



TRACK BY TRACK

self-titled album | october 16, 2020 on rounder records

Never Knew You Were Gone

Joseph:

We got together in a friend's giant wedding venue barn in central North Carolina to workshop these songs. With a loud and echoey tin roof, the barn's sonic limitations sort of dictated the process. We couldn't get too loud or we'd drown each other out. Every afternoon we'd have to quit during a spring storm, and at night the crickets and cicadas got loud right outside. I've lived in North Carolina all my life, but only over the last couple years have I been learning the names of all the trees, generally trying to get better at really noticing my habitat. Sandro Perri (producer) found the sound of summer cicadas in Asheville fascinating --he pulled out his cell phone to record a sound I usually barely register as background. A good reminder.

"Never Knew You Were Gone" is about a kid escaping violence and distraction at home into the natural world outside. His parents never knew he was gone, but he finds a hog-nosed snake and a cicada on a sycamore and looks at the stars. Feels like where he needs to be. In the last verse it's winter and the woods are bare and silent--everyone is either at home inside or else humans are all extinct, could go either way. It's not sad, just empty. Is nature beautiful (or even meaningful) if there's no one to witness it? Will anyone or anything notice when we disappear? If a tree falls in the forest, etc.

Jacob:

This song is a classic Joseph tune. Simple scenes painted beautifully and relatable moments that encourage you to ask a bigger set of questions of yourself. Set to an intricate finger picking and a driving groove. It was my first favorite song Joseph brought to these writing sessions.

Hey, Coyote

Joseph:

We were playing a show in Missoula, Montana, and I had the afternoon to explore town, feeling like a very fluent traveler, very at home in the world. A barista looked at me flatly and asked, "where are you from?" and it snapped me out of my little delusion. I'm not at home here, and in fact, we travel so much that I don't really feel at home anywhere. Why lie to ourselves? Why pretend? Because it's so sad not to. We spend our days moving between impersonal commercial spaces: hotel lobby, gas station, restaurant, venue, bar. I remember realizing once that every room I'd been in all day had been selling Doritos. Coyote is like Hermes, the trickster figure, God of travelers and transitions and commerce and language. I guess this song comes from wanting to have the option of leaving these in-between spaces and really being home somewhere.

Hourglass

Jacob:

"Hourglass" is about shedding the imposed expectations of life we all carry and what it means to arrive at a destination you had convinced yourself you needed to go and find the same emptiness you were surrounded by on the journey to get there. More about getting off a treadmill than finishing a race. On this album I hoped we would collaborate and write together in a different way than we had previously. This song represents that process and accomplishment so well. I had a verse and a howl and knew I needed help stitching it all together. Libby had a chorus, Joseph quickly found a second verse, and Wood and Yan settled into a groove that brought it to a sonic territory we hadn't been together before. And it all gave more meaning to the nuggets of the song than I knew it to have on my own.

Joseph:

I love when two totally separate ideas fit together unexpectedly. Not like puzzle pieces, which were made for each other, but in the way two ingredients create a new flavor. Sometimes one person's song is just one taste, and it needs someone else's idea to gain some context, to allow some tension between the two of them, to pose a question.

Libby:

This song began as an experiment, combining an orphan verse Jacob had written and an orphan chorus I had kicking around. The verse was about the frantic feeling of always trying to beat the clock; the chorus was about realizing the things you were once striving for don't exist anymore, or maybe they never did. It occurred to us that these two somewhat converse kinds of unease often go together: our anxiety about running out of time morphs into an anxiety about "the times." Both our sections of song lent themselves to an uptempo pop groove, which felt appropriate for the kind of electric paranoia in the lyrics, though it was somewhat unfamiliar territory for the band. Wood and Yan fell into that groove very naturally, and the rest of the band fell in behind them.

Your Body

Libby:

I love the song "Body's In Trouble" by Mary Margaret O'Hara and the way she struggles with the body being somehow both outside you and part of you. It's always felt bizarre to live in a culture where it's taken for granted that many people "hate their bodies" or are striving for "the body they always wanted," like a body has nothing to do with a self; at the same time, I think everyone is familiar with the feeling of their body and mind working at cross purposes. I get especially bogged down in these contradictions when I get on stage, the only woman up there most nights, trying to figure out what I want to wear or how I want to move. It's a lot of damned if you do, damned if you don't. So I feel like I'm riding a pendulum sometimes, tight skirts one night and turtlenecks the next, and all the while wondering if I'm teaching some young kid out there the opposite lesson they need to feel freer than I do when they get to be my age.

Joseph:

I think with a lot of these songs we're talking about finding love in the middle of a lot of disillusionment about the world. Holding those two things in balance. I love how this song takes the premise of love-within-chaos a step further and talks about desire, too. Why does it feel so complicated to want something? Like, we have our desires and then on top of them, another layer of wishing we could desire something different, as if any of it is in our control! I get the image of a body being pulled in so many directions at once all it can do is collapse or explode.

Caroline

Joseph:

I realize sometimes I talk too much. I guess I love to be understood, and I love using words to describe things, so I often end up over-explaining myself. I wrote the Caroline verses sort of as melody placeholders to accompany this knotty guitar part I was working on writing in the new (to me) key of Open C. The guitar part was taking so much concentration, I couldn't sing too much at the same time. When I came back to actually write the words I realized I was flirting with some genuine brevity. Saying less, suggesting more. Just painting the outlines of a story and letting the music fill in. A lot of these songs show a lot of darkness underneath a bouncy, fun presentation, which is a juxtaposition I feel like I see in the world all the time. We decided this song accompanied all the bigger, more conceptual songs as a sort of setbreak, a change of perspective, a more personal plea.

Wood:

We had a lot of fun striving for an as-of-yet unfamiliar sonic palette for this one, and to me it fell into a place that defined the overall sound of the record. We combined an acoustic guitar muted with foam, a pillow-muted piano, some congas, and pizzicato violin to make a jumbled, staccato bed on which we could lay some more legato elements like synths and bowed violins. We also experimented a lot with affecting our instruments in the mixing process. Using Moog filters and distressors and fancy harmonizers can make an acoustic instrument sound marvelously alien.

Just Want to Be Loved

Jacob:

The little moments of doubt we flirt with daily had been sweeping over me more than I was used to this past year. For friends of mine in different chapters of life it felt the same - something in the moons had us all searching for who we were and where we belonged. I wanted to write something to hold onto in those moments when your insecurities lead you to believe if you could feel just loved and accepted maybe it'd all be alright. Though there's a healthy nod in the bridge towards the danger of being beguiled by that sense of security if it isn't held up by first loving yourself.

Joseph:

Jacob is so good at getting to the core of an emotion, just expressing the unembellished truth. This one hits like the morning-after epiphany in the first verse. What is this all for? I'm just looking for love.

Help

Joseph:

I was raised with a very masculine and protestant and American stick-to-it-ness, a stubborn individuality, but it turns out that approach doesn't work with important categories like relationships or mental health. When I wrote this very straightforward chorus that said "Help," it was like throwing cold water on my face. Stop doing this on your own! And from a songwriting perspective: stop trying to think of obscure ways of saying something and just say it! It was a stretch of time when I was feeling very alone, very sad, and needed to ask for help. I realize this now.

The band flushed it out and Wood found a great groove for it, but still it took us a lot of studio experimenting to find the sonic identity, something to really grab the ear. This one came to life when Libby wrote those great, frenetic string parts in the intro. Harmony-wise it reminds me of Wallpaper and

Your Body. I guess we're so used to singing softer, sweeter harmonies, it feels good to have some choruses we can belt out.

Big Star

Libby:

This song is about going to the beach with one of my best friends, passing out in the sun, and waking up dazed in an eerie bright-grey world of late-afternoon clouds a few hours later. It's also about looking for love and hope and purpose. The recording was one we took a lot of time on. At Echo Mountain, Sandro and Yan spent ten-plus takes honing this other-worldly percussion buffet that included a turtle shell to fill in the cracks of Wood's bass "loop" (which he actually didn't loop but played live, probably 500 times in a row). We decided not to work out an exact form, instead letting me feel the movement of the band to determine when a new verse would start.

Jacob:

Libby first played Big Star for us during a writing retreat, just her and a borrowed guitar strumming along. From the moment she hit the first chorus it was my favorite song I've ever heard from her. It's vast, emotionally. And immediate in its vulnerability. It's a tune that's easy to get lost in, and I love that about it.

Let a Little Light In

Joseph:

I think there's a double strangeness in looking back on our childhoods from our late twenties. For one thing the memories themselves are fuzzy, deceitful. And then all the strongest emotions I can access--the moments of joy and triumph or heartbreak--feel unfamiliar, like I can't see the world that way anymore. It's harder to see such bright and beautiful primary colors. I guess I'm old enough now to feel totally disillusioned about the politics and culture of the 90s--which is to say I'm seeing the era clearly!--but still it's hard not to miss the wide-eyed wonder of being a kid. There's probably a German word for this kind of negative nostalgia.

Libby:

It was really tempting to take this song in a kind of familiar bluesy direction, but we fought the temptation and tried to take into a weirder, quirkier zone. Joseph's lyrics are like that; they describe nostalgia for childhood in a way it often feels to me: sort of uncomfortable and sad in an inscrutable way, but charged with the emotional memory of something beautiful.

Like You Never

Libby:

This is kind of a preemptive attack directed at a hypothetical person who's better at making up their mind than I am. It connects with Hourglass or Your Body in my thinking because it's about looking at your track record and wondering if you've been following good logic, maybe feeling paralyzed by the unavailability of obvious good logic.

Joseph:

This one reminds me of Let A Little Light in, too, in the way that a lot of these songs are about attacking the unreliable narrator even when it's yourself. Those memories aren't as rosy as you thought they were,

are they? You're more doubtful and skeptical than you can admit, aren't you? I remember around the time we graduated from college a lot of the friends I most admired were having a really tough time figuring out their place in the world. It felt less like pursuing good options and more like avoiding all the immoral options, which were often the lucrative and celebrated ones. This song reminds me of that kind of self-interrogation.

Wood:

We sometimes try the experiment of making a simple song subversively complex. In this one we did our best to not emphasize the downbeat until the first chorus and to not drive that home until the outro. The outro is also not in an intuitive time signature - hitting alternating phrases of 10 beats and 11 beats. We wanted it to be a little discombobulating but catchy at the same time.

Shelter

Wood:

My family is from a county in eastern North Carolina that is still struggling to recover from Hurricanes Matthew and Florence. Much like the countless impoverished regions of the United States decimated by the combination of a harsh political and economic situation and natural disasters, it never received the federal assistance it should have. There's no shortage of people saying that they should "bootstrap it" or make "better choices". But we all sometimes just need a bit of shelter. So we tried to paint a few scenes of that universal human need.

We were unsure of the song as it was a new type of groove for us, so we decided to lean into that unfamiliarity and feature each of the four of us on lead vocals.

Joseph:

Finally something good has come out of my lifetime study of formulaic country music. Hopefully we used my powers for good. This is the type that has four separate stories that each end with the same punchline. A child in the woods, a banker in the rain, a migrant in the desert, and someone facing down a hurricane. When we thought of trying a different vocalist on each verse, I admit I thought it would only be a good idea in theory, but I love it. Helps me feel the different stories as their own scenes.

Wallpaper Baby

Libby:

I've noticed I'm drawn to people who think a little too critically for their own good, people who are so sensitive to bullshit and bad taste that they basically spend their lives on the sidelines. I'm generally sympathetic to walking slowly and carefully through the world, especially if (like me) you come from the line of people who have historically been bulls in the china shop, but this song is about when you run out of patience for nitpicking. And what better form for a song about everything collapsing than a fun rollicking waltz. We're hoping it sends you out on a somewhat confused note.

Joseph:

We did a lot of sonic experimentation on this record, and also a lot of weaving together big themes, and then Wallpaper Baby arrives at the end of the album like an exclamation point on both categories. Making an album now there's always this elephant in the room, this nagging question: how can you make art when you're staring down the barrel of catastrophic climate change? So here's us just playing

acoustic instruments and singing together like we've always done, basically screaming, forget about all the thoughtful, nuanced shit we've just told you, the house is coming down!