

CAITLYN SMITH
STARFIRE

“Each song is a little snapshot of something I picked up along the way,” says Caitlyn Smith. With her new album, *Starfire*, Smith has created a true portrait of an artist as a young woman, full of insightful observations, personal revelation, and commitment to craft. Powerful and nuanced, the record marks the arrival of a true musical force.

Though she began her career as a performer, in recent years Smith has become one of Nashville’s most celebrated songwriters, with her compositions recorded by artists from James Bay to Garth Brooks, Dolly Parton to John Legend and Meghan Trainor (for whom she co-wrote the multi-platinum duet “Like I’m Gonna Lose You”). Since she returned to the stage on her own, tastemakers immediately began taking notice: *Rolling Stone* has called Caitlyn’s voice “soaring and expressive” and *Elle* magazine praised her “powerful, affecting songs,” and she was named one of the “top female vocalists” on *Billboard’s* SXSW 2017 Music Discovery.

“I was wandering around Nashville, writing for other people, but I hadn’t figured out what I wanted to say as an artist,” says Smith of her new focus for *Starfire*. “I started writing songs that only I could sing—I would go in with the intention of writing for myself, after years of not doing that. This record is me opening my heart and telling my story.”

St. Paul, all those nights that you made me love you
St. Paul, all the trouble we got into
I might run a million miles though a million cities
But there'll never be another one that's ever gonna get me
Like St. Paul
— “St. Paul”

Growing up in the small town of Cannon Falls, Minnesota, Caitlyn Smith was drawn to music at a young age. She put together her first band when she was 12 years old, drafting her brother as the drummer, and started cold-calling local venues for gigs. By the time she finished high school, she was writing and performing so often that her parents asked if she wanted to use her college fund to finance a record; she went on to make three albums before she turned 19.

“I cut my teeth in the Minneapolis clubs,” she says. “All those times sneaking into shows was a defining time of my life, it left a huge mark on me. And the fact that there were these great artists who had come from Minnesota—Prince, Bob Dylan, Jonny Lang—made the idea of being a musician more attainable.”

Smith moved to the Twin Cities and played everywhere she could, but she had also been told that Nashville was a gathering place for songwriters, so she drove south to check it

out. Discovering a city of kindred spirits, she began finding connections in the writing community. “As often as I could afford it,” she says, “I would take my Dodge Neon and drive for 14 hours, and started a period of going back and forth between the two cities.”

The *Starfire* song “St. Paul” stands as her tribute to this chapter of her development. “It captures that spirit of how it all started,” she says. “Wherever I travel, Minnesota will always be home.”

*Nashville, you win
Your steel guitars and
Broken hearts have done me in
I gave you my soul
'Cause I wanted it so bad
And now I just wanna go home
This town is killing me*
—“This Town Is Killing Me”

“You always have a picture in your mind of how things are going to go,” says Smith, “and it always turns out different.”

Newly married, she made the decision to move to Nashville full-time, and soon secured a publishing deal. Some country acts started recording her songs, then some country legends, and then artists in the pop world. “The crazy thing about Nashville is you get in a room with people and you have no idea what’s going to happen,” she says. “Meghan [Trainor] wasn’t a star when we wrote that song, she didn’t even have a record deal yet, but it ended up working out swimmingly.”

Being a staff songwriter has its own complications—“you’re putting your art on the line daily and being judged,” she notes—but it was a key stage in Smith’s ultimate plan. “I took a break from the stage because I wanted to learn how to craft a song,” she says. “I saw that you can have the greatest voice in the world, but if you don’t have a song, you have nothing. So I took a few years to really study songs and learn how to write.”

Eventually, though, she began to grow restless and feel the urge to get back behind a microphone. Trying to re-launch herself as a singer, though, proved more difficult than she expected. “I heard ‘no’ from every label in town,” says Smith. “I remember sitting on my guitar case on the sidewalk, crying after a horrible label meeting, and it started to rain, and I thought ‘This will be a great scene in the movie someday.’”

On *Starfire*, “This Town is Killing Me” encapsulates this period in Smith’s journey. “That song is the cornerstone of the record,” she says, “the story of what we all struggle with as songwriters.”

*But you won't burn out this Starfire
There's fearless dancing in my flames
Blow me out, I'll just burn brighter
No, you can't burn out this Starfire
No matter what you say*
—“Starfire”

Smith hunkered down and committed to creating her own music, eventually connecting with producer Paul Moak. Just as things started rolling, though, she found out that she was pregnant with her first child. After lengthy discussions with her husband, she decided to keep working as long as she could. “He said, ‘This isn’t going to stop you—you can still sing, still move around,’” she says. “So I was cutting the record and still touring through my entire pregnancy. We released a few songs before I had the baby, just to put some music out there, and the response was way more than I ever anticipated.”

As she continued writing for *Starfire*, leading up to and following the birth of her son, Smith found more and more clarity about her ambitions. “When I started, it was difficult to know which parts of my story to tell,” she says. “But the more that I did it, the easier it was to identify which pieces to share. The writing became more honest once I finally had my sights on what I was doing.

“After so many years, and so many closed doors, ‘Starfire’ really is my theme song,” she continues. “This is my opportunity to pack up my little gypsy family, take it on the road and keep going.”

The twelve songs on *Starfire* illustrate the range of Smith’s storytelling and the striking impact of her voice. “Don’t Give Up On My Love,” which she wrote by herself in a cabin in North Dakota, is almost painful in its intimacy, while “East Side Restaurant” is more cinematic in its detail and dramatic in its delivery (“That’s about a past relationship that was quite toxic,” she says, “so I know it’s a song people can connect with”).

From small-town Minnesota to the stages of Lollapalooza and the Austin City Limits festival, Caitlyn Smith is now living a dream she’s had from a very young age—and with the release of the mature, masterful *Starfire*, there’s no telling what happens from here.

“The path sure wasn’t what I thought it would be,” she says, “but it took all those ‘no’s and this whole journey to find what I needed, after trying too hard to do what other I thought other people wanted me to do. I needed to ask myself, ‘What do I love, what can I do that no one else can?’ And now I know that I’m not going to give up...This is what I was made to do.”