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Drawing from the strength of women

Southern songwriter Allison Moorer turns to others for simple but deep material.

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Special to The Times

NASHVILLE — There is something so quiet about Allison Moorer, you almost don't notice the ethereal beauty in the delicate black silk blouse and tumble of strawberry colored hair tucked into a booth in a restaurant here. Her porcelain complexion, sophisticatedly minimal accessories and chic knee-high boots set her apart from the mere mortals crawling the mid-Tennessee mall, yet Moorer, 35, remains most definitely a daughter of the South.

Deception isn't something the Alabama-born songwriter deals in, yet like the many contrasts of her life story, it's what makes her art so compelling. Take "Mockingbird," her Buddy Miller-produced album, due Tuesday and featuring songs written by an eclectic female coterie: It was those contrasts that drew her to it.

"The running thread — and I didn't notice it initially — is



THOMAS PETILLO

'MOCKINGBIRD': Allison Moorer did the album in three days at a producer's home.

strength," she says of the project that veers from her normally soul-scraping introspection. "Front to back, really, that's it. Even if they're not hitting you over the head, they're all strong and coming from a very worldly place, yet the language remains feminine.

"I really learned that simplicity is best 97% of the time. These songs are deep while not sounding contrived and over-

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Moorer's voice one 'you hear once and you never forget'

[Moorer, from Page E1] wrought. They're mostly quite plaintive, and it takes a quiet confidence to write like that: to be so honest yet not beat people over the head with it.

"Mockingbird" moves in many directions, such as Nina Simone's bawdy "I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl," Patti Smith's dervish obsession "Dancing Barefoot," her sister Shelby Lynne's haunted "She Knows Where She Goes," Ma Rainey's gritty "Daddy, Good-bye Blues" and Joni Mitchell's fragile "Both Sides Now." Yet it remains anchored by the mature earthiness and knowing emotionalism that defines Moorer's musk-and-velvet alto.

Jason Linn, executive vice president of her record label, New Line Music, recognizes that strength and singularity of

the chanteuse-songwriter. "I first got hip to Allison when she performed 'Soft Place to Fall' from 'The Horse Whisperer' at the Oscars [in 1999]. Her voice is one of those voices you hear once and you never forget...."

"She's done so much: a successful mainstream country career, an Academy Award nomination, a duet with Kid Rock... she's fascinating in the truest sense. So, while this isn't an obvious project, for the people paying attention, it's so deceptively personal, it will blow your mind."

For Moorer, there are two truths about the very organic analog recording done over three days at producer Miller's house. Aside from being an opportunity to study others' songcraft, she laughs and concedes, "I'd spent years and years in-

side my own head, so this was a break from that."

At the same time, it allowed her to expand beyond her own abilities — "I'd never learned to play in open G, and my fingering has grown" — and inhabit some other sentimental terrain. Whether it was the Gershwin-esque staidness of Cat Power's "Where Is My Love," the restive Appalachian refuge of Julie Miller's "Orphan Train" or the rippling fear and desire of June Carter Cash and Merle Travis' "Ring of Fire," the challenge was making these songs her own.

"I'm not afraid to put it out there," Moorer says softly. "I don't think anything's off limits when it comes to art, whether it's going to a certain place emotionally to sing or when I write. What fires [expression]

is what I've got — and I have a very active imagination, but it always pales in comparison to the real stuff.

"And yes, I've had plenty of other experiences beyond my parents' deaths."

Moorer has certainly led a life. There were stints on the road singing backup with her sister as a teenager, years touring the U.S. and Europe for Moorer's own recordings, a divorce and subsequent second marriage to roots iconoclast Steve Earle. They divide their off-the-road time between a home outside Nashville and an apartment in Manhattan.

"My husband says I'm one of the most feminine creatures on the planet. But he's also made me more fearless in terms of my art...made me really commit to it in a way that might've seemed selfish to me before."

"But it's empowering: I'm less concerned with what people expect. Because there's a certain definition" about a woman who makes records,

and it's mostly about the female form. "There's a [misperception] that you have to fit into what's hot right now. And I don't think so...."

"You know, I'm gonna keep having birthdays and I'm gonna keep making records. I think that's what emerges: how powerful these women's voices were and remain. 'Go, Leave, for example, devastates me... you see such conviction and dignity."

"That isn't something you can achieve at just any age."

Linn recognizes the ambition of Moorer's project, and also the opportunity of the somewhat idiosyncratic repertoire. "The more obscure it got, the more intriguing it was... because people don't want predictable. If you surprise them, once they pick it up, the more they won't be able to put it down...."

"She's such a captivating artist, and you know that immediately when you hear her or meet her. It's like meeting the

person you're going to marry. It's obvious it's the real deal."

The real deal has errands to run before heading to Europe for a tour with Earle. Reflectively she sighs, and looks for a way to explain where she is in her life and music, what she's learned and where she's going.

She notes that Jessi Colter's "I'm Looking for Blue Eyes" was "the first song I ever learned to play. My father taught it to me, and it still moves me. That's what songs are supposed to do — and there's so much we couldn't get on here. No Lucinda [Williams], no Carly Simon or Stevie Nicks, no Billie Holiday, but you get a sense of how deeply women feel...."

"I grew a lot, learned a lot about emotions in songs... And that's all you can ask. Look at 'Daddy, Goodbye Blues': She's frustrated, confused, [angry], sad in one song. She really summed up a relationship in a real-life way. After that, what else is there?"