

Searching for Light in the Darkness: Pieta Brown, January 25 at the Redstone Room

Written by

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The title of Pieta Brown's new record, *Remember the Sun*, evokes a seemingly endless darkness without sounding hopeless, and the opening track, "Innocent Blue," does, too. On a bed of warm keyboards, she sings: "Iron bars with no irony / One is bound so none get free / In the innocent blue ... the innocent blue."

The pairing of dark and light was purposeful, Brown said in an interview last week. As she was writing her third record, she was listening to the Staples Singers, Neil Young's *Comes a Time*, and Rod Stewart's

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Gasoline Alley

“Those were the seeds” for *Remember the Sun*, she said. With the Iraq war dominating the news, Brown - performing later this month at the River Music Experience's Redstone Room - wondered “how to get music coming from that place where there's hope and light.”

Remember the Sun isn't a breezy or candy-coated record. The songstress - stepping out of the long shadows of father Greg Brown and musical partner Bo Ramsey - is clear-eyed about the world but uncynical. Brown and co-producer/guitarist Ramsey hit a roots groove on “Rollin' Down the Track,” and the lyrics contrast reality with dreams and hope and memory: “I'll see you the way I want to and not in the way that you seem.” That sentiment is later put into a political context, one that suggests powerlessness: “The masters of war still sleep at home in their beds / When will they wake up, when will they take it back?”

The track has a casual singsong mood that's disrupted with the introduction of some vocal-distortion effects, and Brown's voice emphasizes the rhythm here rather than sliding over it. It's a production choice that announces her attention to dynamics and variety, and after a guitar solo, the words carry a subtle urgency and weight, making the case for art no matter how grim things seem: “I'll sing to the water so black.”

“I felt much more in the driver's seat as far as the sound of the record goes,” Brown said of *Remember the Sun*. “I had a lot stronger vision of how I wanted it to sound ... that kind of warm, rich sound. I pushed myself musically.”

“Sonic Boom” finds her in full rock mode, while “Worlds Within Worlds” is pared down to voice, simple guitar, and light string accents. She played the Wurlitzer, did some of her own guitar overdubs, and presented the songs with strong ideas for arrangements. She's leaning less on Ramsey, she said: “I've grown more confident. It [the division of labor] has evened out a little bit.” (He'll still be playing with her at the Redstone Room.)

It helped that the recording studio was more intimate than with 2005's *In the Cool*. Both

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albums were tracked mostly live over just a few days, but experience and the Minneapolis space put her at ease. "I felt really comfortable in the studio," she said. "I was kind of nervous and wound-up when I made

In the Cool

."



There's nothing about *Remember the Sun* that immediately grabs the listener. Working within the genre of country-raised rock - with the exception of those gently vibrating keyboards - Brown has crafted a collection of handsome songs covering a range from wistful to defiant.

There's much substance to unearth, mostly a function of Brown's sharp, vivid lyrics being obscured by full but uncluttered and expressive arrangements and her lulling singing. She's not just a singer/songwriter, but somebody who's good at both, and her words just don't have the immediate force of Ramsey's careful and sure-footed guitar; their power is nearly separate from the songs in which they're core elements.

"Not Scared" rocks out with blown-out vocals, and it's only considering the words independent of the tune that one realizes the narrator protests far too much: "I'm not scared of you / You can't make me blue / You can't make me run / You can't steal the sun / You can't make me hide / You can't twist my pride / You can't cause me pain."

"That song was more of a rant than a song, really," Brown said. But it illustrates her philosophy that good songs draw their strength from both music and lyrics. On "Not Scared," she said, "the music decides to stand up and hold its own, then somehow it [the whole song] comes alive."

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In that way, she said, it's okay if the music sometimes overwhelms her poetry. "If you don't feel like listening to every word, you don't have to, 'cause there's all that music there trying to say it, too," she said.

"Songs are living things as far as I'm concerned," she added. "Sonic Boom" started as a "slow dirge-y thing," Brown said, and then she tried it as an up-tempo number in the studio and it stuck, transformed. "I'm definitely somebody who can't sing a song the same way twice. ... I like things to be alive and change."

Pieta Brown will perform on Friday, January 25, at the Redstone Room in downtown Davenport. The show starts at 9 p.m., and tickets are \$10.