

NICHOLE WAGNER

and the sky caught fire

10 Song Collection Features Americana Contemporaries Including Will Sexton, Terry Klein, Rod Picott, and more

Regardless of the impression some of her lyrics might give you, Nichole Wagner is not necessarily obsessed with fire. She just has an acute fondness for playing with all manner of combustible metaphors, flirting with disaster, and the myriad ways a human heart can burn. And if compounding that with a penchant for unflinching, often brutal honesty sounds akin to mixing sparks and gasoline, well, that's just the way love sometimes goes. With the songs on her full-length debut, *And the Sky Caught Fire* (July 2018), Wagner's just calling it like it is.



“This is very much a relationship record, and all of the songs on it are very honest — though I may have slightly shifted a few very specific details, just to keep from hurting anyone unnecessarily,” says the Austin-based songwriter, who not coincidentally grew up obsessing over every heart-tangled note of Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours*. “The songs that I love most have always been relationship songs, so the songs that I write usually tend to be relationship songs, too.

1. Winner Take All (2:49)
2. Dynamite (2:51)
3. Yellow Butterfly (3:25)
4. Rules of Baseball (3:36)
5. The Last Time (4:42)
6. This Kind of Love (2:38)
7. Let Me Know (3:44)
8. Fires of Pompeii (3:40)
9. Reconsider Me (3:55)
10. Sparks & Gasoline (2:50)

Produced, engineered, mixed, and mastered by Justin Douglas, the album was recorded at Austin’s King Electric Studio with basic tracks tracked live to tape by a band featuring lead guitarist Will Sexton — one of the first musicians Wagner met after she moved to Texas. In contrast to the making of her EP, which Wagner admits she and Douglas essentially knocked out in a day due to their narrow window at the time, her second time in the studio was a considerably more creatively charged experience from the start.

“...has certain dark ambience that I love. I’m drawn to the shadows.”

“This time around I felt a lot more comfortable and had much better understanding of how to explain some of the things that I wanted to express musically. The album ended up being shaped a lot in the studio. I knew I wanted to make more of an Americana folk record, with the tracks all having a little more meat to them to encapsulate some the early '70s California rock stuff that I grew up listening too. We decided to go live to tape with the same guys on all 10 songs, because we wanted it to grow organically and find the sound for the record as we were making it.”

With a hint of whimsy (and a nod to her habit of rocking the occasional sequined dress), Wagner calls her music “sparklefolk” — but don’t let that handle fool you, because even some of her most playful-sounding songs (“Rules of Baseball,” for instance) are often spiked with the kind of hard truths that can test the mettle of the strongest human heart. And on *And the Sky Caught Fire*, Wagner pulls no punches.

Of course, the emotional intensity — sometimes steely, sometimes vulnerable, but always raw and honest to the core — encoded into the songs themselves had a lot to do with shaping that sound, too. The album’s nine originals and one

“...a lovely piece of work. The tracks are gorgeously recorded...This album goes down as easy as a fine whiskey.”

— Rod Piccott

heartbreaking cover (Warren Zevon’s “Reconsider Me”) pulse with the palpable tensions of love coming undone (“Winner Take All”), caught in the agonizing/electrifying flux of uncertainty (“Let Me Know”), or dangerously close to catching spark (“Fires of Pompeii.”) And sometimes, when a song like “The Last Time” addresses the finality of love having given up the ghost or perhaps having never even been in the room at all, its absence can be downright devastating: “Being with you is like being with a stranger,” sings Wagner, “but it’s better than being alone.”

Although Wagner notes that the only thing she shares in common with the male protagonist of “Dynamite” (one of the two songs she co-wrote with fellow Austin songwriter Terry Klein) is the same hometown, there’s a genuine explosive charge to the way she delivers lines like “initiate, detonate, blow it up and walk away” with such chilling, almost matter-of-fact conviction. Suffice it to say that when she sings “I’ve got dynamite in my blood,” you believe it.

As arresting as those songs are, though, it's "Fires of Pompeii (We Should Walk Away)" (featuring Rod Picott) that simmers with the album's longest slow burn — as befits one of the earliest songs in her repertoire. "This was one of the first real songs I wrote, and really wanted a male vocal to help drive the story and add to the tension that the characters are feeling," says Wagner. "Rod's been very supportive as I've continued on this journey. His work ethic and generosity are inspiring."

The result was something not only entirely new, but hauntingly beautiful in a way even she probably hadn't dared to imagine.

Much like Wagner herself: A fearless young woman just now finding her true purpose — and ready to catch fire.

"...blends new, grainy, soulful colors to paint her real stories! Me, I like it a lot!"

— Ray Bonneville

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