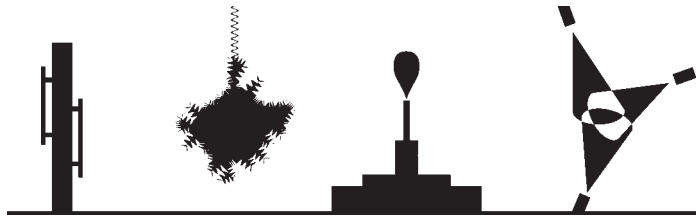


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# THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

## THE WINDS

*Neko Case is the horn section.*

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

The title of Neko Case's new album, "Middle Cyclone," is a reference to "mesocyclone," the core rotational structure of a thunderstorm, which can produce a tornado. This was not my interpretation of the phrase, which I took as a commentary on age, and on how Case turned thirty-eight last year: hair flying, throat open, poorly secured items be damned. Case's work on "Middle Cyclone"—the best of her career by a generous margin, and every song her own except for two covers—addresses youth, aging, marriage, death, change, and all that knobby stuff you run over on the way to your midpoint.

Nature and violence are the forces at work in "Middle Cyclone." Mockingbirds sing, ants march, and the sky drops marbles on Case's characters. The Sistine Chapel is "painted with a Gatling gun," and the characters in "People Got a Lotta Nerve" are all types of trouble—one is a "man-eater," another eats "hearts of sharks." Case sums up this scenario—after a long pull on a cheap cigarette, one hopes—by singing, "It will end again in bullets, friend."

"Middle Cyclone" isn't an album that breaks apart the world with new sounds. It has the same feel as R.E.M.'s "Murmur," Meat Puppets' "Up on the Sun," or X's "Under the Big Black Sun," perfectly formed rock albums from the eighties that emerged from the nest of punk rock, steeped in a love of older music and newer sounds, with self-

indulgences held in check by a quick pulse.

The wide-open spaces and narrow hopes of the characters in "Middle Cyclone" could come from any of the many stages of Case's life. Born in Virginia, Case spent most of her youth in and around Tacoma, Washington, leaving home at fifteen for Vancouver, where she played drums in punk-rock bands. She lived for five years in Tucson, and recently moved to Vermont, where she bought a farmhouse and a defunct post office, to use as a rehearsal space. She is an avid defender of animals (the song "I'm an Animal" is not all that metaphorical, apparently) and has lived much of her life in places where cars and guns usually go together, and fast. If you can't tell how far Case is throwing her voice as a writer, she gives you a big cue in "Vengeance Is Sleeping," when she sings, "I'm not the man you think I am."

Case began recording in the nineties, with a revolving band of musicians billed as Neko Case and Her Boyfriends. Their sound, as Case described it, was like "a bunch of kids trying to reproduce some sort of Owen Bradley magic." Case and her band took elements—pedal-steel guitar, loads of reverb on the voice—of the so-called "Nashville sound" that Bradley helped create for singers like Patsy Cline. At first, Case's take on country was engaging, mostly because of her voice, which Case herself

describes as "breathing through a fire hose." "I've never really listened to my voice and gone, That is a quality instrument," she told me. "It's more like, O.K., that's good and fucking loud." She added, "I'm kind of the horn section of any band I'm in."

Without Case's voice, the Boyfriends records would have been fairly unremarkable country-rock albums. It is ironic that Case, of all people, would be so fond of reverb, an effect whose metallic curve can sometimes obscure a truly great voice but is a boon to modest singers. (The Jesus and Mary Chain would be a couple of links short without the reverb.) Case's tone has the glint and the bruised shading of well-handled brass, her pitch is merciless, and when the throttle is open her chest voice is more than a mere horn section: Case is an event, a force that sets off things around it.

One of the Vancouver groups that Case has worked with is the energetic pop-rock band the New Pornographers. The band's principal songwriters are A. C. Newman, who has a knack for twisting melodies which recalls that of Squeeze's Glenn Tilbrook, and the prolux Dan Bejar, who writes mainly for his band Destroyer. Case's role with the New Pornographers has been largely as a voice—she does not write with the band. But a song like Newman's "The Laws Have Changed," a magnificent and clever work from 2003 that implicitly likened the Bush family to ancient-Egyptian rulers, does not peak fully until Case enters, singing, in chorus with her own voice, "Introducing for the first time, Pharaoh on the microphone." You can't help cheering along with the royalty for three minutes.

As the New Pornographers grew in popularity, so did Case, who made "Blacklisted," her first full-length Boyfriendless record, in 2002; it was her last and best iteration of the countrified middle ground. The attraction to mid-century country music, especially when it goes a-waltzing, makes sense. Like Nashville ballads, Case's songs tend toward long, luxurious phrases that suit her voice. (By contrast, she cites "nimble" vocalists, like her backup singer

*Nature and violence are the forces at work in "Middle Cyclone"—easily Case's best album. Photograph by Elinor Carucci.*



Kelly Hogan, as people with voices as precise as “coping saws.” “They’re like little mountain goats—they’re just hopping up the cliffs,” she said.)

Case’s change in writing style began with “The Tigers Have Spoken” (2004), an album of songs recorded live. The material is mostly covers—several traditional numbers, Loretta Lynn’s “Rated X,” and “Loretta,” by the obscure late-seventies Boston group Nervous Eaters—combined with four Case originals, including “Favorite.” It’s a waltz, a time signature that Case leans on a little heavily, and though the textures are country, the melodies have become longer, the chord changes a little stranger, and the themes more Case’s own. (She hits a deer with her car, but only in a dream.)

The next release, “Fox Confessor Brings the Flood,” from 2006, is in some ways the first Neko Case album. Country music is mostly perceptible in the reverb, now dialled back. Case’s words are more like passages from novels than like country lyrics. “Girl with the parking-lot eyes, Margaret is the fragments of a name. Her bravery is mistaken for the thrashing in the lake of the make-believe monster whose picture was faked” are several lines from the languorous and stately “Margaret vs. Pauline,” a song I hear as a description of the sisters from Marilynne Robinson’s “Housekeeping.” “Fox Confessor” was a relatively big success for an independent act, selling around two hundred thousand copies in this country. (It does not hurt that Case tours constantly. “Touring is the greatest thing in the world,” she told me.) The mood of the album is intense but cool—a long, meditative, slightly bumpy hum.

“Middle Cyclone” may be the place Case has been driving to. Working with the New Pornographers has clearly affected her pacing, which has picked up. There’s nothing as straight-ahead as, say, the punk-rock “Loretta,” but Case has moved out of the Nashville ballroom. Another difference between this and her previous records is that she has a steady, full-time band now, and they woodshed the tunes before recording them. Case arranged the songs with the guitarist Paul Rigby, a trained jazz musician who, as she put it, “is really

savvy about bizarre transitions or chords or how to shift from one time signature to another.” The opening number, “This Tornado Loves You,” moves steadily forward on Barry Mirochnick’s train-track beat and a quickly echoing guitar that could be a quieter figure from a U2 album. Case fuses the personal and the natural instantly: “My love, I am the speed of sound. I left them motherless, fatherless, their souls dangling inside out from their mouths. But it’s never enough—I want you.” The singer carves with “bloody hides” and leaves “broken necks” in the ditch, clearing an area “sixty-five miles wide.” There is no obvious tipoff—is this Case’s heart or her countryside come to life?

There are dozens of moments of vocal delight here: Case soaring on the words “blue, blue baby” in “The Pharaohs”; blending her voice with Paul Rigby’s rapid fingerpicking and the singing of Lucy Wainwright Roche and Kelly Hogan on “Vengeance Is Sleeping”; building steadily on “I’m an Animal,” one of her best rock songs to date. It’s almost certainly about sex, and if it’s not it’s certainly about something that has to happen soon.

When Case returns to her comfort zone—mid-tempo to slow—the music has a different feel, slightly wilder and heavier than before. “Prison Girls” could be a story about the assassin Anton Chigurh, from Cormac McCarthy’s “No Country for Old Men”: “Who am I tonight? My hotel room won’t remember me.” Or maybe this singer has been captured: “The prison girls are not impressed, the ones who have to clean this mess. They’ve traded more for cigarettes than I have managed to express.” When Case and her band join for a group chant of “oh, oh, oh,” there is more than a hint of the chain gang amid all the reverb. But this outlaw doesn’t return to guilt, or vengeance; the song’s recurrent phrase is “I love your long shadows and your gunpowder eyes.” And since we’re switching among the human, animal, and physical worlds, it seems fair to say that shadows in “Middle Cyclone” remain even when the light moves. ♦

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