

MADISON CUNNINGHAM “REVEALER” INFO

As its title suggests, “Revealer” - the new album by Madison Cunningham - is full of confessions, intimations, and hard truths the Los Angeles singer-songwriter-guitarist might rather have kept to herself. It’s a warts-and-all self-portrait of a young artist who is full of doubt and uncertainty, yet bursting with exciting ideas about music and life, who has numerous Grammy nominations but still feels like she has far to go, who turns those misgivings into songs that are confident in their idiosyncrasies. It’s also a rumination on music as a vehicle for such revelations, what’s gained and what’s lost when you put words to your innermost feelings. “There’s a sense of conflict about revealing anything about yourself—not just what to reveal, but whether you should reveal anything at all,” she says. “When you have to vouch for yourself and present a true picture of who you are, that can get confusing very quickly. This record is a product of me trying to find myself and my interests again. I felt like somewhere along the way I had lost the big picture of my own life.”

Reassembling that picture resulted in songs full of odd turns of phrase, skewed imagery, and witty asides; Cunningham writes to figure things out, and she doesn’t settle for easy answers or pat platitudes. Instead, more often than not she pulls the rug out from under herself, playing both straight man and comic relief. “I’m not immune to a piece of bad news, I just do what I must to move on,” she sings on the percolating opener “All I’ve Ever Known.” If it sounds like a cry of determination and fortitude, Cunningham immediately undercuts herself: “Give me truth but put me under so I don’t feel a thing.”

These are dark, funny songs for dark, not-so-funny times. “I wanted this work to reflect how I was taking in the world at that moment, and I promised myself I wouldn’t withhold the good or the bad from this self-portrait. I couldn’t have planned for the startling range of emotions a pandemic would bring on — sorrow, depression, anger, anxiety, fear, apathy. Much less writing during one. While I could take some comfort in knowing other people were experiencing those very things, I had yet to understand how many conflicting emotions a person could carry at once.” The confusion she shared with the rest of the world, however, was compounded and complicated when her grandmother died unexpectedly. Suddenly, the pain became unbearably personal. “Revealer” became a way for her to work through all of those overwhelming emotions.

With rich strings eddying around her measured guitar strums, “Life According to Raechel” is a catalog of missed opportunities and lost time, all the visits she never made to her beloved grandmother, all the important details that make up a life. “There’s always something left unsaid,” Cunningham sings. “Were your eyes green? Were they blue? What was it that I forgot to ask you?” She offers no resolution, no closure, no comfort at all—which is exactly what makes the song so honest about grief. “You’ve got this wound that’s never really going to heal,” she says, “because you’re going to feel the absence of that person for the rest of your life. It’s never going to be resolved. When I realized that, I turned a corner I knew I wouldn’t come back from. When I was able to finally be honest about what it felt like to grieve her, I was able to properly grieve the state of the world and the other things I had lost. Like earning your first gray hair. You could pluck it, but it would just keep growing back.”

The rest of “Revealer” didn’t come easily, but the songs did come. “Songwriting wasn’t this romantic outlet. It was not fun. It was a constant reflection of how poorly I was doing as a human being. I didn’t want it to be true, because it’s such a humbling thing to admit to needing help.” To capture the rawness of those emotions and the urgency of these new songs, Cunningham recorded as she wrote, finishing a song and then taking it to the studio within a matter of days. She worked once again with Tyler Chester, her longtime producer and collaborator, who manned her debut, 2019’s *Who Are You Now* and her 2020 covers EP *Wednesday*, and she also brought in producers Mike Elizondo (Fiona Apple, Regina Spektor, Mastodon) and Tucker Martine (Neko Case, Sufjan Stevens).

Cunningham has already proved herself to be a deft and imaginative guitar player, but “Revealer” foregrounds her spry staccato playing so that it becomes a musical signature. “I’ve always been interested in different ways of approaching the guitar that challenges the way I think I should play it. I tried to explore that more fully and intentionally on this record. I pulled some inspiration from non-Western styles, like Afropop and South American music. I wanted to make the guitar sound more integral to the song structure and less like, ‘now here comes Mr. Electric Guitar.’”

While experimenting in the studio, Cunningham found ways to make familiar instruments sound unusual and unsettling. On the hard-driving “Your Hate Could Power a Train”—which directs its most withering observations inward rather than outward—she transforms a simple ukulele into something dark and menacing, drawing out the song’s darker undercurrents. “I plugged it in and detuned it an octave with a pedal, so it has this wild, undefinable sound. I used that as the main instrument on that song because I wanted it to feel out of control, frantic, and angry. There were so many moments like that, when I felt liberated to stop and take a deep dive and explore sounds. I used to think there’s no use in messing around. But actually there’s only use in messing around. You have to explore, because the best ideas come from childlike curiosity.”

Eventually she emerged with a set of songs prickly with emotions and revelations, an album full of contradictions that somehow speak to a unified truth. “Revealer” reckons with her recent past, but also defines her future. Hoping that she would be singing these songs for many years to come, she planted secret messages to her future self: promises and reminders that she believes might continue to reinforce the lessons she learned during the writing process. “No one’s holding you back now!” she exclaims on “In From Japan,” which she recorded with Martine. “That statement wasn’t true when I wrote it or when I sang it, but I chose to keep that line. That’s a very beautiful part of the songwriting process: Sometimes you write things for your future self to grab onto. You write some idea or sentiment that you hope you can eventually find meaning in.”

As Cunningham learned while making this album, the songwriting process is just as open-ended as the grieving process. That idea is at the heart of “Revealer”, which is more than simply a document of a dark time in her life. It’s a survival guide, a chronicle of growth and change written by the artist who finds joy in the process and beauty in the mistakes. “Doesn’t it feel strange when you say it out loud?” she asks on “Who Are You Now.” “Time to act your age, no one’s gonna show you how.”