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Sleeve Dog Records

HAYSEED

Susan Werner

Release Date: June 25th



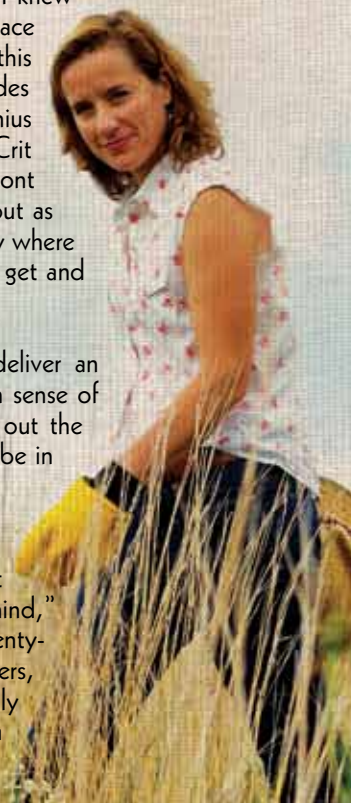
Dubbed by NPR as the “Empress of the Unexpected,” singer/songwriter Susan Werner confirms her reputation as an artist changeable as the weather with her newest recording *Hayseed*. Paying tribute to American agriculture and to her Iowa farm roots, Werner again keeps her audiences guessing and laughing simultaneously, lending her wry humor and passionate voice to subjects such as farmer’s markets, agrochemicals, climate change, drought, longing for a sense of place, and the movement towards sustainable agriculture. The characters and perspectives are varied and colorful, the lyrics are sharp as thistles, the music is handmade and hoppin’, and with *Hayseed* Werner continues her reign as one of the most bold and creative forces on the acoustic music scene today.

Listeners will recognize Werner’s Americana roots, first heard on 2011’s country/blues tinged *Kicking the Beehive*; however, the collection of originals that appear on *Hayseed* hits even closer to home. “Everything was mandolin and banjo and upright bass and fiddle,” she says. “A sound that’s as - forgive the term, but it finally applies - organic as a sound can get.” Released on Sleeve Dog Records and distributed via Thirty Tigers, the album itself was commissioned by the University of Nebraska’s Lied Center For The Performing Arts and the Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources, and the entire project began with seed money from fans during a successful PledgeMusic campaign. Werner incentivized fans with unusual rewards like signed ears of corn from her folks’ farm, and a percentage of the money raised was donated to three farming charities; Practical Farmers of Iowa in Ames, Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) of Spring Valley, Wisconsin, and The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas. Known for her engaging and energetic live show, Werner will be adding another homegrown aspect to her *Hayseed* tour schedule—making special appearances at local farmers markets throughout the nation.

Hayseed was produced by Boston-based songwriter and producer Crit Harmon (Martin Sexton, Lori McKenna, Mary Gauthier, Ed Romanoff). “I chose Crit to produce because he’s a songwriter himself, and that was hugely important to me,” Werner says. “And also because he grew up on a farm in the Midwest and knows the business end of a honey wagon. I knew he’d get the spirit of the songs, the sense of humor and the sense of place in these songs. I also knew he’d assemble a great cast of musicians, and this is the A list of the A list of the Boston area players.” That cast includes legendary guitarist Duke Levine, upright bassist Marty Ballou, dobro genius Steve Sadler, and Red Molly’s Laurie MacAllister on backing vocals. “Crit totally got it when I said this should sound like it’s being played on the front porch of a farmhouse,” Werner continues. “I wanted this thing just about as unplugged as anybody could stand it. I mean, Dubuque was the big city where I grew up, and that’s about as urban as the sound on this album could get and still be true to Delaware County, Prairie Township, Section 14.”

On *Hayseed*, Werner employs her signature songcraft and wit to deliver an assortment of tunes as hilarious as they are insightful. “There’s a certain sense of humor that goes along with farming because things don’t always turn out the way you expected,” she states. “If you can’t laugh about it, you might be in the wrong line of work.”

Opener “City Kids” sets the tone for the record with a wry commentary on what Werner refers to as “the Revenge of the Nerds.” “Truth is that if you grew up on a farm, you always did feel a little square, a little behind,” she explains. “But times change and tables turn. And who’s paying twenty-five dollars a pound for organic pork these days? It’s not the farmers, people.” To a banjo and upright bass accompaniment, Werner practically spits out the title phrase: “All the city kids, they had fluffy little dogs, a dog that sits and begs, a dog with all four legs, didn’t smell like hogs.”





The wacky, folksy “Herbicides” is an instant campfire classic. “Agrochemicals are a fact of farm life, but I didn’t know quite how to address it. This seemed like a novel approach,” she laughs. The reflective, tender “Something to Be Said” is at the heart of the record – which turns out to be a tender heart, indeed. “I did a series of shows in rural Nebraska, and this little girl sent me a note that said, ‘Thank you for coming to this waste of cornfields,’” Werner says. “It struck me – it took the wind out of me, really - that this little girl felt that way about where she was growing up. I had to find a way to say, kid, listen, you’re overlooking something. It may have taken me years to see it, but I really do see it now.” A slinky melodic motif introduces “Egg Money,” a tune that charts the tale of a crafty farm wife’s revenge. Other *Hayseed* highlights include the rollicking, sexy fun of “Bumper Crop,” the hushed and silvery “Plant the Stars,” dedicated to Werner’s father, and the dobro-tinged heartbreak of “While You Wait For The Rain.” The album closes with “Ode to Aldo Leopold,” a song written in tribute to a man now recognized as one of the founding fathers of sustainable agriculture. The song closes the album with these lyrics: “The land will outlive us all, however long we all shall live, and when the future comes to find the legacy we leave behind, may they say of us that we’ve been kind; we left the land with more to give, for the land will outlive us all.”

Werner is a farmer’s daughter herself and well acquainted with the trials and tribulations of American farm life. Her keen perspective led to the creation of the varied cast of characters that populate the album. “I wanted to show that farmers are just like everyone else,” she says with a laugh, “Honest, hardworking, kind, generous, resentful, and murderous.” Underneath its glib, satirical wash, *Hayseed* is tender and benevolent, an homage to her upbringing. “Growing up on a farm is part poetry and part child labor,” she jokes - “but it’s the landscape, the land itself, your love for that that stays with you – the fields, the fences, the creek. And I’ve found you can love a place as much as you can love a human being.” After all, it seems a pastoral childhood is what drove Werner to music in the first place. “I started playing guitar when I was little, and everyone in my family can play and sing. Maybe it’s part genetic – I suspect my family is wired for it. But if you’re alone out there on the prairie – well, playing music is a pretty good way to spend a couple hours. And, if you hit a few wrong notes – well, nobody’s gonna hear you.”

At age five, Werner made her debut, playing guitar and singing at St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Manchester, Iowa; she learned both piano and guitar by ear. After earning a degree in voice from the University of Iowa, she attended Temple University in Philadelphia, performing in numerous recitals and operas while completing her graduate studies. On occasion Werner, who calls Chicago home now, still closes any one of the 125 club dates she plays annually throughout the US and Canada with “Un Bel Di” from *Madame Butterfly* or “Habanera” from *Carmen*, but ultimately, she opted to forgo a career as an opera singer, dedicating herself to songwriting instead, building a reputation at jazz clubs, coffeehouses, and folk festivals along the Eastern Seaboard.

After launching her career with the self-released *Midwestern Saturday Night* in 1993, her second recording *Live at Tin Angel* impressed executives at Private Music/BMG, which released her critically acclaimed major label debut *Last of the Good Straight Girls* in 1995. She also received critical accolades for her subsequent recordings *Time Between Trains* (VelVel, 1998) and *New Non-Fiction* (Indie, 2001). She has toured the nation with acts such as Richard Thompson, Keb Mo, and Joan Armatrading, and was featured in a 1998 Peter, Paul, and Mary PBS special as one of the best of the next generation of folk songwriters.

Hayseed is the fourth in a series of concept albums, beginning with 2004’s *I Can’t Be New*, which features original songs in the style of Cole Porter and George Gershwin, followed by *The Gospel Truth* in 2007 and *Classics* in 2009 (2011’s country-blues flavored *Kicking The Beehive* hinted at this turn towards the rural). “I like concept albums because they give the audience and the artist a place to meet, something in common to talk about, right from the word ‘go,’” Werner says. “And it seems everybody - from the First Lady to Dodge Trucks - has something to say about food, farms and farmers these days.”

“There’s a changing of the guard taking place in American agriculture,” Werner explains. “Farmers like my father and mother are retiring, and new farmers are starting out. I wanted to honor my parents and their way of life, and I want to be part of the conversation about what happens next, what farming looks like this year, next year, ten years from now.”

The ultimate purpose of making *Hayseed*, though, is broader, more light-hearted. “Maybe the reward of it all is just this simple: to write a song like ‘Egg Money’ or ‘City Kids,’ to see a song like that make my parents laugh, my brothers laugh, my cousins, my high school friends, and see people all across the country laugh,” she finishes. “Well, there you have it. Mission accomplished!”



The Mission of the Lied Center for Performing Arts is to educate, inspire and entertain the people of Nebraska through the performing arts. The center values the transformative power of the arts by presenting artists of great distinction and creating new artistic works which contribute to the diverse culture of Nebraska and the world. The Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR) serves Nebraska by providing internationally-recognized science and education to assure the state’s competitiveness in a changing world. IANR is committed to growing a healthy future through innovations ensuring food, fuel, and water security; sustainable landscapes and community vitality. Both of these exemplary organizations are located on the campus of The University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In recognizing their unified mission of service and achievement, the two institutions have joined forces to help this ‘most exciting talent in the country’ promote this important subject through music. The University of Nebraska’s Lied Center for Performing Arts and IANR are proud and committed supporters of our great friend, Susan Werner, in creation of these funny, tender, sweet, outrageous and timely songs.