

I'm With Her

A band of extraordinary chemistry and exquisite musicianship, I'm With Her features Sara Watkins, Sarah Jarosz, and Aoife O'Donovan. Collectively, the multi-Grammy-Award-winners have released seven solo efforts, co-founded two seminal bands (Nickel Creek and Crooked Still), and contributed to critically acclaimed albums from a host of esteemed artists. But from its very first moments, their full-length debut *See You Around* reveals the commitment to creating a wholly unified band sound. With each track born from close songwriting collaboration, I'm With Her builds an ineffable magic from their finespun narratives and breathtaking harmonies. The result is an album both emotionally raw and intricate, revealing layers of meaning and insight within even the most starkly adorned track.

Co-produced by Ethan Johns (Ryan Adams, Laura Marling, Paul McCartney) and the band and recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios in a tiny English village near Bath, *See You Around* delivers a warmly textured yet stripped-down sound that proves both fresh and timeless. To achieve the album's intimate feel, I'm With Her recorded live in the tight confines of the Wood Room, all three members performing in the same room without monitors or headphones. With its piercingly lyricism, *See You Around* also finds I'm With Her showing the uncompromising honesty of their songwriting. That intensity is heightened by the band's effortless harmonizing, which the New York Times has praised as "sweetly ethereal, or as tightly in tandem as country sibling teams like the Everly Brothers, or as hearty as mountain gospel."

Layered with lush guitar tones and crystalline harmonies, *See You Around's* title track opens the album with a breakup ballad of rare nuance ("It's about coming to the end of a long relationship where you both run in the same circles, and that melancholy feeling of knowing you're going to have to keep seeing that person again and again," Jarosz explains). A bittersweet mood endures for songs like "Ain't That Fine," a wistful meditation on existential ups and downs that ultimately discovers solace in its reflection and reckoning (sample lyric: "I can't believe the things I put my mother through/But it's alright, I guess we all deserve our turn to be a fool").

From track to track, I'm With Her infuses their sonic palette with so many unexpected and subtly captivating elements: the jagged guitar lines and chanteuse-like delivery of "I-89," the percussive vocal phrasing of "Game to Lose," the ghostly harmonies and eerie atmospherics of "Wild One." At the same time, the band's finely wrought lyrics gently shift from the darkly charged storytelling of "Pangaea" to the sleepy sensuality of "Ryland (Under the Apple Tree)" to the romantic travel tale of "Overland." And on the Gillian Welch-penned "Hundred Miles"—a gorgeously understated track, and the album's only song written outside the band—*See You Around* closes out with a world-weary but potent message of hope.

All through *See You Around*, I'm With Her exhibit a refined musicality that reflects their deep musical roots. After years of crossing paths in their intersecting scenes, the three musicians came together by happenstance for an off-the-cuff performance at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in summer 2014. The very same day, a mutual friend texted them with a last-minute request to open a show that night at the Sheridan Opera House. "We had two hours to prepare for a 30-minute set and we said, 'Let's do it, let's skip margaritas and rehearse,'" O'Donovan recalls. "We worked up six or seven songs in the bathroom, and then went on to this crazy-energetic crowd at one in the morning. I'll never forget how amazing that felt."

Later that year, Watkins, O'Donovan, and Jarosz met up in New York to prep for a series of European shows in early 2015, carefully crafting their own arrangements of songs by artists ranging from Jim Croce to Nina Simone. "When you're arranging a song, you're communicating in ways that sometimes can be really inefficient," says Watkins. "But with us it felt like we were all in a similar rhythm." As their chemistry continued to deepen, the trio soon founded I'm With Her and transformed the project into a fully realized band. "Once you decide it's a band, you can put it higher on your priority list and give it more attention," says O'Donovan. "The bar gets raised when something has an air of permanence about it, and that's definitely been the case for us."

Although I'm With Her spent most of 2015 performing at festivals around the world, the band also holed up for their first-ever writing session that summer in L.A. "By that point it had started to solidify that we travel well together, play well together, eat well together—it felt like we'd tested our compatibility in all these different zones," says Watkins. And after just four days of writing, it was clear that their compatibility extended to the art of songcraft. "I loved the songs, we all loved the songs," says Jarosz of that first batch of tracks penned in L.A. "I think that really sparked the flame for us to make a full record together."

When it came time to get working on the record, I'm With Her convened at a borrowed farmhouse in Vermont and spent over a week carving out new material, leaving only to replenish their supply of Heady Topper beer. "We were completely on lockdown and didn't interact with another human being for eight days," says O'Donovan. "If you can get through that and, at the end, still be so excited about what you're doing, then that says a lot about the whole creative flow as a band." Jarosz adds: "A lot of times you approach songwriting as a solitary act, or maybe choose to write with one other person you feel comfortable with. It's a whole other beast to have three people writing together, juggling all these different ideas and personalities. But somehow for us, all of the songwriting was just so seamless."

In Vermont, the band settled into their creative stride, but when the additional voice of producer Ethan Johns was added to the process in the studio, they found themselves starting another round of learning and growth. "Going into the recording, there were a lot of unknowns and a lot of questions," says Jarosz. "It was a challenge for us to figure out how to make our vision and Ethan's vision come together in a way that worked for everyone, and there was definitely some friction at times, but about halfway through we started to work it out." With each member playing guitar and handling various aspects of the instrumentation— including fiddle and ukulele for Watkins, mandolin and banjo for Jarosz, piano and synth for O'Donovan—the band cut most of the album live and under exceptionally close-knit conditions. "Ethan had the studio so that we played all in the same room and facing each other," Jarosz says. "There was really no separation between us at all."

In looking back on the making of *See You Around*, I'm With Her note that a sense of unity has sustained in every step—including the moments when one member's song idea failed to fly with the others. "If an idea doesn't get accepted, it's not like, 'I'm a failure, this will never be heard,'" says Watkins. "You just move on to the next thing and put that idea aside for something else. We don't have to be as precious with things, which really helps that forward-motion of creativity." It's exactly that dynamic spirit that, despite the album's many moments of graceful restraint, imbues so much of *See You Around* with a powerful urgency—or, as O'Donovan, puts it: "In this band, there's no time to get bogged down in what doesn't happen. It's all about what *is* happening."