

Sarah Shook to Shake Up Askew

Sarah Shook and the Disarmers will take the stage at Askew in a few weeks, hot off their February release *Nightroamer*. Whether you want to call it insurgent country, outlaw country or pull out your thesaurus for all manner of other names, Shook (they/them) specializes in honky tonk with a rock 'n' roll edge.

The backstory around their North Carolina upbringing is now famous to fans - a sheltered, deeply religious upbringing in which secular music wasn't allowed. Shook, a single parent, recently found sobriety and came out as non-binary in 2020, describing themselves as "bi and queer til the cows come home."

Celebrated for bringing an indie rock, DIY sensibility to country themes along the lines of Lucero or Lydia Loveless, Shook's vocal delivery is non-nonsense as they sing about fractured relationships and missed chances. *Nightroamer* takes Shook's sound in new directions, in some instances trading twang for more straight-ahead sonic territory.

"The wide spectrum of genres on *Nightroamer* is indicative of where I was in life when we made the record, new to sobriety and going through a lot of self-discovery," said Shook by email.

"Been Lovin' You Too Long" is a minor-key indie rock song with pedal steel as background texture, reminiscent of Neko Case. "I Got This" is a sickly sweet pop song with high-pitched vocals - if dressed up a little more, it may be a Billboard top 40 contender.

"No Mistakes" and "It Doesn't Change Anything" are more meat-and-potatoes fare - bouncy, no-nonsense honky tonk tunes. "Stranger" feels like the perfect balance, with its wistful guitar riff and backup from the pedal steel and 12-string. It even uses autotune (though tastefully!), a very far cry from the barroom rock of Shook's previous albums.

They noted the deeply personal "If It's Poison," a catchy melancholic tune with the '50s chord progression, as their favorite on the record. "I wrote it after escaping an abusive relationship and while navigating a new fledgling relationship," said Shook. "There was a great deal of uncertainty those few weeks we spent joined at the hip and ultimately we didn't end up together. In the end it wasn't poison, but we also didn't get the timing right."

"Talkin' to myself" is an infectious rocker complete with Hammond B3 that will keep the fans happy, and "Nightroamer" brings things back to classic country melodies.

Nightroamer was produced by Dwight Yoakam guitarist and producer Pete Anderson, who has worked with such diverse artists as the Meat Puppets and Roy Orbison. Shook noted the band managed all pre-production, and that Anderson really only added a few embellishments toward the end. They also admitted "honestly, there were a few concessions I made I wish I hadn't."

Shook also just finished a solo album under the name *Mightmare* to be released later this year, with the first single dropping in July. On this one, titled *Cruel Liars*, Shook handled everything - from the drum programming to the engineering - save a few bass tracks contributed by Disarmers bassist Aaron Oliva.

As they gear up for a grueling touring run across the US and Europe, Shook admits that the road can be a rough go: "People think it's glamorous - it's not. It's very hard to consistently eat healthy food, it's impossible to have any type of daily routine, you have zero privacy, and you miss your loved ones like mad.

"All that said, it's honest hard work. I love my bandmates, and it makes our fans pretty damn happy when we come through their towns."

Sarah Shook and The Disarmers are at Askew on May 19 at 8pm. Buy tickets here.

It's Been Real

I'm not one for sappy goodbyes, but I should note this will be my last music column for *Motif*. I'd like to thank everyone out there for reading my stuff these past eight years, as well as the folks at the magazine, especially Mike Ryan and Emily Olson.