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PET SOUNDS

NEKO CASE emerges from a rustic Vermont farm with the album of her life and a newfound outlook on love, meteorology, and chocolate chip cookies

BY ELLEN CARPENTER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

ERIC OGDEN

NEKO CASE'S BIGGEST fans bum-rush her at her front door. "Hi, guys!" she singsongs as four large dogs come clattering over floorboards to fill the entrance of her Tucson, Arizona home with sheer body-wiggling desperation. You'd think she'd been on tour for weeks, not at a local café for two hours.

Dropping a canvas tote, Case bends to bestow kisses and back scratches. "Oh, Travis, you're such a ham," she says to one of her three greyhounds. "I made the mistake of feeding the dogs bacon yesterday," she warned earlier, prepping me for potential toxic blowback. "Greyhounds are really talented in that area."

Happily, though, the only aroma here is a good one: the lingering scent of fudge cookies with white chocolate chips, which Case made last night. Dressed in blue and white Mizuno sneakers, navy blue cords, and a nubby, gray shawl-collar sweater, she ambles into her recently renovated kitchen (vintage porcelain sink and '50s Tappan Deluxe stove), lifts a glass cake-stand cover, and displays the improbably professional fruits of her labor. "You want one?" she asks, handing over a perfectly rounded specimen, which turns out to have a striking balance of decadent gooeyness and intense chocolate flavor.

"I spent about a year figuring out how to make cookies," says Case, 38, a proud subscriber to both *Saveur* and *Gourmet*. "About five years ago, I really had a craving for chocolate chip cookies, and I used that Nestlé Toll House recipe, and it was *shit*. So I made my kitchen into a test kitchen for about a year, until I figured it out."

That would be the Neko Case m.o.: a relentless, near obsessive pursuit of perfection. "I'm a control freak," she admits, and indeed, she spent the better part of the last two years recording her new, fifth studio album, *Middle Cyclone*. This collection of atmospheric story-songs and moody country

ballads steers clear of the hooky, buoyant pop rock she sings as a member of indie supergroup the New Pornographers. Here, she lends her arresting voice—molasses-thick with a fiery edge—to loosely structured songs that paint vivid portraits of heartache, death, and failed friendships. Enlisting guitar charmer M. Ward, plus members of the New Pornographers, Los Lobos, and Calexico, the album painstakingly blends twinkling hammer dulcimers, quaking strings, customized music boxes, and other arcane instrumentation in a finely wrought tapestry that sounds unmistakably homespun and rustic.

She recorded much of *Middle Cyclone* in a drafty 18th-century barn, which sits on a Vermont farm she bought a couple years ago with an eye toward making it her permanent residence. Case had the floors redone and wheeled in six pianos she picked up for free on Craigslist. Some of them were missing pedals and irreparably out of tune, but when she and her collaborators—including the Band's Garth Hudson—played them all in unison for her cover of Harry Nilsson's "Don't Forget Me," the sound seemed to fuse decades and eras in one massive, spectral choir. "I figure Harry Nilsson would approve if Garth Hudson was the lead pianist," she laughs.

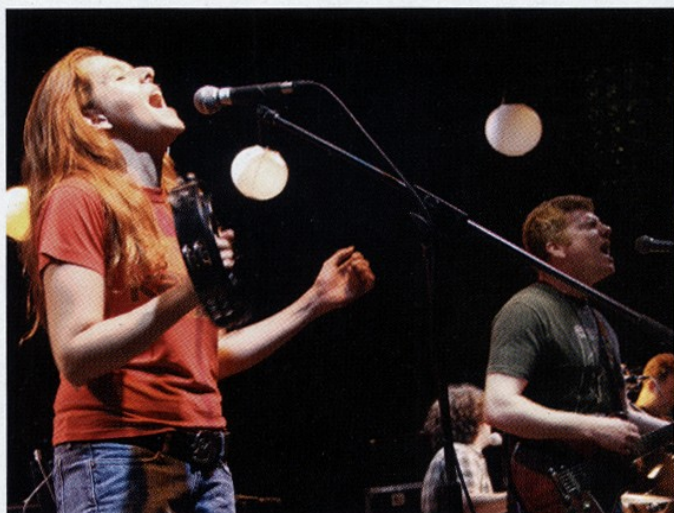
Hudson, who also played on Case's 2006 album, *Fox Confessor Brings the Flood*, hears just as deep a resonance in the singer's voice. "It sounded like the wind from the Rocky Mountains," Hudson recalls of his first exposure. "Her voice sailed."

Case built a makeshift cardboard recording booth in the barn to lay down her vocals, and other sounds often snuck onto the tape: A nest of wildly chirping baby robins make an appearance on the ghostly "Polar Nettles"; elsewhere, gusts of wind add spooky ambience. The 32-minute closing track, "Marais la Nuit," is actually a looped recording of frogs outside the barn. "We were joking that there should be a post-album chill-out section," she says, "and so I thought, 'Why not?'"

GROOMING BY PAMELA FROST

Photographed
for SPIN in
Tucson, Arizona,
January 5, 2009





“MY DAD MADE UP ‘NEKO’ AFTER SMOKING POT. I COULD NEVER FIND ONE OF THOSE LICENSE PLATES WITH MY NAME ON IT.”

For Case, letting go is the second-hardest part of finishing an album. “It’s even harder to transition back to being a regular person,” she says. “You know, sitting on your couch and doing nothing. You always have this feeling that there’s something you’re not doing.”

Today at least, she’s making a decent go at regular-personhood: sipping iced tea in her lavender-walled dining room while her dogs nap on their beds a few feet away. A black velvet scrunchie gathers her trademark electric-red hair in a sloppy ponytail atop her head, revealing an undyed natural palette of brown and gray underneath. Her skin is makeup-free, dappled by the sun, and her green-gray eyes are soft and friendly. She had surgery two days ago to remove a vein in her leg that wasn’t returning blood to her heart (“They were like, ‘It’s preventative, but we should really take it out ‘cause you don’t want to have a stroke on a plane!’”) and her “giant Barbie leg bandage” is making her move more slowly than usual. But no bother.

Her unassuming one-story home is dotted with telltale signs of a craftswoman. Pieces of cardboard—the beginnings of a miniature building she’s constructing for a Chicago art exhibition called “Exquisite City”—are scattered across the dining room table. Lemon and tangerine trees and pots of Ukrainian bell tomatoes, okra, and tomatillos fill the space in her backyard that isn’t monopolized by an empty in-ground swimming pool. And while her front yard is lined with the same cacti as every other on her residential street, it’s the only one with a fence made from old mattress springs (which she welded together herself).

Despite the baroque perfection of her current home, Case hopes to leave it soon for an even

more bucolic one on her farm—which would, in a sense, be a return to happy times. She spent fifth and sixth grade living with her mom and stepdad in Vermont’s rural Lamoille County and considers it the high point in a childhood that didn’t have many.

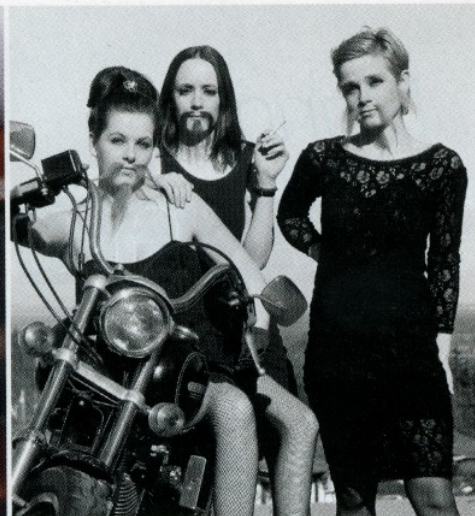
CASE’S FAMILY COMES from Washington state, but she was born in Virginia, where her father was stationed with the Air Force. Her dad took credit for her unusual name. “He claimed he made it up while he was on guard duty at the Air Force base, and he claimed to have smoked a bunch of pot, which, for some reason, he thought was a great selling point as to why that name is so great,” Case says. “I could never find one of those fucking bike license plates with my name on it.” When she was a year old, her family moved back to Washington, driving cross-country with her grandmother and grandfather, who was a school superintendent, in a big yellow school bus.

Her parents got divorced soon after, and she split her time between them, bouncing from town to town and school to school, getting picked on relentlessly because her family didn’t have much money. “Kids were so fucking mean and petty,” she says, audibly angry 30 years later. “They had this adulthood to their pettiness that I just didn’t get; I didn’t understand why they were so cruel.” Things were different in Vermont. “It was the only place I lived as a kid where I felt like I really fit in,” she says. Everyone she knew there lived on a farm, so class wasn’t an issue. “They were really okay with themselves, so they were friendly and supportive.”

When her mom and stepdad relocated back to Washington two years later, Case found things worse at home than they were at school. “My family were pretty big alcoholics, and I wasn’t into it,” she says, letting out a nervous laugh. “It was time to go.” She left home at 15 and got on a “schedule of hand-to-mouth”—no one would give her a job since she was underage. She tried to finish high school, but was so malnourished that she couldn’t stay awake in class and ended up dropping out. She fell in with a group of young punk musicians and started playing drums, despite the fact that her musical training amounted to a year of violin in elementary school. One thing she didn’t do was sing. “It was terrifying,” she says of the prospect.

Case eventually got her GED and completed a two-year program at community college (paid for by working the graveyard shift unloading trucks at UPS) before heading to art school in Vancouver. She played drums in a few Vancouver punk groups—including Cub and Maow—and at some point, started to share vocal duties. “I don’t really know when it happened,” she says about singing. “It wasn’t me thinking, ‘I am goooooo and I better share this!’ It was more like I had such a huge desire to do it.”

Carl Newman, the leader of the New Pornographers, remembers seeing her for the first time in 1995 when she was playing with the all-girl Maow. “They were wearing kitten ears and fur bikinis, and Neko was drumming,” Newman says, “and at the end of the show, she just go-go danced randomly for a minute. I remember going, ‘Who the hell is that girl?’” They soon became friends, bonding over their love of the Vapors and Shocking Blue, and in 1996 he asked her to join a band he was starting. A year later,



With Carl Newman and the rest of the New Pornographers, 2006; wailing alongside John Mellencamp and T Bone Burnett at 2007's *Hardly Strictly Bluegrass* concert; melancholy baby on board, 2009; riding to an electrolysis appointment with her Maow bandmates, 1996

she released her first solo album, *The Virginian*.

She never meant to make music her career. "Music and art were viewed as a real pipe dream," she says. "I never brought it up to my family, and I never considered that for myself, but suddenly I had to quit all my jobs because I was too busy being on tour."

A FEW HOURS LATER, Case and I sit at Rosa's, one of her favorite local Mexican joints, where she has a bowl of chicken and rice soup and her sixth glass of iced tea for the day. It's early and the place is crammed with young parents and their screaming toddlers. Munching on tortilla chips, Case almost seems to fit into this little slice of American strip-mall life—her music and backstory to the contrary.

Middle Cyclone comes from the term *mezzo cyclone*, which is the column of air that rises and spins in a tornado. Case became obsessed with tornados after having one particularly vivid dream. "This tornado was a living, breathing thing," she says. "And he asked me to read him a book because he couldn't hold it in his hands. It was a diary of someone he was looking for, but he couldn't read their diary to find out where they were." That dream inspired the opening track, "This Tornado Loves You," a layered lyric that grows and whirls like its twister protagonist, on a deadly mission to find his love ("Carve

your name across three counties / Ground it in with bloody hides / Their broken necks will line the ditch till you stop it / Stop this madness / I want you").

After that dream, Case noticed that tornados had become a theme on the album. Even her cover of "Never Turn Your Back on Mother Earth," by quirky electro poppers Sparks, references them. It's easy to read into her dream and the resulting theme. With her commanding, sirenlike voice (just imagine her trying to whisper), Case is a force of nature herself. As "This Tornado Loves You" implies, consummating the love with the tornado would result in death. Perhaps she's the tornado, the destructor, someone unsafe to love.

Case disregards that notion. Though the album is full of love songs, she says none of them are hers. "They're love songs about characters; they're love songs about places," she says. "I try not to make them about me. They're just stories."

Our conversation is momentarily silenced by a particularly loud wail from a nearby child.

"Do you ever want to have kids?" I ask her.

"No," she blurts without hesitation. "This bloodline stops here." She emphatically shakes her head and purses her lips. "I can have dogs—they're not so high-maintenance that they need me constantly. Plus, you know, growing up as an unwanted child, I don't know if I'd be a very good parent, because I don't know what you're sup-

posed to do, really." (Case has long since mended her relationship with her mom. "We never really hated each other or anything," she says, "She's been recovering for a long time, and she tries really hard. My dad passed away a couple of years ago, so there's not much to patch up with that.")

But soon after announcing her no-children policy, she amends the statement. "I'm not *not* into the idea, especially living on a farm. I walk around there sometimes, and I feel like it's a real shame that there's not a kid there to enjoy it, because I remember what it was like to enjoy that as a kid. So, you know, eventually I might adopt. But I don't ever want to get married or anything like that. I think I would feel kind of trapped, but that's just because I've never seen it work."

She says that her longest relationship lasted six years ("Wasn't really worth it") and that people always want to know if she's dating *someone*—that is, someone famous. "Yeah, I'm on the Hot List," she snorts, rolling her eyes. "There are really hot actors and musicians beating down my door." For the record, she considers most *GQ* cover stars to be "teeny weenie" with "giant heads." "I'm always into dudes like Gene Hackman," she says, idly crunching an ice cube.

A two-year-old boy at the table behind us starts to cry after his parents get up to pay the bill and leave him in his high chair. Case and I wave at him and smile. "See, it's okay," she coos. "We'll give you attention."

In so many ways, Case suggests some solitary force as untamable as the tornados running through her songs and dreams. But here, for a moment, she seems different. Almost...motherly. Under her gentle, playful entreaties, the boy's sniffles subside, and soon he starts to smile.

Case sighs. "Our new boyfriend." ☘