Waco, **Harris** believed the values instilled in her by her parents were not entirely in line with how many on the left were viewing — and vilifying — Christians, citing them as responsible for the new change in leadership. As a person in recovery, **Harris** has had to re-evaluate her own connection to faith and find strength in a higher power ("Though he's not necessarily a blue-eyed Jesus," she laughs), though she certainly knows what it's like to "be told how to vote" in a Southern church setting.

It was from the intersection of these social, personal, and political currents the album was born. And while much of the material on *Boomerang Town* was inspired by personal experience, the songs on this collection are far from autobiographical xeroxed copies. More than anything, they come from a place of emotional truth.

Boomerang Town traces the fortunes of a host of characters who live on the knife's edge between hope and despair. The title track, whose sound recalls the best of Mary Chapin Carpenter's '90s work, features a young couple from a small-town working dead-end jobs who get "knocked up" and have their dreams put on hold. It is a portrait of rural desperation and the restless search for salvation against long odds. "This is what it's like to be a part of the post- "'Born to Run' Generation," **Harris** quips. "Springsteen's generation had somewhere to run to. I'm not so sure mine does." For the characters in these songs, escape isn't always a matter of geographical distance.

"I tried a lot of perspectives [on this one]," **Harris** says about writing the title track. "My parents are high-school sweethearts, and I was an accident and they're still happily married. I worked at Wal-Mart when I was 19. I reflected on this guy who was the brother of a good friend of mine. He didn't drop out. He knocked-up his girlfriend and went into the military. Certainly [the song] is a combination of me and not me. It was me thinking about what might have gone differently for my parents, who are still in Waco and own a business there."

Harris's father, whom she counts as a big supporter and responsible for much of her musical education, took her to the first Austin City Limits Music Festival, where she had the life-changing, Eureka moment of seeing Emmylou Harris, Patty Griffin, and Buddy and Julie Miller perform on stage at the same time. It was then the young **Harris** knew what she had to do. She had found her ticket out.

Harris continues: "Why was I able to get out of my boomerang town? Why are others stuck there, longing to leave but unable to find their way out? Writing these songs, bringing these narrators to life, brought me closer to the answers," she says.

Themes of grief and addiction permeate other sections of the record. "How Could You Be Gone," which **Harris** wrote with her partner, the venerable folk songwriter Mary Gauthier, reflects on the passing of a close friend during the pandemic, as well as the 2017 death of **Harris's** mentor and compadre Jimmy LaFave, a long-time fixture on the Americana scene who succumbed to cancer. "It's been my experience that grief operates on its own timeline," **Harris** says. "I wanted this track to build and repeat with intensity to mirror the experience of relentless grief." Another song, "Fall (Devin's Song)," is about a former childhood classmate of **Harris's** who was accidentally shot and killed in the sixth grade. The song was inspired by a series of "In Memoriam" pieces the boy's mother wrote to the local paper, and the song serves as a tribute to both of them, as well as a commentary on the timeless nature of grief.

One of the album's standout tracks is the lilting, Irish-influenced "The Fair and Dark Haired Lad," a Chicks' type-number that grapples with the seductive nature of alcohol. Another tune that deals with the demon rum, "Sam's," is far more dirge-like, and its dark, circular melody mirrors the claustrophobia and sense of trapping that comes with the onset of addiction and mental collapse.

Boomerang Town is not entirely a lament, however, with songs like "Love is Gonna Come Again" and the wistful "Missing Someone" shining with hope in the face of the darkness. For this is a record that understands that love and grief are two sides of the same coin. It also announces the arrival of a great new songwriter on the scene.

"My goal is to just write the best possible song I can write," **Harris** says, "and I wanted to have ten songs that made sense together sonically. I still believe in the album format, and I wanted to lay the groundwork as a solid songwriter." On *Boomerang Town*, **Jaimee Harris**, who was able to find her way out — unlike so many others — has accomplished all that, and much more.