

Brandy Clark

the bird



Photo credit: Pamela Springsteen

As she started recording her fifth album, Brandy Clark had to make an important choice. Amid the high of finishing the Tony-nominated musical *Shucked* and releasing her Grammy-winning self-titled fourth album, she and her new road band – Gabe Burdulis, Amanda McCoy, and Erin Nelson – were really cooking.

Clark wanted to capture how her new songs sounded live, even if it meant she and producer Shooter Jennings had to rerecord.

“In doing that, we really found our groove,” Clark, who was recently named one of the “30 Greatest Living American Songwriters” by the *New York Times*, says. “Those musicians are a huge part of this record.”

Clark and her band ended up cutting more than 20 songs with Jennings, 11 of which ended up on her new studio album *the bird*. The project is another in an astonishing succession of releases that highlights Clark’s tremendous skills as a storyteller, wordsmith, and singer. Wide in scope and lushly inviting, *the bird* is an album that feels the gravity of being human and dares us to find

meaningful connections where we encounter barriers.

The album's lead single "American Roots" was the catalyst for Clark to bring in her band. Written with Michael Pollack and Griff Clawson, it is a message for the country during a particularly contentious era. Clark tested the song out live and the response floored her. "I played it on the first night of the tour and we got a standing ovation," she says. "I've never had a song react like that."

With its sunny melody and instrumentation, "American Roots" offers a welcoming vision of America: "It's no more mine than it is yours," Clark sings in affirmation. "I was thinking about generations back when my family immigrated and how lucky I am that I was born here," she says. "But it's not a political song – it's a patriotic song. It's my love letter to America and the best of what America is."

With their initial recording, Clark and Jennings updated the arrangement of "American Roots." When she played the new version live, the song fell flat. That convinced her to change course and persuade Jennings. "It became the song that we wanted to make sure we got right," she says. "We knew we were doing something right live. The song was bigger than I knew when we wrote it. It was too important for us to miss the mark."

Jennings welcomed the changeup and, for his first time working with Clark, made his space at Los Angeles' Sunset

Sound into an environment where everyone felt free to experiment. "He wanted everybody to feel comfortable enough to screw up and find brilliance," Clark says. "It's usually in a mistake that someone plays off of."

In fact, a file-sharing mishap led to the recording of "The Loner and the Lonely," a scuffed-up look at relationship dynamics that Clark wrote with pop maestro Justin Trantor and Eren Cannata. Clark wasn't certain the pop-diva chorus was right for her and didn't intend to share the demo with her band or Jennings, but they heard it anyway and fell in love. "That is an example of a really beautiful mistake," Clark says. "I'm so happy it worked out."

Clark frequently visits the skies and the cosmos on *the bird*, finding escape at times and longing to shrink the distance at others. "The Astronaut," featuring some lovely string work by SistaStrings, has her dreaming of extraordinary feats. In the title track, written with *Shucked* co-conspirator Shane McAnally and Scott Stepakoff, she gives an achingly tender vocal performance as she longs for the ability to soar without fear and see things from higher up. "And the Sun Said to the Moon" imagines the two heavenly bodies as longtime admirers but forever unable to bridge the space.

Planets align in the love story of "Still Found You," while "Goodnight Los Angeles," which she wrote with Dan Wilson, sends fond wishes from another time zone. With its glimmering mandolin,

"Stranger on a Plane" describes wheels going up and walls coming down in a confession to someone she'll never see again. Closer to home, "Tower" is a rumination on Music City fame and karma, written with Connie Harrington and Nicolette Hayford.

Rosanne Cash features on "Old Woman," which ponders a positive future for women of all ages. "Jessie Jo Dillon and I were talking about the election," Clark says. "I said, 'You know, I hope I see a woman in the White House in my lifetime,' and she agreed." Clark debuted the song at an event with Cash, and the esteemed songwriter was moved to tears. Clark asked her on the spot to sing on the recording with her. "That was a really amazing moment for me to have her sing on it."

The idea of speaking one's feelings aloud closes out the album in the stunning "If There's Someone You Love." Building from muted acoustic guitar to epic swells of drums, it's an urgent plea to speak up. "That came from the grief of someone having lost a parent suddenly, which happened to me in my 20s," Clark says. "It's that idea of, if there is someone you love, tell them."

the bird covers a lot of emotional territory across its 11 tracks, the way one might expect of a classic singer-songwriter album, and Clark's vision ties it together. And with the heft of her backing band, Clark's inimitable voice as a singer and writer comes through loud and clear to guide each song exactly where it needs to go.

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