

THE MASTERSONS

GOOD LUCK CHARM (NEW WEST RECORDS)

"The first thing people usually ask us is 'What's it like as a husband and wife playing music together?,'" says Chris Masterson. "We always say that the lows are low, but the highs are *really* high."

There are plenty of highs on *Good Luck Charm*, the second album by The Mastersons, the collaboration that Chris shares with his marital and musical partner Eleanor Whitmore. Generously filled with infectious melodies, instinctive harmonies and vividly insightful lyrics, *Good Luck Charm* embodies the uncanny rapport that singer-guitarist Chris and singer-violinist-guitarist Eleanor have developed in their experiences living, touring and making music together.

The Austin, TX-based duo's lilting songcraft and charismatic chemistry have already won over listeners around the world, thanks to the couples ongoing status as members of Steve Earle's band The Dukes, their frequent opening sets for Earle, and their critically-lauded 2012 debut album, *Birds Fly South*.

Although *Good Luck Charm* is the Mastersons' second album, in many ways it's their first full-on collaboration. Whereas *Birds Fly South* consisted largely of songs that they'd composed individually, all of *Good Luck Charm*'s material was co-written by Chris and Eleanor, giving the material added depth as well as a powerful collective lyrical identity that's matched by their expressive harmonies.

"This is a more purpose-driven record," Eleanor states. "The first record was kind of his/hers, but this one is entirely ours."

"Playing a few hundred shows has really solidified us as a band and focused our vision for the new record," Chris observes. "Every song is crafted for the two of us. When we made *Birds Fly South*, it just seemed like a good idea to do a record. Now we *know* it is."

Good Luck Charm – recorded with noted producer/engineer Jim Scott, whose resume includes work with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Wilco and the Dixie Chicks – raises the stakes with 11 emotionally precise new songs that are firmly rooted in sometimes-harsh reality, yet which radiate with hope and optimism.

"It's cautiously optimistic," Eleanor says of the twosome's new material, adding, "I think we tried to steer the songs in a direction that was a little more positive and a little more upbeat. Our last record had a lot of broken-character songs, but I think that this one reflects the place we're in now."

Good Luck Charm's title track, for example, is an uplifting ode to human connection that was originally inspired by the pair's visit to the Texas state capitol during Sen. Wendy Davis' pro-choice filibuster in June 2013.

"It was really striking," Chris recalls, "how many people we saw there – friends, family, all kinds of people from our community. It was so powerful to be around a bunch of people trying to speak up for what they believe in."

"This isn't meant to be a political album, but there are definitely some tracks that touch on that," Eleanor asserts. "But it's meant to be galvanizing, not polarizing. In the current political climate, people are frustrated and feel like they don't have a voice, but I know from experience that if people organize and speak up, they can make a difference. That's what that song's about."

Elsewhere on *Good Luck Charm*, "Uniform," "Anywhere But Here" and "Cautionary Tale" offer a sublime blend of unflinching honesty and heartfelt positivity, while the heart-tugging "I Found You" and "Easy by Your Side" poignantly celebrate enduring romance with sensitivity and humor.

"'Cautionary Tale' took us a couple of years to write, and it's one that a lot of people seem to be responding to," Eleanor offers. "It's a cautionary tale for the digital age, where people are trying to numb themselves from their jobs or their struggles. There's a lot of loneliness out there, but it's important to connect with people. That's a theme that comes up a lot in these songs."

Denton, TX-born Eleanor and Houston-bred Chris have both been making music for most of their lives. Eleanor, the daughter of an opera-singer mother and a folk singer/airline pilot father, began playing fiddle at the age of four and studied with legendary Texas fiddler Johnny Gimble, and she and her sister Bonnie (now a respected singer-songwriter in her own right) played in the family band. Chris, meanwhile, was a teen guitar prodigy, playing the blues in Houston clubs by the age of 13.

Both future partners had considerable success as instrumentalists-for-hire, with Eleanor backing the likes of Regina Spektor, Kelly Willis, Diana Ross and Will Hoge, and Chris playing with Son Volt, Jack Ingram, Bobby Bare Jr. and Wayne Hancock. After meeting at a festival in Colorado in 2005, each released a solo project – Eleanor's *Airplanes* and Chris' *The Late Great Chris Masterson* – but eventually found more satisfaction in writing, performing and recording together. After a five-year stint living in Brooklyn, they realized that there was little point paying to live in New York when they were spending most of their time on tour, and relocated to the more hospitable environs of Austin. By then, they were already touring and recording with Steve Earle, performing together on numerous Earle tours and playing on his acclaimed album *The Low Highway*.

"Playing with Steve has been great for us," Eleanor says. "For one thing, he's an amazing songwriter, so that kind of holds us to a certain standard. He's also a great storyteller, and that's taught us a lot about relating to an audience. One thing we've learned in touring with Steve is that people remember the stories that you tell as much as the songs you sing. If you make them laugh or make them cry, they take that home with them as much as they would a song."

"You learn something different from every artist you work with," Chris adds, "whether it's how they handle the crowd or how they write songs or how they handle rehearsing or recording. We've accumulated all of this experience in our time working with other artists and I'm grateful for it."

While Chris and Eleanor have learned a lot from Steve Earle, they themselves are an integral part of his band. "Chris is the best guitar player that's ever been in this band and Eleanor's a better musician than any of us," exclaims Earle.

Chris and Eleanor wrote most of *Good Luck Charm* while on tour with Earle, stealing whatever time they could to work on the songs. "We spent a lot of time hiding out in dressing rooms with our guitars," Chris notes. "On our days off, we didn't go out or do anything fun; we were just holed up in hotel rooms writing these tunes."

"It was a challenge," Eleanor adds, "but having a deadline lit a fire under us, and I think that some of that urgency is reflected in the songs."

By then, they'd found a sympathetic ear in producer Jim Scott, whose clear, unfussed production spotlights the strengths of *Good Luck Charm*'s songs and the honesty of the Mastersons' performances. "Jim was high on our list of dream producers," Eleanor states, "so when he said he was interested in working with us, we packed up the van and the dog and drove out to California, and recorded and mixed the record with Jim in 15 days. It was a tall order, but he made it easy."

"We've always loved the way Jim's records sound," Chris adds. "They always sound organic, without a lot of trickery or bells and whistles. After working with him, I can say that his records come out sounding as good as they do as the cumulative effect of a series of good decisions. He has a real ability to get the best out of every performance, and he got it to sound good without us ever having to spend four hours playing ping-pong while he got a snare sound."

Jim Scott stated, "Chris and Eleanor might be the hardest working husband and wife team in the business. They had a great spirit in the studio, pushing themselves and each other to greatness in every phase of the recording process. From the songwriting to the live performances, they are true professionals that bring joy to music."

With *Good Luck Charm* under their belt, The Mastersons plan to promote it in the best way they know how: by getting in front of people and singing and playing together.

"At some point, we got to a place where it felt like the shows we were playing had really started to connect with people on an emotional level," Chris observes, adding, "I think all the success we've had out on the road comes through on *Good Luck Charm*."

"We're really lucky," he concludes. "We get to get out of bed every day and write a song or go play a show together, which is pretty much all that we've ever wanted out of life."