

NEKO CASE

FOX CONFESSOR BRINGS THE FLOOD

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When it comes to the art of telling tales, Jim Thompson had it pegged. “There are 32 ways to write a story,” the noir author famously observed, “but only one plot: Things are not as they seem.” The story of **Neko Case**, similarly, could be told a number of different ways; but the facts, as always, yield only a part of the truth.

There is the basic, by now familiar biographical arc: **Case**’s childhood in Washington State, art school in Vancouver, her early baptism into the world of country and gospel music, and contemporary gigs in distaff punk trios Maow and Cub, as well as a longer (and ongoing) stint in powerhouse Canadian pop group the New Pornographers. Since the late ‘90s, however, the bulk of **Case**’s energies have been devoted to a thriving solo career. Following three critically lauded studio albums, 1997’s *The Virginian*, 2000’s *Furnace Room Lullaby*, and 2002’s masterful *Blacklisted*; a quietly potent kitchen-recorded EP, *Canadian Amp*; and last year’s brilliantly conceived concert collection *The Tigers Have Spoken*, **Case** reemerges with her latest, *Fox Confessor Brings the Flood*.

Two years in the making from conception to completion, the album is a culmination of sorts, the sound of an artist fully coming into her own and producing a career defining statement. **Case**’s work has always hinted at a uniquely skewed gyroscope at the center of the music: her songs at once playful and heartfelt, artsy yet unpretentious, and capable of shelving offbeat imagery inside of classic compositional structures. Significantly, *Fox Confessor* is further fueled by **Neko**’s refusal to limit her work along generic boundaries. Her role as producer is profoundly felt, as styles, influences and sonic signatures from dozens of musical traditions thread through the new songs, leaving the echo of their passing but combine to create a sound at once foreign and familiar.

Lyrically reflective and self-assessing, the twelve songs on the *Fox Confessor* are cast in a tone that is at once resigned (“Hold On, Hold On”) yet far from pessimistic (“Maybe Sparrow”). It’s an album where the storytelling offers exacting portraits of the transient and hyper real (“Margaret Vs. Pauline,” “Star Witness,” “That Teenage Feeling”), while opening windows to the still viable--albeit sadly neglected these days--metaphors, lessons, or cautionary reflections derived through mythological creations (“Fox

Confessor Brings The Flood”). Elsewhere, near-forgotten spirituals (“John Saw That Number”) emote clear-eyed observations on our common lives.

Aside from the intro to “John Saw That Number” (recorded in the back stairwell of Toronto’s Horseshoe Tavern) and “At Last” (tracked at Toronto’s Iguana studio), the balance of the album was done at Tucson, Arizona’s Wavelab Studio, with engineers Craig Schumacher and Chris Schultz. Produced and mixed by **Neko** and Darryl Neudorf, ***Fox Confessor Brings The Flood*** once again finds her imagistic lyrics and singular voice backed by a cadre of talented collaborators including longtime bandmates Jon Rauhouse and Tom V. Ray, frequent musical foils The Sadies, Giant Sand leader Howe Gelb, vocalist Kelly Hogan, Calexico’s Joey Burns and John Convertino, as well as Canadian cohorts Brian Connelly and Paul Rigby. Former Flat Duo Jet Dexter Romweber and Rachel Flotard of Seattle punk-pop combo Visqueen also guest, as does legendary piano/keyboard/accordion genius Garth Hudson of the Band.

However, if **Neko** has always chosen the best of collaborative friends, what she reveals on the new album is that “the most tender place in my heart is for strangers”--a statement which may or may not have seeds planted in the transient nowhere-is-home years of her childhood.

Having been moved from town to town after arriving in the world toward the end of 1970, she eventually settled in Tacoma, Washington. An only child, by the age of 15 she’d left home and quit school. **Neko** somehow managed to survive on her own, and soon steeped herself in the re-emerging punk scene that roamed wildly between Olympia and Seattle, working at a series of rock clubs and witnessing firsthand the transformative power of bands like the Screaming Trees, Girl Trouble, and Nirvana.

Although she maintains an affinity for punk music and its off-shoots (having begun her musical career as a drummer for The Del-Logs, The Propanes, and Maow), it was the discovery of an obscure spiritual album by Bessie Griffin & Her Gospel Pearls that provided an important paradigm shift for her early on.

“I was 19,” she once explained to an interviewer. “I was heavily into punk rock, and punk rock was really dogmatic and macho. But this record made me feel like, you know what, these people are singing about something they really care about. These ladies aren’t kidding. And they sing about religion with more passion than anybody sings about anything--not about love or sex or violence or anything. It’s like their voices are these crazy cannons or something, and they could just blow shit out of their way with them. I wanted to be able to sing like that, because I thought that must’ve felt really good.”

As it happened, that kind of vibrant voice lurked inside her own body--seemingly born of another era, much older and lived-in than what someone in her thirties should now possess, unleashed at equal turns raucous and otherworldly. Much, of course, has been made of her unique vocal talents, as well as the musical strength of her recordings. Yet it is her lyrical prowess that begs for greater analysis, for her ability to shape verse is on par with everything else that makes her albums so dynamic--her other voice, as it were.

Indeed, the poetics on *Fox Confessor Brings The Flood* quite often transcend the secondary aspect of contemporary song lyrics, yielding finely detailed macro-observations while maintaining empathy for individuals who may be imperfect, or foolish, but are never to be trivialized. Take, for example, these few lines from the album's opening track "Margaret vs. Pauline":

Ancient strings set feet a 'light to speed to her such mild grace

No monument of tacky gold

They smoothed her hair with cinnamon waves

And they placed an ingot in her breast to burn cool and collected

Fate holds her firm in its cradle and rolls her for a tender

Pause to savor

Everything's so easy for Pauline...

W.H. Auden once argued that the standard for recognizing a "major" poet should be established by the following points: "1. A large body of work; 2. A wide range of subject matter and treatment; 3. An unmistakable originality of vision and style; 4. A mastery of technique; 5. A constant, progressive process of maturation--so that should an author's individual works be placed side by side at any stage of his or her career, it would always be clear which work came first and which came after." As such, his criteria can also be used on the songwriters of our day--the poets of the modern age--although, as Auden himself conceded, only three and a half of the five points really needed to apply.

Regardless, **Neko** is a major poet by any standard, a songwriter less interested perhaps in traditional narrative form than in distilling a pure moment of time. She's an artist whose songs are so textured in their presentation that the subtleties filter into the subconscious while the overall effect astonishes. But rather than each of her progressive albums disposing of what came before it, there is, instead, a sense of "continuation" at play--in which every album exists like the subsequent chapter to a novel that grows more complicated and intriguing as it progresses.

So, then, if her 1997's country-flavored debut *The Virginian* stands as a welcoming prologue, *Fox Confessor Brings The Flood* takes us much deeper into the story where, as she writes and sings in "Dirty Knife," "cascading letters pool on the stairs/the grass is high, the cats are wild/you can't even touch the tip of their tails/and the blood runs crazy with giant strides."

The continued evolution of her as a creator, producer, personality and live performer has been as fascinating to witness as the music she makes. With *Blacklisted*, her 2002 masterpiece and an album that deserved every bit of its widespread praise, came validation, too, for those serious music lovers and insightful fans who already knew the synthetic label of “alt-country” would fail to pigeonhole her work or vision.

Neko claims no genre, nor utilizes any classic formula for her songs and singing. More than anything she thrives in the spaces in between her music. As with the highest art, the negative space should be calculated, too. What isn’t readily seen also carries its own weight—an articulated emptiness, a space defined and made human by whatever has sought to confine it; and while her artistic integrity may never have been in doubt, on *Fox Confessor Brings The Flood* **Neko** has again shown how capable she is of accessing her best instincts to forge something meaningful with words and sounds--a record that’s confessional, poignant, and, ultimately, an honest representation of where she is today.

For all the directness and immediacy of *Fox Confessor*, the music on **Neko**’s new album is thicker, deeper, and more detailed than anything she’s done before. Finally, it’s neither the singer *nor* the song alone that defines the best music. It’s how much power moves between the two. On *Fox Confessor Brings the Flood*, **Neko Case** comes on strong.

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