‘Tigers Blood’ by Waxahatchee

One of the hardest working singer-songwriters in the game is named Katie Crutchfield. She was born in Alabama, grew up near Waxahatchee Creek. Skipped town and struck out on her own as Waxahatchee. That was over a decade ago. Crutchfield says she never knew the road would lead her here, but after six critically acclaimed albums, she’s never felt more confident in herself as an artist. While her sound has evolved from lo-fi folk to lush alt-tinged country, her voice has always remained the same. Honest and close, poetic with Southern lilting. Much like Carson McCullers’s Mick Kelly, determined in her desires and convictions, ready to tell whoever will listen.

And after years of being sober and stable in Kansas City–after years of sacrificing herself to her work and the road–Crutchfield has arrived at her most potent songwriting yet. On her new album, *Tigers Blood*, Crutchfield emerges as a powerhouse–an ethnologist of the self–forever dedicated to revisiting her wins and losses. But now she’s arriving at revelations and she ain’t holding them back.

Crutchfield says that she wrote most of the songs on ‘Tigers Blood’ during a “hot hand spell,” while on tour in 2022. And when it came time to record, Crutchfield returned to her trusted producer Brad Cook, who brought her sound to a groundbreaking turning point on 2020’s *Saint Cloud*.

They hunkered down at Sonic Ranch in Tornillo, Texas–a border town known for cotton and pecans–and searched for another turn, waited for a sign. Initially, MJ Lenderman, Southern indie-rock wunderkind (much like Crutchfield when she started out) came to play electric guitar and sing on “Right Back To It.” But as soon as they tracked it, Cook told Lenderman he had to stay for the rest of the album. And he did.

“Right Back To It” is ‘Tigers Blood’’s lead single. A nod to country duets like Gram and Emmylou, winding over a steadfast banjo from Phil Cook. Together, Crutchfield and Lenderman harmonize on the chorus: *“*I’ve been yours for so long/We come right back to it/I let my mind run wild/Don’t know why I do it/But you just settle in/Like a song with no end.”Crutchfield says it’s the first real love song she’s ever written.

The song “Bored” opens with blase drum beats from Spencer Tweedy that crash under Crutchfield as she throws her voice high: “I can get along/ My spine’s a rotted two by four/Barely hanging on/My benevolence just hits the floor.”Lenderman’s scuzzy riffs and Nick Bockrath’s climbing pedal steel add power to the album’s most ‘Southern Rock’ a la Drive-By Truckers moment.

 “365” is a story of recognition told from a hard-won place of self-acceptance/forgiveness. Crutchfield initially started writing it for Wynonna Judd, with whom she has written and performed in the past, until the lyrics started hitting closer and closer to home. The writer Annie Ernaux says, “writing is to fight forgetting.” Like Lucinda Williams, Crutchfield’s lyrics are memoir. Throughout ‘Tigers Blood’ Crutchfield is addressing a “you,” but the ‘you’ in “365” evokes raw closeness, vulnerability. “Ya ain’t had much luck but grace is/In the eye of the beholder/And I had my own ideas but/I carried you on my shoulders, anyways.”

“365” is essentially ‘Tigers Blood’’s aria about addiction, with little to no accompaniment to Crutchfield’s voice. Her backing band is hushed, as if the spotlight’s coming down on her, alone on the stage, giving her testimony. Crutchfield slings her voice with arresting precision, reaching its highest harmony on the whole album. “So when you kill, I kill/And when you ache, I ache/And we both haunt this old lifeless town/And when you fail, I fail/ When you fly, I fly/And it’s a long way to come back down.”

“365” circles back to the beginning of ‘Tigers Blood,’ where Crutchfield’s words ring clear as a bell. Album opener “3 Sisters” starts with Crutchfield singing over hymn-like piano chords: *“*I pick you up inside a hopeless prayer/I see you beholden to nothing/I make a living crying it ain’t fair/And not budging.”‘Tigers Blood’ is Crutchfield at her most confident and resilient. Staring straight at the truth, forgiving but not forgetting, not batting an eye.

— Ashleigh Bryant Phillips