

## Blues with a Beach Boys Dream: Rachel Brooke, May 23 at RIBCO

Written by Jeff Ignatius  
Thursday, 16 May 2013 07:10

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Rachel Brooke grew up with bluegrass and country standards and in high school played them in her father's band. Her album *A Killer's Dream* (from late last year) puts that experience and her voice in a blues context.

All three of those genres share simplicity. Yet Brooke's dream is to record her equivalent of the Beach Boys' famously dense and unconventional *Pet Sounds*.

She'll be performing with her band on May 23 at RIBCO, and you'll hear a little bit of both aspects in her live show.

From her background in country and bluegrass, she said in a phone interview last week, "I learned a lot of structure. They [the songs] sound similar in a lot of ways, but there are also very small differences that mean a lot. ... I learned how to write based on those." Bluegrass, country, and blues are typically crafted with a limited palette, and she said the key is "learning how to make the small differences" that give the songs their distinctive identities.

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While *A Killer's Dream* was recorded entirely live and has its share of simple blues settings, it also has plenty of unexpected color – from the Tom Waits-like jazzy horns and ghostly, whistling warbles of “Late Night Lover” to the big-drum sing-along pop of the title track with its infectious lead xylophone to the surprise clip-clop percussion that brings levity to the otherwise haunting “The Black Bird.”

Above it all is Brooke’s big, agile voice, which opens the album on the unadorned “Have It All” and is true throughout, bringing twang to straight-ahead blues, offering a sleepy, sultry siren song in “Late Night Lover,” and approaching a yodel on “Old Faded Memory.”

The blog SavingCountryMusic.com has called her the “queen of underground country” and – without caveat – “the Emmylou Harris of our time,” and she collaborated with Those Poor Bastards’ Lonesome Wyatt on 2009’s *A Bitter Harvest*. (He duets with her on “Old Faded Memory,” and the pair is beginning work on a second album.)

The blues was a conscious reference point in writing *A Killer's Dream*, Brooke said – a break from the direct and obvious tack of country. “There’s a little bit of an edge to those lyrics, I think,” she said. “They say things without actually saying it.” She cited the words of “Fox in a Hen House,” which takes the title metaphor and a typical woman-done-me-bad hook and muddies it with her female narrative voice: “There ain’t no devil in my heart / ’Cause I ain’t no man. / But there’s been one in my kitchen / She been cookin’ with my pots and pans.”

Brooke said she knew she wanted a different sound for the album, but she didn’t know what it was – until she began touring with the duo Viva Le Vox. “As soon as I started playing with them, I just knew that I wanted to record it with them,” she said.

Cutting *A Killer's Dream* after refining the songs and arrangements on the road, Brooke said, was a clear contrast to the arduous process of 2011’s *Down in the Barnyard*, which “I recorded it by myself, and I was learning how to use my equipment at the same time. I was concentrating so hard on getting the sound right that I was ... losing motivation and time to experiment. ... I wasn’t able to really have fun. ... I was just frustrated the whole time. So that was probably the biggest part, not being able to really relax and put some creativity into it.”

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A loose playfulness within the blues form is evident throughout the new album, but Brooke said she's not yet sure what her *Pet Sound* might entail: "I don't know. Lots of percussion. If I had some people who could play wind instruments, I would totally love to have that. ...

"It will happen. That's my goal in life."

*Rachel Brooke will perform on Thursday, May 23, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue, Rock Island; [RIBCO.com](http://RIBCO.com)). The show starts at 9 p.m. and also features J.L. Hellwater. Cover is \$6.*

*For more information on Rachel Brooke, visit [RachelBrookeMusic.com](http://RachelBrookeMusic.com).*