

# Wild Thing

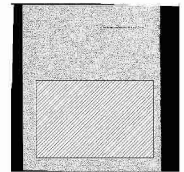
Neko Case's songs are full of claws,  
wolves, tornadoes, birds of prey and the occasional gust of wind.  
But her voice is the real force of nature.

BY DANIEL MENAKER

"I wish I had a tremolo," Neko Case said. She looked at the Samburger she was wolfing down — Samburgers and Zinburgers being the specialties of a restaurant called Zinburger, in downtown Tucson, where Case lives, for now. With their maple bacon, American cheese and Thousand Island dressing, Samburgers are a cardiothoracic surgeon's dream. Case had been talking about singers whose music and voices she admired — Iris DeMent and Roy Orbison prominent among them. She now banged her hand on the table, flounced her bright-red hair, leaned over and said, "I want a tremolo!" Then she looked up and laughed at herself.

In part because of the inexpensiveness and flexibility of digital technology, the universe of independent singer-songwriters is constantly expanding. But in that universe, Neko Case is near the center. She is to many what she herself would call "the Man!" Her last CD, an often surreal and melodically inventive collection of songs called "Fox Confessor Brings the Flood," rose to No. 54 on the Billboard chart and ended up selling 200,000 copies. And publications like Rolling Stone and Spin and The Stranger, along with a growing cadre of intense, often lovesick fans, have

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL JACKSON





lionized Case's singing voice as uniquely clear and powerful. It may not vibrate as much as she would like, but it's not the angel-sweet sound of Alison Krauss, either — it has real richness and body. And on her new CD, "Middle Cyclone," to be released in March by Anti- (a division of the punkish label Epitaph that features all their artists who aren't punk), Case displays a wide vocal and emotional range only intermittently present on her six previous recordings and in her regular releases with the Canadian power-pop band the New Pornographers. She has often been described as a belter, a force of nature, a kind of vocal tornado. So this increased admixture of playfulness, delicacy and orchestral effects strikes you as the kind of variegation that artists — and species — make in order to survive and thrive.

Meat, wolfing, lionized, cyclones, species, tornadoes, survival. A suitable lexicon, because despite the appeal to a broader audience in her new lyrics and arrangements, Case remains, in person and in her music, at least for now, to some degree a feral outsider. And, like the weather that sweeps through her songs, a product of chaos. She was born in Alexandria, Va., in 1970, the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants. Her father and mother were very young and entirely unprepared for parenthood, according to Case. The family left Alexandria and lived all over the Northwest, but Case identifies her hometown as Tacoma, Wash. When she was just 5 or 6, Case's parents divorced, and afterward Neko split her time between her father and her mother and stepfather. She recalls those years as ones of extreme poverty. "Government-issue American cheese was a treat," she said over her Samburger, bedecked with same, though not government-issue.

"I should have been an abortion," Case says, with her customary frankness. "The only reason I wasn't was that my father was a Christian." Air quotes didn't quite land on that proper noun, but they hovered close by. He was also a heavy drinker, she says, and used drugs, and "he hated his life. And he reminded us of that every day." Abortion rights is an important issue for Case — she emphasizes that she has seen and lived the misery of unwanted children. (Another cause of hers is humane treatment for animals that suffer cruelty and neglect at people's hands.) Her father died not long ago, of a heart attack, at 56, and she seems more sympathetic than angry about his desperate existence. "I've been mourning my dad my whole life," she says. Her mother was good to her as a little girl, Case says, but adds that later she was often left at home alone. "I spent a good deal of the time alone with dogs," she told Harp magazine. "I'd sing and talk to the dogs and draw pictures."

**CASE HAS A LOT OF ANIMALS** of her own now — four dogs, three of them rescues from the Tucson Greyhound Park racetrack, the "home of paw-pounding action!" its ads say. The racers there have names like Dollar Fa Dollar, Phoenix Twix and Exotic Lookin, but Case has retitled hers Swan-y, Guy and Travis, the last named after the hero of one of her favorite movies, "Paris, Texas." A fourth dog, a shepherd-chow mix, Liza, balances the bony and high-strung greyhounds with some heft and calm. The dogs have 15 legs among them; Travis lost one to cancer.

For the last five years, Case has lived in a middle-class, one-story-house neighborhood of Tucson, not far from the city's center. But this spring she'll move to an old farm she bought and is now renovating in northern Vermont. "I want to get away from the social vampires in Tucson," she says. "The people who have no lives of their own and meet me and know who I am and feel entitled to say negative things. I have good friends here, especially in the bands" like Calexico and Giant Sand. Members of these bands and others have often appeared on her CDs. "But a lot of it is just like high school. And I like forests and all the wildlife up in Vermont."

*Daniel Menaker, who often writes about music, is working on "A Good Talk," a book about conversation.*



Neko's Wild Years: As a teenager, top, and in Vancouver with an early band, the country-punk act Maow (Case is at left).

It's hard to imagine what these acts of social vampirism might consist of, but she prefers to leave them unspecified. She also asks that the Vermont town's name not be mentioned. "I've had stalkers," she says. Alexandria, Tacoma, Vancouver, Chicago, Tucson and, next, Vermont. Case hopes that her new community will prove to be her permanent home. You wonder.

She takes the dogs out three or four times a day — at least once to a nearby park, so that the greyhounds can run. I walked with her one afternoon. Quite a sight, this flame-haired, black-clad person and her four charges, as they walk through the cactus-dotted, sand-dusted Tucson streets and alleys. She is 38, 5-foot-7, slender and lithe — she spends 50 minutes on a treadmill every day and has been kickboxing since she was 24. Her face is long and faintly weathered. At Joe's Pub in New York a couple of years ago, she seemed tour-fatigued backstage but often fierce when she was performing. "I have this typical Ukrainian face," she says. "Even people who know my music don't recognize me most of the time, thank God." She may go unrecognized, but she seldom goes unnoticed.

Other dogs tore back and forth barking ferociously behind fences as the human/canine entourage went by. "There's a lot of crime here," Case said. "Break-ins. A lot of drugs too — meth." A Latino woman with a bulldog straining angrily at his leash walked by on the other side of the street. She held the leash with two hands. "Sorry," the woman said. "He is not too friendly." When Case is on tour — typically at least six months a year — a friend takes very careful care of the dogs. "And when I'm home, they take care of me," she said. (Case is offering a free download of "People Got a Lotta Nerve," from the new album — a song that chastises human beings for destroying predatory animals — and Anti- will donate \$5 to

Best Friends Animal Society for every blog that posts the offer.) A flock of birds flies by right overhead, with a larger bird behind them. "That's a Harris's hawk," Case exclaimed. "See the white ring around his tail? There are a lot of predator birds in the desert — hawks and especially great horned owls. They are awesome! He's after the pigeons."

**CASE LEFT HOME IN TACOMA** when she was 15. There was a day when she packed up and moved out, but even before that she was drifting away. Some nights she just didn't go home, or couldn't. "There was a lot of drinking going on then," she says. She lived in the basement of a friend's parents' house for a while. "But eventually I had to leave," she says. "I was a teenager, and of course I didn't do the chores I was supposed to do to be able to stay there." She hung out on the fringes of the Northwest's punk-rock scene, which at the time was energized by the success of Nirvana, among other bands, and did a lot of PCP. "Remember? The stuff that had kids standing at the edge of roofs, thinking they could fly?" Astonishingly — for someone with her background and habits — she somehow got her high-school G.E.D. and then with borrowed money attended the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (now a full-fledged university), in Vancouver. She is still an artist as well as a musician — and a seamstress and an avid reader and an environmentalist and someone capable of basic car repair. She recently contributed a cardboard building to a recycled-material collaborative installation called "The Exquisite City," which opened at the Chicago Tourism Center in January.

Her career in music started with her playing drums in several Tacoma and Vancouver bands — the Propanes, the Del Logs, Cub and Maow, all punky or country — or puntry — and she still feels a strong bond with Canada. It was with Maow that she began singing as well as drumming. "It's really hard to do," she says. "Levon Helm is the Man — he's awesome!" She made sure to minimize the damage in case she messed up the first time. "I chose an audience of seven or eight in Toledo, Ohio," she says. She eventually clambered out from behind the drums and went on to form her own band drawn — in the recombinant process that typifies the indie-rock scene — from such other groups as Zumpano, the Softies and Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet.

In 1997, Case officially began her solo career, accompanied by Her Boyfriends, a nomenclaturally more dignified band, with a CD called "The Virginian," which was a mixture of country covers and original songs with a more-or-less-traditional country sound. There followed "Furnace Room Lullaby" (2000), also with Her Boyfriends; then, under her name only, "Canadian Amp" (2001); "Blacklisted" (2002); "The Tigers Have Spoken" (2004; "a real live album," Case says, "not a fake live album like so many 'live' albums"); and in 2006, "Fox Confessor Brings the Flood."

Each recording puts the country and country-noir vocals and arrange-

Forget Me," and they happen to be the most overtly tuneful and "easy" of the album's 15 tracks. By the way, the last track, "Marais la Nuit" — "Night Swamp" — is 32 minutes long, uses four-minute repeated loops, is amphibian in its tonalities and comforting in its effect, and that's all that should be said about it before the album's release.

The foundations of Case's music are still — somewhere down there, almost subterranean — country and indie rock, but for some time now her melodies have been growing more complex, the instrumentations more varied and ambitious, the modulations more surprising, the lyrics more imagistic, to the point, sometimes, of surreal impenetrability:

Who led you to this hiding place?  
 Whose lightning threads spun silver tongues?  
 The red bells beckon you to ride,  
 A handprint on the driver's side.  
*"Deep Red Bells," from "Blacklisted"*

This is one of Case's most memorable compositions. An admirer of hers, the musical polymath T Bone Burnett, says that he heard her sing it at the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles some years ago, "and I don't think I've ever heard a voice that sounded like that before. It was so full! I don't know of another woman who has that same fullness and power." Case did in this instance divulge one reason that this song may make such an impression — live or on "Blacklisted." "It's based on the Green River killer," she says. "When I was a kid in Tacoma, we were all scared all the time. I actually carried a knife to school with me. The 'you' in the song is one of his victims. They were all prostitutes, but we didn't know that. They could have been anybody; they could have been us." When you know this, "hiding place" becomes pretty ominous, and "silver tongues" may allude to the way the killer — Gary Ridgway — used sweet talk and photographs of his son to lull his victims into trusting him.

Such knowledge adds to and subtracts from the song's strength. Like poets, many songwriters who use surreal and open-ended lyrics decline to provide explications for them. When "Deep Red Bells" is "solved" this way, you perhaps feel more acutely the fear and mourning that generated it. But knowing the topical background may also denature the lyrics somewhat. "I don't want to be a spoiler for the listener," Case says. "I want people to feel able to make the song their own."

One person not subject to this general nondisclosure policy is Paul Rigby, the band's guitarist, who is also Case's compositional collaborator. "Sometimes I don't get something — some reference," he says, "and I'll ask Neko where it comes from, and she'll tell me." Case explains, "That's because sometimes it's important for Paul to know something more specifically so that he can make a chord change suit the meaning better." Rigby goes on to say: "I think Neko is always writing, even when she's not. It seems like

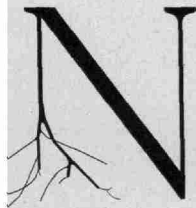
*'I don't think I've ever heard a voice that sounded like that before,'  
 T Bone Burnett says. 'It was so full! I don't know of another woman  
 who has that same fullness and power.'*

ments and the dropped g's that characterized Case's earlier career further behind, though traces of them pop up often. Fewer three-chord Everly Brothers-type covers (she recorded "Bowling Green" on "The Virginian") and fewer notional numbers, like Case's own "Honky-Tonk Hiccups," one of the few downright (and probably purposefully) silly songs she has written. "Middle Cyclone" does include Case's renditions of "Never Turn Your Back on Mother Earth," the odd, admonitory waltz by the decades-old protean band Sparks, and Harry Nilsson's lovely and slyly funny "Don't

the lyrics can happen over a day or a year. The idea comes first, and then she tries to find a melody. Then, later, she may say to me, 'I need the chord to be weirder here,' or something like that. I'll whittle it down to two choices, and then she makes the decision."

Jon Pareles, a music critic for The Times, best described the overall impression that "Fox Confessor" makes: "Memories interweave with fantasies, observations with fragments of narrative. For every clear-cut song about troubled love ... there are two with far more elusive imagery." Then,

most perceptively: "At first, the songs can seem remote and arty, but gradually they start to add up.... She's unveiling what haunts her."



Neko Case's life and musical career, viewed together, form a collage — the visual-art form she favors. They consist of many "found" or accidental or rescued elements, starting with the old brown Chevy diesel van that she drives. The more you look at them side by side, however, the more they cohere and interconnect. Take the dogs ("gassy dogs with smelly butts," she called them, before that Tucson walk). Well, in the barn of her new old farm in Vermont, where some of "Middle Cyclone" was recorded, there are six of eight castoff pianos that Case discovered offered free on Craigslist. Derelicts, too, in their way. "Some of them don't really work very well — the pedals don't operate, a few keys are broken," she says. Like the dog with the missing leg. As she used to be, each piano is a stray. She puts them to strong use in her anthemic version of the Nilsson song. Watching a video of her recording that song is moving, especially as its burden — "Don't forget me" — comprehends not only a lover's yearning for remembrance but also an artist's striving for recognition and a human being's longing for permanence. And, maybe, a piano's wish for a new life. And a child's wish for attention. A complementary gust of wind happened to whoosh through the barn near the end of the recording. Case kept it in.

Or take the growing eclecticism of her music and the influences on and contributors to it. At various times in her career, critics have compared her with everyone from Patsy Cline (yes) to Loretta Lynn (no) to Dolly Parton (huh?) to Wanda Jackson (yes, definitely). She admires a very long list of other musicians: from Howlin' Wolf — "He's just awesome!" she says — to, of all people, the Hi-Los; and has done covers of songs by everyone from Tom Waits to Queen to Hank Williams. And on "Middle Cyclone," the Band's Garth Hudson, members of Calexico, Los Lobos, the Sadies and a few of the old New Pornographers pitch in. So Case has fashioned from this assemblage of predecessors and admirations something very much of her own in her songwriting and singing. The first time through "Fox Confessor" and "Middle Cyclone," you have no idea what might be coming next.

Case courts surprises in her music but not in the commerce behind it. She was cast on — and then cast herself on — her own devices for so long that when it comes to business, she has insisted on complete independence. She has recently turned down major-label overtures ("And I'm so glad that Elektra, for example, didn't come to me early on with an offer," she says), retains all the rights to her songs and has never made a publishing deal. She does share revenues with Rigby, the guitarist. "Paul really helps me compose my music," she says, "he always knows which chords to use when." Otherwise

were just that loud rock band," says Carl Newman, the New Pornographers' guitarist and songwriter. "She might just come in and record with us for five days. She told me once that hearing the songs she does with us when they're all finished is like coming home and finding that your house has been redecorated." Newman had been friends with Case for a while in Vancouver before he first got a real idea of her singing voice. "It was at a friend's wedding," he says. "It was the first time I heard her in full-on Neko mode. She sang that old song 'So Young.' That was the first time I realized how really great she was." Odd song for a wedding, if he's talking about the Ronettes' "So Young" — "So young, can't marry no one." Newman says: "No one is listening to the words at a wedding, anyway. They're all just dancing — and hammered."

**CASE'S HOUSE MAKES** the same kind of mixed-assortment impression that her songwriting does. As there are in her lyrics, there were animals everywhere — not only the real, gassy ones but also mounted deer heads, prints of pictures with animals in them, statuettes of animals. A banjo hung from a hook. A couple of proto-Pisa towers of books stood in one corner, and a couple of long rows of LPs sloped against a couple of walls. A stack of DVDs was less precarious but no less heterogeneous than the books and LPs.

Maybe because of her hard childhood, it seems as if Case has created not only her music and her art and her sewing and her decor but also her very self out of patches and pieces. Somehow she managed to shore up her fragments against a meaningless life of drugs and poverty and oblivion. It could easily have gone the other way. After leaving her friend's parents' basement in Tacoma, she says: "I was pretty floaty. I didn't have any idea about mortality. My life was like the scene in 'Roger Rabbit,' where the guy goes into the cartoon world." Finally, and paradoxically, it was her very anger about neglect that appears to have driven her away from self-destruction and toward music. "I was a mad kid," she says. "I was sick of being poor. I was sick of being a girl. I felt completely unimportant. I didn't matter to the world, and I was just going to get love any way I could."

You can hear that anger in many of her recordings, especially the earlier ones. It may account for the almost assaultive nature of some of her singing and some of her arrangements: a staccato drumbeat, a lemon-sour twangy guitar, in-your-ear intensity, heavy use of reverb — an effect that Case says creates a feeling of space but to my ear often creates a sense of confinement. (Case has said of her childhood, "I felt like a prisoner.") And then there are these recurring images in her lyrics, some of which are from love songs — knives, wolves, teeth, birds of prey, claws, fire and blood. And when she's singing more calmly, Case can sometimes sound at a distance from her material.

To say nothing of its title, 5 of the 15 songs on her new CD mention tornadoes or cyclones. So you would expect to find even more tempestuousness here. But the very first cut is called "This Tornado Loves You." Hmm. A different spirit and, maybe, greater self-awareness. The vocabulary hasn't

'The idea comes first, and then she tries to find a melody,'  
 says Paul Rigby, Case's guitarist. 'Then, later, she may say to me,  
 "I need the chord to be weirder here," or something like that.'

she retains artistic and financial control of her productions. What are those revenues? Well, in her best year, 2006, when "Fox Confessor" was released and she had an extensive tour to go along with it, she had gross revenues of about \$360,000. Of that figure, she says, about \$320,000 went for professional expenses — equipment, transportation, the band's pay and so forth.

Case is more flexible when it comes to her work with the New Pornographers. Here is a pretty different kind of music from her own — she has no part in the lyrics and none in the production of the group's recordings. "We

lightened a great deal — nettles, cyclone, tornado, vengeance, animals and so on. But some of the distance is gone — the singer sounds more fully in her songs than she sometimes has sounded before. "I was willing to be a little more personal," Case says. "I realized that it's O.K. to admit that no matter who your characters are, you're writing about yourself."

**DURING MY VISIT TO TUCSON**, we took a trip to buy produce of integrity at a Whole Foods supermarket overlooking the city. It was one of your more



Case and her "strays" — a half-dozen pianos in varying degrees of disrepair that she has collected — in her Vermont barn during the recording of her latest record, "Middle Cyclone."

picturesque supermarkets, to say the least, in a mall with a cactus garden and a spectacular view. The cacti outside the store reminded me of the often-thorny music Case admires and composes. They appeared to grow out of nothing, beauty and strangeness from dust, and then new parts of them seemed to spring as if from nowhere out of other parts, the flowers looking completely ad hoc and accidental.

The whole place, the whole city below, exuded both desperation and determination, mixed in with its meth fumes. The scene may not have had quite the eschatological chill that Case's lyrics for the title track of "Fox Confessor Brings the Flood" have: "It's not for you to know, but for you to weep and wonder/When the death of your civilization precedes you." But especially in these catastrophic financial times, and especially in a place like Arizona, where a huge number of people were facing foreclosures not merely of mortgages but of their entire economic lives, and a huge number of other people risk deportation every day, it was close.

**IN HER RATTLY BROWN CHEVY VAN**, Case returned to the issue of abortion. She deplored some recent movies that raise the matter as one of its crucial plot points — "Knocked Up" and "Juno," for example — and then "solve" it with a sweetly positive ending or a miscarriage or some other sidestep. "Just have the abortion," she said of "Juno." "Just have it and get on with your life." She continued: "Years ago, I went to Planned Parenthood in New York — for another reason — and I saw these girls waiting there, and it was just awful. It was cold, they were in gowns that didn't really close, and their boyfriends and parents weren't with them, and they were sitting under these bright lights, and the people were mean."

Surely this experience lies behind one of her most readable songs, "Pretty Girls," on "Blacklisted":

The TV is blaring and angry,  
 as if you don't know why you're here.  
 Those who walk without sin are so hungry —  
 Don't let the wolves in, pretty girls. ....  
 Don't let them tell you you're nothing.

But once again, the collage effect supersedes the direct correspondence between Case's life and beliefs and her art. For it's as much the *patness* of those movie endings as their politics that infuriates her. Just as it's the canned and banal aspect of a lot of popular music that bugs her and, conversely, the moral and even narrative irresolution of a show like "The Wire" on HBO that earns her respect. An aesthetic of contingency, luck and resourcefulness governs her personal history and her work, especially the open-ended nature of her songwriting. "Middle Cyclone" — named after the area near the middle of a tornado in which air rushes straight up — comes close to immediate accessibility, but it is never pat, never ear Splenda. It has a Brechtian-sounding love song in march rhythm, two or three waltzes, a sweet Byrds-like salvo of opening guitars and vocal effects from wild to coy.

Of this openness to new forms and experimentation, T Bone Burnett says: "Neko is an artist. It's that simple. She's above it all, the way an artist has to be. I wouldn't be surprised if one day she picks up and moves to Bulgaria to learn about Bulgarian art. She's open to everything. She's a young woman with an incredible gift, that voice, and the spirit of a true artist" — everything, it seems, except a tremolo. ■