

# SARA WATKINS

*Young in All the Wrong Ways (New West Records)*

“This is a breakup album with myself...” says Sara Watkins of her third solo record, *Young in All the Wrong Ways*. Writing and recording these ten intensely soul-baring songs was a means for her to process and mark the last couple years, which have been transformative. “I looked around and realized that in many ways I wasn’t who or where I wanted to be. It’s been a process of letting go and leaving behind patterns and relationships and in some cases how I’ve considered myself. What these songs are documenting is the turmoil you feel when you know something has to change and you’re grappling with what that means. It means you’re losing something and moving forward into the unknown.”

That sense of possibility infuses the songs on *Young in All the Wrong Ways* with a fierce and flinty resolve, which makes this her most powerful and revealing album to date. In some ways it’s a vivid distillation of the omnivorous folk-pop-bluegrass-indie-everything-else Watkins made with Nickel Creek, yet she makes audacious jumps that push against expectations in unexpected ways. These songs contain some of the heaviest moments of her career, with eruptions of thrumming B3 organ and jagged electric guitar. But it’s also quiet, vulnerable, tenderhearted. In other words, bold in all the right ways.

Recently Watkins found herself without a manager at the same time she was leaving the label that released her first two solo albums. For many artists that might be the worst possible time to enter the studio, but working without a net invigorated Watkins. It was important for her to document this time in her life when she was between professional contracts: free from the weight of obligation to anyone but herself. In that regard the tumultuous title track sounds like the first song of the rest of her life. Her backing band create a violent clamor, with Jon Brion’s sharp stabs of electric guitar punctuating the din and Jay Bellerose’s explosive drumming ripping at the seams of the song. In the chaos, however, Watkins finds clarity: “I’ve got no time to look back, so I’m going to leave you here,” she sings, with new grit and fire in her voice. “I’m going out to see about my own frontier.”

Fittingly, Watkins wrote or co-wrote every song on *Young in All the Wrong ways*—a first for her. Her previous albums have featured well-chosen covers that compliment her own songs and showcase her interpretive abilities. “I love singing other people’s songs, and originally I did plan to have a couple of covers on the album. But as we were recording and getting a picture of how everything fit together, it became apparent that the covers really stood apart from the story that was taking shape. I felt like I just had a little bit more to say. Everything is coming from me, so there’s a unified perspective on this album that’s different from what I’ve done before.”

Some are lonely and quiet: “Like New Year’s Day” describes in careful detail a trip out to the desert, and the low-key arrangement echoes the reassuring isolation of the southwestern landscape. Other songs are more extroverted, their volume and energy a means to reach out to friends and colleagues. “Move Me” opens as a loping pop song, but soon explodes into a wallowing rocker as Watkins demands, in a voice that strains against composure, “I want you to move me!” It’s a time-stopping performance: Janis Joplin by way of Fleetwood Mac.

“That song is about relationships that have gone stagnant, how sometimes we just go about the process of making small talk in order not to stir anything up,” she says. “But it’s sad when you can’t have a meaningful conversation with people after a while. Even if they hurt you, you just want to feel something from them. You don’t relate to each other the same way as you once did, so you have to decide if you’re going to invite this person further into your life or just move on.”

Watkins knew just the right people to bring these tough-minded songs to life. She corralled longtime friend and fellow fiddler Gabe Witcher to produce, then put together a band that includes two of Witcher’s fellow Punch Brothers: guitarist Chris Eldridge and bass player Paul Kowert. Providing harmonies on the title track are Sarah Jarosz and Aoife O’Donovan, Watkins’ bandmates in *I’m With Her*, and Jim James of *My Morning Jacket* provides a vocal foil on “One Last Time.” “I’ve known these guys for a long time, so there’s a personal trust as well as a musical trust. I was able to put my heart and soul into these performances, in a way that I don’t think I would be able to if I was in a room full of strangers. It allowed me to give myself over to some of these very personal thoughts that are in the lyrics.”

To say these are personal lyrics might be an understatement. They’re beyond personal, whether she’s confessing some long-held regret or gently consoling a friend. *Young in All the Wrong Ways* ends with “Tenderhearted,” a quietly assured song that Watkins wrote about a few of her heroes: women like her Grandmother Nordstrom who have weathered hard times with grace and have provided Watkins with examples of how to live her life. “They’re women who have endured so much yet emerged with love, strength and kindness. I remember someone saying, It’s so sad how much she’s had to go through. And I remember thinking, That’s why she’s such an incredible person. She faced all those trials and came out the other side.”

Watkins would never be so bold as to count herself in their company; instead, she aspires to follow their example. But *Young in All the Wrong Ways* does reveal an artist who has managed to transform her own turmoil into music that is beautiful and deeply moving: “God bless the tenderhearted,” she sings, “who let life overflow.”