

Amythyst Kiah
Wary + Strange

Amythyst Kiah's Rounder Records debut, *Wary + Strange*, marks the glorious combination of two vastly different worlds: the iconoclastic alt-rock that first sparked her musical passion and the roots/old-time music scene where she's found breakout success in recent years, including recognition from Rolling Stone as "one of Americana's great up-and-coming secrets." With an unforgettable voice that's both unfettered and exquisitely controlled, the Tennessee-bred singer/songwriter expands on the uncompromising artistry she most recently revealed as part of Our Native Daughters—an all-women-of-color supergroup whose Kiah-penned standout "Black Myself" earned a Grammy Award nomination for Best American Roots Song and won Song of the Year at the 2019 Folk Alliance International Awards. When met with the transcendent quality of her newly elevated sound, what emerges is an extraordinary vessel for Kiah's songwriting: a raw yet nuanced examination of grief, alienation, and the hard-won triumph of total self-acceptance.

Produced by Tony Berg (Phoebe Bridgers, Amos Lee, Andrew Bird) and recorded at the legendary Sound City Studios in Los Angeles, *Wary + Strange* arrives as a deeply immersive body of work, endlessly redefining the limits of roots music in its inventive rhythms and textures. Despite its mesmerizing effect, the album's sonic grandeur never eclipses the impact of Kiah's storytelling, an element influenced by losing her mother to suicide when she was 17 and also by a longtime struggle to find her own sense of belonging. "A lot of these songs come from a moment in my 20s when I was grappling with trauma while also trying to navigate the experience of being a Black and LGBT woman in a white suburban area in a Bible Belt town," says Kiah, who grew up in Chattanooga and later moved to Johnson City. "I've had moments of feeling othered in certain aspects of my life, and it took me a long time to figure out who I wanted to be and how to move through this world."

Though much of *Wary + Strange* centers on an unfiltered expression of heartache, its songs represent years of tireless effort and exploration. A testament to the steadfast conviction behind her musicianship, Kiah recorded the album twice before linking up with Berg—then scrapped virtually everything and started over from scratch. "My favorite records are the ones that pull you into another world and completely absorb you, but I didn't quite know how to get there on my own," she explains. After an introductory session with Berg in early 2020, Kiah found herself floored by his transformation of "Fracture Me," a bluesy portrait of longing for obliteration. "I knew I needed to work with Tony when he came in with a bass harmonica to use instead of a bass [guitar] and then got out the Mellotron and added a flute line at the chorus of this country blues song," Kiah recalls. "I thought to myself, 'I've got to see what else he pulls out of his bag of tricks.' I'd be lying if I said I didn't have a moment of thinking, 'Am I *really* going to record everything all over again?', but I just kept coming back to, 'What do these songs really need?'"

My goal is to keep growing as an artist, which means trusting the process and doing whatever it takes to make a great record.”

Made with musicians like Wendy Melvoin (Prince & The Revolution, Madonna, Neil Finn), guitarist Blake Mills (Fiona Apple, Alabama Shakes, Dawes, Bob Dylan, Randy Newman), bassist Gabe Noel (Kamasi Washington, Father John Misty), and pedal steel guitarist Rich Hinman (k.d. lang, Tanya Tucker), *Wary + Strange* finds Kiah fully up to the task of treading unfamiliar ground. On the album’s reimagining of “Black Myself,” for instance, she departs from the brightly defiant version that opens *Songs of Our Native Daughters* (a 2019 release co-produced by bandmate Rhiannon Giddens), amplifying the track’s kinetic tension and, in turn, wholly augmenting the power of its message. “‘Black Myself’ is the first song I’ve written that was confrontational,” says Kiah. “I’d always made it a point to sing songs that anybody could relate to, but this was something that had been welling up inside me for a long time, and working with three other Black women in *Our Native Daughters* put me in the position where I finally had the courage to put those words out. The reception of the song so far has given me hope that there are people out there who are ready to confront the shared trauma of racism, to look within ourselves and see how we might be perpetuating racist beliefs, and to do what is needed to create equality for all people.”

In her graceful interlacing of political commentary and personal revelation, Kiah infuses “Black Myself” with a potent vulnerability that builds and deepens all throughout *Wary + Strange*. To that end, the sublimely devastating “Wild Turkey” recounts the aftermath of her mother’s drowning in the Tennessee River as well as Kiah’s journey from angry denial to heavy-hearted acceptance. “For a long time, I didn’t understand that when people commit suicide, it’s because they believe the world will be better off without them,” she says. “I thought [my mom] did it because she didn’t really love or care about me and my dad, and I interpreted that as being abandoned. Writing this song was a way to make amends with what happened and to recognize that numbing myself wouldn’t work for me in the long run.” In a shining example of the album’s ingenious production, the track’s unearthly tones and dreamy background vocals conjure the unsettling effect of being submerged underwater. “I remember hearing that for the first time and crying,” Kiah points out. “It’s that sort of attention to detail that made this record one of the greatest joys of my life.”

Elsewhere on *Wary + Strange*, Kiah intimately documents a tumultuous period in her late 20s when she took up drinking in order to ease the social anxiety that had plagued her since childhood. “I’d gotten to the point where I really wanted to start dating and having meaningful relationships with people, so I started drinking to feel less nervous in social settings—but that ended up escalating over time,” she says. Featuring a brilliantly untethered guitar performance from Blake Mills, “Hangover Blues” perfectly captures the angst of being stuck in a bad habit, its swampy rhythms echoing the sticky unease of morning-after regret. Meanwhile, “Firewater”

finds Kiah looking back on the same point in time with a more clear-eyed perspective, channeling a newfound self-possession in her soulful vocal delivery and luminous guitar work. “‘Firewater’ is about the end of the party phase, when partying was no longer fun,” she says. “It’s me reconciling with the fact that I need to find other ways to cope, which is something I started figuring out once I got into therapy.”

In bringing *Wary + Strange* to life, Kiah revisited another form of therapy: the powerfully cathartic records she turned to for solace as a child and teenager. “The way I listened to music when I was younger was very much based on trying to find some kind of healing,” she says. “The way that someone like Tori Amos took these incredibly personal things and expressed them with piano and vocals was spellbinding to me, and it was my dream to create something that evocative.” At age 13, Kiah started writing songs on a Fender acoustic guitar from her parents; she later broadened her musical vocabulary by studying in the Bluegrass, Old-Time, Country Music program at East Tennessee State University. Not long after self-releasing her 2013 debut, *Dig*, she began garnering acclaim from leading outlets like NPR and The New York Times, who remarked that Kiah’s “razor-sharp guitar picking alone guarantees her a place among blues masters, but it’s her deep-hued voice that can change on a dime from brushed steel to melted toffee that commands attention.”

With the arrival of *Wary + Strange*, Kiah aims to offer listeners the same sense of purposeful escape that music has long provided her, all while building an undeniable sense of communion with her audience. “For anyone who’s struggled with grief or trauma, or felt left out and weird and like they didn’t belong, I hope this album lets them know that they’re not alone in that feeling,” says Kiah. “I hope they understand the experiences I’m trying to relay to them, and I hope they come away from these songs knowing that they can heal from whatever it is that they’re going through.”