

LAURA VEIRS

On her third Nonesuch release, *Saltbreakers*, singer-songwriter Laura Veirs remains tantalized by the mysteries and marvels of the natural world, filling her work with images, both precise and poetic, of the ocean and the stars. But she digs even deeper this time into the vagaries of human nature, transforming the turbulence of her own life, as well as her concerns about the hair-trigger state of the world at large, into a collection of songs distinguished as much by their emotional urgency as by their often astonishing musical inventiveness.

"Lyrically I drew more from my personal life on this record than with anything I've done in the past," says Veirs. She aims to convey the feeling, if not the specific circumstances, of an intense period in her personal life: the end of a long-term relationship, and the unexpected start of a new one, coupled with a move from Seattle to Portland. She recalls this recent time as "a real emotional pendulum. I was swinging from joy to despair and back again. I was bouncing off the walls." She channeled her restless energy into writing material that mirrors those dramatically swinging moods; it shifts from brooding to euphoric to the hauntingly contemplative.

"I needed to say something truthful," admits Veirs. "I wasn't afraid to look at my dark side." And she doesn't waste any time doing that, opening *Saltbreakers* with the lines, "Sorry I was cruel/I was protecting myself/Drifting along with my swords out flying/Tattering my own sails/then I tattered yours too."

"It was nice to be direct," she admits. "But I still like to leave the songs open enough so that listeners can create their own images, their own ideas. On my early records, I was much more direct. It was all narrative. Then I went into a lot more obscure and poetic place. Now I've created a nice balance between those things."

Veirs recorded the album in Seattle, with band-mate Tucker Martine (The Decemberists, Bill Frisell) once again producing and mixing. Though she now calls her group *Saltbreakers*, it's actually comprised of her longtime compatriots, formerly known as the Tortured Souls -- guitarist/bassist Karl Blau, keyboardist Steve Moore and drummer Martine. The name change was a practical decision: "I didn't want to talk about that Tortured Souls thing anymore. It just got old," Veirs, who also plays guitar, explains with a laugh, remembering lots of bad jokes about the moniker.

Over the last three years, the band has traveled the world in support of Veirs' previous Nonesuch albums, *Carbon Glacier* (2004) and *Year of Meteors* (2005), assiduously cultivating an international fan base. Veirs continues to praise the musicians' strong interrelationship: "The band has gotten really close. We've become like a real family. It's felt like that for a long time, but it's even more so now. Before we made this record, I demo-ed the tracks at home using Garageband. Then we went on a short west coast tour and played the new material. One of the big pay-offs of the way we work was then being able to go into the studio and just play the songs."

The title track of *Saltbreakers* also marks the debut of her fellow players as backing vocalists; they gamely follow Veirs' lead, negotiating her twisting trains of thought and idiosyncratic cadences while managing to make it all sound relaxed and conversational. The lyrics to "Saltbreakers," inspired by A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession*, evokes the romantic intensity of the source material, but Veirs' group gives the song a disarmingly buoyant, R&B-like feel. As Veirs recalls, "Karl has sung with me before, but this was the first time for the entire group. They did it all live, clapping in a room together. There was a lot of laughing. I had to make up the last verse on the spot because we realized that we needed something more, the song wasn't ready to end. I like seeing the process unfolding in the studio like that. That's the fun of recording as a group."

Salt became a unifying theme for the album – the salt in tears, the salt in ocean waves, the salt left behind by perspiration after, as Veirs puts it, "a long sweaty night of the soul," the point at which opening track "Pink Light" begins. "The idea felt visceral," says Veirs, "so I ran with it." The sea and waves – or saltbreakers, as Veirs likes to call them – are a leitmotif: "I have a lot of dreams about whales, and the sea itself is so mysterious, ineffable, infinite. You can never know completely what's going on under the surface. That really intrigues me. The sea is both nurturing and destructive: it can be safe and luscious and comforting or a real tyrant. Waves, of course, can wash things away, absolve you, clear the beach of detritus, or they can bring a bunch of stuff back in."

On "Ocean Night Song," in which guest star Eyvind Kang's viola is transformed into a ghostly undersea wail, Veirs envisions her soul floating into the deep to join the whales already swimming there. These "herds of the sea" – a phrase that echoes Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a touchstone for Veirs -- pass by again on the gentle, jangly "Cast a Hook in Me" as the narrator of the song is willingly seduced by a merman. Veirs has lately been drawn to the work of Nobel Prize-winning Portuguese novelist Jose Saramago, whose apocalyptic novel *Blindness* helped to shape "Don't Lose Yourself." She actively sought Saramago's permission to adapt his images of a society upturned by an epidemic of hysterical blindness. "Don't Lose Yourself" transforms social commentary, and a little bit of personal confession, into a sort of magical realism, while "Phantom Mountain" features a startling, fuzzed-out guitars and rock and roll drum-kit sound. Says Veirs, "We like to push different boundaries. We play loud and get noisy. I like some edge, along with some beauty, in my work."

Perhaps the most beautiful moment on *Saltbreakers*, the one sure to entrance both dedicated fans and the uninitiated, is "To the Country," a call-and-response collaboration between Veirs and the eight-voice Cedar Hill Choir, whose almost otherworldly white gospel singing was triple-tracked by Martine. He recorded them in the studio at Johnny and June Carter Cash's cabin in Hendersonville, Tennessee, where, Veirs recounts, "You could feel the energy in that room. There are pictures of family -- mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers -- and a mantle that all the famous people who have recorded or visited there, like Bob Dylan, have signed. We were really excited to be asked to sign it too." Fellow Nonesuch artist Bill Frisell plays guitar on the track, which, despite the studio setting, owes more to the spare, hypnotic music of Mali, which Veirs has been exploring, than to American country music.

Choirs seem to suit Veirs' material. A 45-member chorus of middle school students from Cognac, France, calling itself The Young Rapture Choir, created their own arrangements of Veirs' repertoire. Martine recorded them in concert last year and Veirs has released a limited-edition disc on her own Raven Marching Band imprint. More recently, a teacher from Spain sent Veirs 30 individual notes from

his students, each of them thanking her for making the fantastical, gravity-defying video for "Galaxies," from Year of Meteors. Perhaps they're responding to an element of child-like wonder in her work. A fairy tale-like quality is certain there, but older, more knowing ears will find something even more engrossing in these songs: the sound of a real life unfolding between the crashing sea and the twinkling stars.

-- Michael Hill