



VANESSA PETERS

There is a level of songwriting depth and maturity that one can only acquire the old-fashioned way: spending two decades on the road, playing thousands of shows all over the USA and Europe, sleeping on couches and floors, crowdfunding a dozen records paid for by hard-earned fans, and racking up millions of miles in cars, trains, and planes all around the world.

That depth and maturity is richly evident in Vanessa Peters's latest album, *Foxhole Prayers*. In *Foxhole Prayers*, Peters's already-considerable songwriting prowess has risen to its fullest stature, presented as a concise, gut-punching collection of songs composed of piercing observations of both the outside and inside worlds.

"I'm a literature geek at heart and for years I've wanted to do an album somehow influenced by *The Great Gatsby*, but the idea seemed much too nerdy and abstract," explained Peters. "But after I re-read it last year, it dawned on me that we were literally reliving the *Gatsby* years. Suddenly I could see all the corrupt and self-indulgent characters from the book all around me, with Trump as some kind of PT Barnum-meets-Warren G. Harding character. I was on tour in Europe at the time and had some downtime between shows so I holed up in a tiny apartment in Utrecht for four days and began writing the songs that would become the basis for the new album."

In *Foxhole Prayers*, Peters shines a bright light on the modern world, illuminating the perilous rise of populist politics, the seemingly incessant swirl of violence around us, the struggle to remain positive in dark times, and the need to stand strong against hate and desperation. The album is dark at times, but Peters reminds us on upbeat songs like "Lucky" and album opener "Get Started" that we forge our own luck from sheer determination and gratitude in the face of hardship.

Never before have we heard Peters speak out as forcefully as she does in "Carnival Barker," one of the album's most pointed tracks which takes direct aim at not just populist politics but also the frightening way that history repeats. Simultaneously she takes herself to task for being part of the problem in "Just One of Them" when she writes, "I'm deafened by my silence in the face of so much need / I thought I was an honest man, but truth be told, I'm just one of them." And it is impossible to remain dry-eyed throughout the starkly-honest "Fight," in which Peters movingly bares her deepest fears as a songwriter.

In *Foxhole Prayers*, Peters demonstrates that she has not only reached an entirely new level of lyricism, but has also vaulted into a new echelon of musicality. The album reflects a pleasingly diverse yet cohesive collection of styles, effortlessly weaving modern

electronica elements and drum machines into more familiar acoustic and rock arrangements. The result is a splendid musical tapestry that unfolds from the first notes and keeps the listener sonically mesmerized throughout.

For the record Peters turned to producer Rip Rowan (Old 97s, Rhett Miller), producer John Dufilho (Deathray Davies, Apples in Stereo), and what has now become her established stable of all-star musicians, including longtime sideman and Grammy-winner Joe Reyes (Buttercup) and Dallas guitar hero Chris Holt (Don Henley) on electric guitar. Dufilho and bassist Andy Lester form the rhythm section for most of the album, while Peters's European bandmates (Federico Ciancabilla, Andrea Colicchia) also make an appearance on a couple of tracks.

The team delivers A+ execution on every artfully-produced track. On the deeply personal "Fight" the track opens simply and builds to an emotional climax on a swell of interlocking guitar melodies evocative of *Bends*-era Radiohead. "Before it Falls Apart" is an instantly striking, minimalist arrangement of drum machines, acoustic and electric guitars, and a rich vocoder that suggests a more analog version of Imogen Heap. On "This Riddle" producer Rowan gives the track a decidedly Neil Finn treatment, with intersecting live and looped drums and swirling mellotrons. The album also showcases the band's ability to deliver punchy raw rock on tracks like "Trolls" and "Carnival Barker."

Throughout the album, Peters's voice is lush and blissful as never before, dominating the mix and commanding the listener's attention to every word. And that's the point: these are *big* songs, full of weight and meaning, demanding to be heard - and Peters makes you feel every syllable.

Taken together, the songs on *Foxhole Prayers* tell two complete stories. The first story is the story found in the songs: stories of fear and hope, of pain and endurance, of romance and politics, of dark versus light. The second story is the story of the songwriter herself, because on that level, *Foxhole Prayers* reads like the climax of a great adventure tale in which our protagonist reaches her ultimate objective and becomes a hero.

"To write a truly meaningful song," Peters observed, "you have to get out into the world and meet the people in it, hear and feel their stories, try to get inside their heads and hearts. The best songs are the universal ones that somehow tell a specific story, yet manage to mean many things to different listeners. Those are the songs I'm searching for, the stories I'm trying to tell."

Vanessa Peters is the kind of songwriter who took to the road as a seeker, and returned home a discoverer. Songwriters of this sort are not born; they evolve over time, because wisdom is a prerequisite and there is no shortcut to experience. That experience and wisdom is crystallized in *Foxhole Prayers*, where we find Peters writing and delivering songs of exceptional lyrical and musical power, cementing her reputation among the new generation of American songwriters.