



Sara Watkins
Under the Pepper Tree

With the nostalgic and gentle new album *Under the Pepper Tree*, Sara Watkins offers a comforting record for those moments as daily rhythms fade into nightly rituals – and when a child’s imagination comes to life.

Made with families in mind, the personal project encompasses songs she embraced as a child herself, as well as the musical friendships she’s made along the way. Recorded in Los Angeles with producer Tyler Chester, *Under the Pepper Tree* brings storytelling, solace, and encouragement to the listener, no matter the age.

Reflecting on the optimistic outlook that is woven throughout the album, Watkins says, “I hope it resonates with children and with anyone else who needs to hear that message. We think of an uplifting message as largely being childlike, because that’s how we communicate to kids. We encourage them, we’re kind to them, and we have often more patience than we do when we’re talking to adults. But we all need to receive that. We all need to be on the receiving end of patience and kindness and space to let someone be who they are.”

For two decades, Watkins has been one of the most visible artists in roots music, with her catalog ranging from solo albums and Watkins Family Hour, a duo with her brother Sean Watkins, to her Grammy-winning bands Nickel Creek and I’m With Her. She admits that she initially felt conflicted about making a children’s record until she realized that perhaps this album could impact a young listener in the same manner as the music from her own childhood affected her.

The idea for the album began when Watkins was asked to contribute a song to a livestream – specifically, a song that would bring a mellow, centering vibe during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Intrigued with the idea, she agreed to participate, and as her list of potential songs expanded, so did her vision for this project. Her young daughter, who will be 3 years old when the album comes out, can be heard singing with Watkins on “Edelweiss.” It’s a sweet moment, one of many to be found in *Under the Pepper Tree*.

“I want this album to be a place of calm, imagination, and relief,” Watkins says. “Some days are perfect and things are a dream and make you feel like a superhero. And some days are just... such a challenge. I feel like this record has a place in both of those days, and I really hope that these recordings find a place in kids’ hearts, and become as special to them as they are to me.”

Prior to the sessions, Watkins sequenced the album by practicing its 15 songs to see which ones worked as a piece, naturally leading to the formation of Side A and Side B. Then she crafted smooth transitions between the songs, which makes each half of the album glide by. Watkins states, “Although this album can certainly be enjoyed by listening all the way through, very early on in the planning I began thinking of it as something to be taken one side at a time. I imagine someone dropping the needle on side A one night, and side B the next.”

Watkins leads the album with “Pure Imagination,” a wistful classic from the 1971 film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, one of her favorite films as a child. “Sonically, it really sets the tone, and in terms of the message, that’s how we wanted to set the record up,” she says. “I wanted it to be a place where kids or anyone can listen with their imagination.”

Side A of the album includes “Blue Shadows on the Trail,” a nod to her California childhood singing at Western conventions with Nickel Creek, who reunite on the track. (The cowboy song also appears in another fondly-remembered film, 1986’s *The Three Amigos*.) Two Disney songs -- “Second Star to the Right” and “When You Wish Upon a Star” -- lend familiarity to young listeners, while Side A concludes with two appealing Watkins originals: The instrumental “Under the Pepper Tree,” and a thoughtful ballad, “Night Singing.”

The album’s evocative title is a nod to the homes of her parents and grandparents, where pepper trees grew in the backyard – and in fact, she recorded “Under the Pepper Tree” beneath the branches of a neighbor’s pepper tree that reaches over into the backyard of the home she shares with her husband and daughter.

In addition, Watkins says she imagines “Night Singing” as a song that could be sung to her daughter, or by a child to a grown-up, or even from the universe to the listener. “There are parts of the song that speak to all of those perspectives, in a way that gives the song longevity to me,” she observes.

On Side B, she welcomes the harmony of I’m With Her on “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” and Taylor Goldsmith (of Dawes) on Harry Nilsson’s “Blanket for a Sail,” while David Garza adds his voice and a lovely guitar accompaniment on “Beautiful Dreamer.”

Meanwhile, the Disney songs “La La Lu” and “Stay Awake” are found alongside the enduring “You’ll Never Walk Alone” and the closing number, the Beatles’ “Good Night.”

Beyond the music, though, Watkins envisioned *Under the Pepper Tree* as an inspiring visual project as well. She enlisted Adam Snizek to create a stunning vinyl package, so children can interact with the record in a deeper way. The idea stemmed from the vintage vinyl releases she’s collected for her daughter.

“You find some that are really beautiful, and there are some Winnie the Pooh albums that we listen to on a daily basis, not just because of what they sound like, but because of what they look like,” Watkins says. “My daughter will look at the book while I put on the record. The pages don’t tell everything that’s in the song, but that doesn’t matter because sometimes she’s more looking and sometimes she’s more listening. It’s all there, it’s all connected. I want kids to experience my record that way, with all of those senses.”