On songwriting between places



Singer-songwriter Jess Williamson reflects on how living in two different parts of the country influenced the process of making her newest album.

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As told to Jess Williamson, 1685 words.

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I live between two very different places: Los Angeles, California and Marfa, Texas. You probably know LA, but are you familiar with Marfa? It's a town of fewer than 2,000 people in the high desert of Far West Texas, three hours from the nearest airport and about an hour from the Mexican border. I've never been anywhere quite like it. It's a difficult place to describe. It's often called an art colony, but there's a lot more to it than that.

I just released a new album called *A Mile South of Heaven*. I wrote almost all of the songs in Marfa and recorded it in LA, so, in a way, the album has a foot in both worlds. I started writing it in earnest in the fall of 2023. My previous album, *Time Ain't Accidental*, had been out for a couple of months, and I had a three-month break from touring, with the exception of a handful of shows in Texas. I decided to spend October through December in Marfa. At the time, it was the longest stretch I'd ever spent living there.

I struggled with it at times, and some of those feelings eventually found their way into the songs. I was sharing my boyfriend's studio apartment and I needed a space of my own to write. First, I rented a beautiful, light-filled studio at a compound called Pure Joy. It was a big box in the middle of a landscaped courtyard, with high ceilings, a few pieces of really nice furniture that belonged to the owners, and, for some reason, a miniature putt-putt golf setup with astroturf. I moved in all of my songwriting gear, which consisted of the following: a guitar, my keyboard, a chord wheel, an Omnichord, an Apollo interface, microphone, laptop, and a journal.

This was where the writing began, and I felt like I was getting absolutely nowhere. Looking back, I don't think a single thing I wrote in that space ended up on the album. I was frustrated and plagued by that all-too-familiar feeling: will I ever be able to write a song again?

I'd created what seemed like the perfect conditions for writing an album, but the songs weren't coming.

I'd been so inspired by the idea of spending the winter in the middle of nowhere, in a cold and quiet tourist town, with nothing but space and time to dig into writing. But once I was actually there, I wasn't sure what to do with myself. I was still relatively new to Marfa, and I was experiencing some FOMO about not being in LA. I'd created what seemed like the perfect conditions for writing an album, but the songs weren't coming.

I ended up losing the space because the owners decided they needed it. I had to move out without much notice. But it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. From there, I rented a room at the local Methodist church, and that's when everything changed.

To pay my rent, I would slip a handwritten check under the door of the church secretary's office. There was something so romantic about writing songs in an old church, although I never went at night because it was too scary to be there by myself. For whatever reason, in that room, the songs finally started coming.

I remember the day I started writing "Country Mile." I'd just been at the coffee shop, where I saw a massive pickup truck with monarch butterflies stuck to its grille, killed on the highway. I was so moved by the image. The beauty of the butterflies, the unintentional violence of the truck, and the fact that it really wasn't anyone's fault. Something about it stayed with me. It became the inspiration for the lyric, "Had a moth on the dash for a country mile."



In 2024, I spent much more time in Marfa than in LA. My dog, Nana, died in the spring of that year, and I was grateful we'd spent the previous fall there together, because she got to have such a sweet couple of months. It's a great town for dogs. They can go pretty much everywhere, including my room at the church, and the whole town knew her. After she died, every time I ran into someone in Marfa who had known us, they would immediately offer their condolences. We buried her on my boyfriend's family's land in Terlingua, about an hour and a half from Marfa. I wanted to be close to her, and I made regular trips to her gravesite to leave candles and plant cacti.

On one of my trips to visit Nana, I stopped in the nearby town of Alpine because the annual Gem and Mineral Show was taking place. As I perused the aisles of crystals and fossils, I was struck by the sudden feeling of being a tourist. And not only here, but also back in LA—just a few weeks earlier, before Nana's death, I'd found myself invited to a fancy Grammy's after party at the Chateau Marmont. That strange feeling of moving between two very different worlds without fully belonging to either became the basis of my song "The Gem and Mineral Show."

One of my favorite books is *Songwriters on Songwriting*, a collection of interviews with different songwriters about their creative processes. A lot of them say that writing a song can feel like channeling something from somewhere else, like trying to catch it before it goes away. But "A Mile South of Heaven" was different. That one

actually came to me in a dream, which was a first for me. I was deep in the songwriting groove in Marfa, and one night I woke up with a melody in my head. I'd been dreaming it, along with the lyrics, "If you wanna go to heaven, gotta go through hell." I immediately grabbed my phone and recorded a voice memo so I wouldn't forget it. I remember singing very quietly into my phone so I wouldn't wake my boyfriend. Looking back, he wouldn't have minded. He gets it.

Something else that helped my process in Marfa was taking regular walks along Highway 2810, just outside of town. About two miles down the highway, there's a hill with a turnout where you can park. I'd leave my car there and walk, listening to voice memos and demos of the songs I was working on, trying to figure out what was working and what wasn't. Sometimes I'd just drive for a while. I ended up adopting that stretch of highway because it had become such a meaningful part of making *A Mile South of Heaven*.

In the fall of that year, I eventually decided I needed to get back to LA, since I technically still lived there and my subletter was moving out. I returned and forced myself to stay for 30 consecutive days. This was actually my best friend's idea. He's a therapist, and we'd talked about how I'd developed a habit of leaving LA whenever I got lonely or uncomfortable. He suggested I force myself to stay for a full month to see if I even still liked it there. We called it the 30-Day Challenge.

It really did feel like I was channeling something from somewhere else, doing my best to catch it before it disappeared.

I woke up one Saturday morning with the sudden realization that I was done with LA. I was ready to leave for good. "Goodbye to All That" is one of my favorite Joan Didion essays. She famously wrote it about leaving New York, and I decided I would write my own "Goodbye to All That" about leaving Los Angeles. It was one of those songs that came very quickly, almost entirely in one afternoon. It really did feel like I was channeling something from somewhere else, doing my best to catch it before it disappeared.

And then something very unusual happened. I was writing the third verse, and when I got to the lines, "Goodbye to the dreamers, the poets, and their songs / I'm afraid there's so much that I still haven't done," I started to cry. It caught me completely off guard. I realized in that moment that I wasn't actually ready to give up on Los Angeles. Not yet. The song I'd set out to write as my goodbye to LA had somehow convinced me to stay. I don't even feel like I wrote that song. It feels more like it came through me, and in the process, told me something I hadn't quite figured out for myself.

Songs are powerful in sneaky ways, and it's a good thing I stayed. I ended up recording *A Mile South of Heaven* at the famed Sunset Sound in Los Angeles, with Shooter Jennings producing. I'm so proud of the album we made. If I'd packed up and moved away, I'm not sure it would have worked out. Shooter is a busy guy, but because I lived just down the road from his studio, he was able to fit me in between other projects.

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When I look back at this record, I can see how both Marfa and LA influenced my songwriting. Arguably my most Texas-centric song on the album, a tune called "Texas Time," was actually written in my house in LA. Sometimes you need some physical distance from the thing to be able to write about it. Songwriting is a mysterious process, and no matter how much I engage with it, I can never quite predict what will work or what won't. I now find myself with another three month break before the *A Mile South of Heaven* tour begins, and I've decided to spend it in

Marfa. I have the pretty ambitious goal of writing the next record while I’m here. We’ll see!

Name

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