

## Amanda Shires

### Down Fell the Doves

Just in case the title alone wasn't a dead give away, Amanda Shires' *Down Fell the Doves* is not a record for the faint of heart, faith or spirit. Not that anyone who heard her last album would have expected such. Carrying *Lightning*, the critically acclaimed 2011 breakthrough that put Shires on the map as one of Americana music's most arresting new voices (and *Texas Music* magazine's 2011 Artist of the Year), was a kudzu-tangled web of frayed heartstrings and combustible desire that revealed the one-time "little fiddle player from Lubbock" to be a grown woman unafraid to "get wrecked in love" and dish out the same with keen poetic insight and unnervingly mature, femme-fatale conviction. But as striking as *Lightning* was, *Down Fell the Doves* (Shires' debut for Lightning Rod Records) is where the gloves really come off.

"There's a lot of destruction on this record," says Shires, the observation coming a thoughtful pause after her somewhat casual dismissal of the album's "Box Cutters" — a disturbingly beautiful suicidal daydream — as just being "a little bit of dark humor."

"I wrote that one in a haze of delirious exhaustion," she says of the song that imagines, amongst other possible exit strategies, the sweet surrender of "a rose-petaled, eyes-closed collapse" in a warm blood bath.

Maybe you just had to be there.

"I don't know," Shires concedes with a disarming, self-effacing chuckle, her lilting West Texas drawl as yet unbowed by years of living in Nashville and nonstop touring. "I always hate giving things away, because I like it when people can hear a song and make their own stories. But I believe in that old saying, 'What happens in the dark comes to light.' In order to create something, you've got to destroy something: You can't have good without bad, you can't have life without death or growth without decay. And with everything that happens, you're learning something; I think that in this record I realized how much of learning and life experience is relearning. And there's beauty in that. So although there's a lot of destruction and things falling apart on the album, there's also rebuilding going on. I think even in the darkest material there's an inkling of hope."

She addresses that theme directly in arguably the album's most gorgeously bittersweet track, "The Drop and Lift." Elsewhere, it's left to the listener to gleam whatever hope one can from the likes of "Box

Cutters” and “Deep Dark Below” — a somber meditation on the nature of evil (“Monsters are men that the devil gets in ... it’s usually the weak ones he finds”). Ditto the equally unsettling, relationship-haunting demons stirred in “Devastate” and “If I” (the latter of which asks, with chilling frankness, “If I were to break a promise that I made ... would you really want me to come clean?”). In the album-closing “The Garden,” a striking still life of an ill-fated love gone to seed, the titular doves drop “gray-eyed and flightless” like a hard rain of fallen angels, littering the ground like spoiled fruit and jagged shards of broken heart and innocence.

Juxtaposing that at times overwhelmingly grim emotional terrain, though, are songs that deliver just enough light to keep the shadows themselves on edge. Noting that “all of the songs are reflective of what I’ve been doing the last two years,” Shires — who was married in early 2013 to fellow singer-songwriter Jason Isbell (with none other than Todd Snider conducting the nuptials) — coos unashamedly when asked about the tender-hearted “Stay.” “Oh, that’s a cute one,” she gushes playfully. “Pretty sappy, huh?” And then there’s the flirty but reverent “A Song for Leonard Cohen,” in which she fantasizes about “comparing mythologies” with her favorite songwriter over a drink or 12.

“I wrote it as an exercise on his birthday,” says Shires, who has a verse from Cohen’s “Hallelujah” tattooed on her forearm. “But I did not write it in hopes that he would hear it, In fact, if I had thought there’d ever be a chance in hell of him actually hearing it, I never would have written it, because that would be mortifying. But I admire and respect him so much, and that would be my dream encounter with him. Dreaming is a safe way to have fun.”

Elsewhere on *Down Fell the Doves*, Shires dreams of being not only “careless, weightless and free,” but blessed/cursed with the ability to “see through everything” (“Look Like a Bird”) and, just for kicks, impervious to bullets, hatchets, hand grenades and “all the ways that words cut through/against promises breaking into open wounds” (“Bulletproof.”)

“Wouldn’t that be cool?” she asks. “I was playing a show in Tampa, Fla., and this guy named Tiger Bill showed up to the merch table with this bag with tufts of hair and claws and stuff in it — including this Siberian tiger claw. And I was like, ‘Well thank you for this bag of crazy parts,’ because I don’t know — with gifts, it’s rude not to be gracious, right? But he said that he took care of animals and no tigers were hurt — they shed their claws. And then he went, ‘Seriously, you have to hang onto the tiger claw. They say in China that they make you invincible.’”

She wrote the song the following day — and still keeps said tiger claw handy ... just in case. “But I don’t need anybody testing it out or anything,” she says.

When it came time to capture magic in the studio, though, the only good luck totems Shires relied upon were her trusty fiddle (and ukulele) and well over half a lifetime’s worth of firsthand playing and recording experience — augmented by the decades more brought by guitarist Isbell, bassist Jimbo Hart, drummer Chad Gamble and producer Andy LeMaster (Bright Eyes, R.E.M.). The album was recorded at LeMaster’s Chase Park Transduction studio in Athens, Ga.

“I like a lot of the records Andy’s worked on, which is how we met,” Shires says. “And Chad and Jimbo are both from Jason’s band, so it was mostly a group of people that I had already developed a rapport with. But this was the first record I’ve made where I really let the producer ultimately make the call of how things were going to go. I brought demos in — which was another first for me — but I just left a lot of stuff up to Andy, which worked well because we had a lot of the same ideas.”

Though not without its share of mood-enhancing embellishments, like the horns on “Stay” arranged by Shires and trombonist Chad Fisher, the sonic landscape of *Down Fell the Doves* is as haunted and provocative as Shires’ lyrics and melodies. Not to mention as rich with compelling contrasts, with the scrape and howl of Isbell’s guitars offsetting and perfectly complementing the delicate “drop and lift” of Shires’ quavering vibrato and almost supernaturally expressive violin — an instrument that, just like the devil’s in “Deep Dark Below,” “sounds like your deepest desire, lonely and bruised getting over being used.”

“It’s a lonesome instrument,” marvels Shires, who picked up her first violin at age 10, played Western swing music all through her teens (with the legendary Texas Playboys, no less) and continues to find new and interesting sounds on the versatile instrument that surprise even her. “I like the ways you can make it sound like wind, or fire, or ... like wild. And I like that it can also be pretty.

“But that’s not me,” she hastens to add with characteristic humility. “That’s the fiddle, because they’ve got their own minds. I just follow mine around and make sure it stays in one piece.”