



Sunny War
Anarchist Gospel

“I feel like there are two sides of me,” says the Nashville-based singer-songwriter and guitar virtuoso known as Sunny War. “One of them is very self-destructive, and the other is trying to work with that other half to keep things balanced.” That’s the central conflict on her fourth album, the eclectic and innovative *Anarchist Gospel*, which documents a time when it looked like the self-destructive side might win out. “Everybody is a beast just trying their hardest to be good. That’s what it is to be human. You’re not really good or bad. You’re just trying to stay in the middle of those two things all the time, and you’re probably doing a shitty job of it. That’s okay, because we’re all just monsters.”

Extreme emotions can make that battle all the more perilous, yet from such trials Sunny has crafted a set of songs that draw on a range of ideas and styles, as though she’s marshaling all her forces to get her ideas across: ecstatic gospel, dusty country blues, thoughtful folk, rip-roaring rock and roll, even avant garde studio experiments (like the collage of voices that closes “Shelter and Storm”). She melds them together into a powerful statement of survival, revealing a probing songwriter who indulges no comforting platitudes and a highly innovative guitarist who deploys spidery riffs throughout every song.

It’s a style she’s been honing for most of her life, at least since she took her first guitar lessons and fell in love with music. “When I was a kid, I was obsessed with AC/DC, and I loved dramatic ‘80s guitar bands like Motley Crüe. Later, I was obsessed with Bad Brains, the Minutemen, and X.” True to the punk ethos, her first punk band, the Anus Kings, made music with whatever they had at hand, and what they had at hand were acoustic guitars. That made them stand out among other Los Angeles groups at the time, and today Sunny is the rare roots artist who covers Ween and can drop a Crass reference into a song (as she does on “Whole”). “I don’t really make music with a traditional roots audience in mind. I like weird music, outsider music, like Daniel Johnston and Roky Erickson.”

Even as she was developing a guitar style that married acoustic punk to country blues, those two sides of Sunny were already at odds. As a teenager, she began drinking heavily, which led to her dropping out of school. She played punk shows, stole and chugged bottles of vodka, and quickly became addicted to heroin and meth. For money she busked along the boardwalks in Venice Beach, recording an album to sell out of her guitar case and letting that self-destructive side win most of the battles. But “the body can’t handle both heroin and meth,” she explains. “When you’re young, it’s hard to gauge that you’re killing yourself.” A series of seizures landed her in a sober living facility in Compton, so emaciated that she could only wear children’s pajamas.

Music remained a lifeline, and she fell in with a crew at Hen House Studios in Venice, where over the years she made a series of albums and EPs, including 2018's *With the Sun* and 2021's *Simple Syrup*. Twelve years after she kicked meth and heroin, Sunny is remarkably candid about this time in her life. "Everyone I loved died before they reached 25. They OD'ed or killed themselves. We were just kids who didn't have anyone looking out for us. You're not supposed to know so much about death at such a young age. Maybe that's why I write a lot about not taking shit for granted, because it always feels like something's about to happen."

Building on those hard-won triumphs of previous albums, *Anarchist Gospel* documents a moment when Sunny had finally gained the upper hand on her self-destructive side, only to watch that stability crumble. "I went through a breakup," she says of the album's genesis, "and I was still staying in the apartment that my partner and I had lived in. I had to finish the lease. I was really depressed and drinking a lot. I felt so isolated from everybody I knew. I didn't have the energy to do anything. It felt like the world was ending. Then I got Covid." Sunny admits she contemplated suicide, but instead she wrote a song, "I Got No Fight," a muted, measured gospel number on which she sings that title like a battered mantra. It's a moment of almost unbearable honesty, although fortunately she did find the fight in herself. "I was just having a tantrum really. A lot of my songs are just tantrums. But I did feel better after writing it."

Once her lease in Los Angeles ended, Sunny moved to Nashville, where she was born and where she lived until she was twelve years old. Among the items she packed were demos for several new songs of heartache and hard-won hope. "I think the album is split between being a breakup album and being somehow uplifting." She booked sessions at the Bomb Shelter to work with producer Andrija Tokic (Hurray for the Riff Raff, Alabama Shakes, the Deslondes). "I already liked a lot of the records that Andrija had made. As far as new stuff goes, a lot of my favorite albums were produced by him, so I thought we'd be a good match."

Working with a small backing band, they captured a raw energy in these songs, although one instrument gradually dominated the music as they proceeded: her own voice and the voices of others trying to stay between good and bad. Most of these songs are call-and-responses with a small choir that includes Allison Russell, Jim James, Dave Rawlings, and Chris Pierce (her partner in the duo War & Pierce). Acting as the angels and devils on her shoulders, they alternately challenge her self-accusations or sympathize with her worries. "There's so much singing on here. I didn't plan for that, but I really like it. That's why I thought it would be cool to call the album *Anarchist Gospel*, because of the choirs on these songs."

Music assuaged her heartache and confusion, even the songs she didn't write. Despite its title, her reimagining of Dionne Farris's "Hopeless" is perhaps the album's most hopeful moment: "I cried just a little too long," she sings. "Now it's time for me to move on." On the sadder end of the spectrum is her cover of Ween's "Baby Bitch"; showcasing her sly sense of humor, it's a playfully melancholy kiss-off that features a choir of kids singing along as she tells an ex, "I'm better now, please fuck off." It's funny, but uneasily so: a joke that reveals something bleaker. "It's such a great breakup song! You're out there somewhere and run into your ex with their new partner. But you know who they really are. You know they're being a bitch. There aren't many songs that get to that kind of experience without turning it into a joke."

As the sessions wound down and the mixing process started, Sunny got the worst news imaginable. “My brother called me and told me I should come to Chattanooga. My dad was in the hospital, and he wasn’t going to make it. I called Andrija and told him I had to cancel the session and catch a Greyhound. Instead, he insisted on giving me a ride. He drove me down to see my dad. I barely knew this guy, and he was doing this incredible thing for me. I don’t know too many other producers who could navigate that kind of situation.” That simple act of kindness helped her endure that astounding loss, even as the grieving process threw these songs into even sharper relief.

Because it promises not healing but resilience and perseverance, because it doesn’t take shit for granted, *Anarchist Gospel* holds up under such intense emotional pressure, acknowledging the pain of living while searching for something that lies just beyond ourselves, some sense of balance between the bad and the good. “This album represents such a crazy period in my life, between the breakup and the move to Nashville and my dad dying. But now I feel like the worst parts are over. What I learned, I think, is that the best thing to do is just to feel everything and deal with it. Just feel *everything*.”