



USA Rose Skelton is charmed by Sarah Jarosz, the young southern Texan girl who is wowing audiences with her dazzling musicianship and songwriting

PORTRAIT SCOTT SIMONTACCHI

In the heat of a Tennessee afternoon, Sarah Jarosz takes the stage, alone. Beside her lies an arsenal of acoustic stringed instruments and, entirely at ease in front of a crowd of hundreds, she kicks off a set that includes a Grammy Award nominated instrumental and songs from a debut album that features American music icons such as Tim O'Brien, Dobro legend Jerry Douglas and banjo star Abigail Washburn.

She seems entirely unfazed by the crowd or the fact that few people in the audience, mostly locals out for a bit of festival fun, know who she is. She has that sense of self-conviction that puts people immediately at ease and seems to say, 'I'm just doing what I do.' It's this, probably, that has made this girl – she only just turned 20 – one of bluegrass' favoured talents. Mention her name in the US, and musicians of all calibres just break out in a smile.

Jarosz is a southern girl, from the warm country plains of Texas where she grew up an only child of school teacher parents.

She was singing by the age of two, playing the piano at six and then fell in love with music when she first picked up a mandolin at the age of ten. "That's when I knew," she says, as we shelter from the stifling Tennessee summer sun, "this is what I really love." She joined a bluegrass jam session in her hometown 30 miles outside of Austin, Texas, and felt immediately that she belonged. "I was very novice," she says, "and to start in a world where it was 'yes, you should be a part of this' was why I fell in love with the community of it all."

But Jarosz's musical life went on a special course which has had people drawing comparisons with other female musical prodigies such as Alison Krauss, a bluegrass-country singer who first signed with a label at the age of 14. Jarosz signed with Sugar Hill Records and in 2009, when she was just 17, released *Song Up in Her Head*, a tender, full-bodied record on which she wrote, performed and co-produced all of the songs, »

THE SONGS IN HER HEAD

NEW RELEASES



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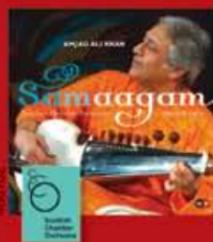
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Amjad Ali Khan
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accompanied by a cast of some of bluegrass' most treasured talents. 'This young woman is proof,' says Abigail Washburn in the sleeve notes, 'that the future of music itself is certain to be full of virtuosity, passion, integrity, deep beauty, and soul.'

"Since my last record was my first," says Jarosz, "I wanted to include as many of my heroes and people who inspired me growing up. Maybe it's not that usual..." she says, trailing off, as if the thought only just crossed her mind, "...the cool thing about this genre of music is that growing up everyone's been so supportive of me. I was blown away with how generous they were with their time in the studio."

There's something entirely endearing in Jarosz's expressions, which serve to remind me that this phenomenal writer, singer and performer is only just out of high school. I wonder if she had some kind of 'special' upbringing; if perhaps her parents forced her through an advanced education programme with no time for normal kids' stuff? "No," she giggles. "They never pushed it upon me, only supported it." Her parents never hired a babysitter for her; whenever they went to concerts, she would go too. "I was seeing people perform and observing it from a young age and hearing people's different styles of performance. There's a lot to be said for listening to music."

Song Up in Her Head was written over many years. She wrote 'Left Home' when she was just 12, and 'Tell Me True,' a heart-wrenching claw-hammer banjo lament, when she was 13. She cut the record in Nashville, the home of country music, with her elite band of fiddle and cello, and the visiting celebrities. Her cellist, Nathaniel Smith, was only 14 at the time. "There was no time issue," she says, and then, in her completely self-assured, but never arrogant way: "I was like, I just want to make a record and these are the songs I want to put on it."

Fast-forward some months and Jarosz is visiting the UK to launch her second album, *Follow Me Down*. She's just recorded a programme as part of the *Transatlantic Sessions* [to be broadcast on BBC4 in the autumn] which includes Alison Krauss, and wowed a bar-full of people at the home of English folk, Cecil Sharp House. Despite the tiny venue

Below: on-stage at the Austin City Limits Music Festival; Sarah rehearsing with Amos Lee, Alison Krauss and Danny Thompson (on bass) for BBC4's *Transatlantic Sessions*



SCOTT NEWTON



JOHN MACCANNON

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and the audience of people who know little if not nothing about this Texan whizzkid, she pulls it off with an unflinching sense of ease. She wears no make-up, makes eye contact with the audience while she sings, and her voice is totally honest and open, full of beautiful phrasing. Performing songs from both her new album and her debut release, the leap in maturity of her work is immediately obvious.

"Since I made the last record," she says the next day, "I've moved away from home and had two years of college. So I've not only had a lot of new experiences as a person but also as a musician. I've learnt a lot of new things so there was a lot of new stuff to be said on the album."

Jarosz is on an elite scholarship to study contemporary improvisation at the New England Conservatory. When she's not studying, she's performing. She opened for the UK's bluegrass-folk chart-toppers Mumford & Sons in Colorado last year and keeps up a busy international tour schedule.

Music college has pushed her out of her comfort zone and gone, on this latest album at least, are the sweet, country tones. Instead, she's incorporated a song version of Edgar Allan Poe's final poem, 'Annabelle Lee' [featured on this issue's covermount CD], a Bob Dylan cover, some racing old-timey tunes and a cover of Radiohead's 'The Tourist' which is about as far out of the bluegrass country comfort zone as can be imagined. She recorded it with The Punch Brothers, the boundary-pushing bluegrass band, after she and mandolin player Chris Thile discovered that they both knew the song. Their version is a space-age bluegrass extravaganza, the heavy, heady vocals soaring in and between mandolin, fiddle and banjo. Could she, I ask, imagine herself going off in an alt-rock tangent?

She laughs her sweet southern laugh. "I've always loved that style of music - Radiohead, Wilco, The Decemberists. But no, I don't think it would ever take over my style. The rootsy side of everything is so important to me and I want to try to be as true to myself as possible. I don't know if totally going that route would be true to myself."

As ever, Jarosz is totally convinced of her own direction. She loves Radiohead, but she'd rather take some of those elements which inspire her and make something new of it. She loves poetry, so she tinkered with Poe's poem to make something which fitted her tune. She loves roots music, but she felt like having drums in there. Her music is an alluring mixture of potent ingredients: self-assurance, honesty and innovation, backed up by a gorgeous voice and an incredible musicianship. To top it all off, she's as down-to-earth and nice as any country gal you'd hope to meet.

"All the people I've always admired seem really self-assured," she says, when I try to pin her down on where this sense of conviction comes from. "They're not going to let the rules guide them to determine what they're going to do. They know the kind of music they make and they're going to do it regardless." Does she feel she's broken any rules musically?

"Oh I don't know," she giggles. "And honestly? I really don't care. I'm just gonna carry on doing what I'm doing." ●

REVIEW *Follow Me Down* is a *Top of the World* review in this issue - track 2 on the CD

DATES Sarah Jarosz returns to the UK in July. See the Gig Guide for tour dates

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