

Check the mirror. Play what you see.

Sheryl Crow reaches back to the 1990s to face the present on 'Be Myself'

BY JON PARELES

Sometimes the comfort zone is where a musician belongs. That's the charm of "Be Myself," Sheryl Crow's pointedly titled new album, which gleefully and unabashedly returns to the sound of her hit albums from the 1990s. "This record, of all the records I've made, was just sheer joy," Ms. Crow said in an interview at the Bowery Hotel.

For this album, her ninth, Ms. Crow reunited with her late-1990s collaborators, though some things had changed over two decades. She was recording in her own barn in a suburb of Nashville, not in Los Angeles, New Orleans or New York. Instead of doing all-night sessions, she made music between taking her two sons to school and dinnertime. And she had new topics to write about: divisive politics, relationships filtered through technology, and the way social media prizes photos of derrières.

But "Be Myself," due April 21, still relies on her girl-next-door voice, on straightforward songs that don't hide their fondness for the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, and on mostly hand-played instruments with subtle sonic tweaks. Ms. Crow wrote and recorded, as she did on her albums "Sheryl Crow" (1996) and "The Globe Sessions" (1998), with the songwriter and co-producer Jeff Trott and the engineer and mixer Tchad Blake, who, Ms. Crow said fondly, "tampers" with the music.

She also has a follow-up nearly done: a set of collaborations with friends, mentors and idols including Willie Nelson, Neil Young and members of the Eagles.

At the interview, Ms. Crow, 55, was dressed for a photo session, slender and petite in high heels, black pants and a Greg Lauren top studded with shiny black beads.

In a relaxed conversation that let the drawl of her Missouri childhood emerge now and then, she spoke about shifting expectations, about thinking as a parent and about how songs with serious intentions can still sound lighthearted.

"I've been working for over 30 years," she said. "Artists who have been around that long become criticized for their later work being kind of soft, or it's not what it was, or they don't have anything

to say anymore now that they have money. I really, on this record, wanted to feel like I felt on my second and third and fourth records, which was just a feeling of liberation. We were celebrating us coming back together, celebrating this liberation of being older and making music that isn't trying to be anything other than what it is."

Her debut album, the multimillion-selling 1993 "Tuesday Night Music Club" — which brought her three Grammy Awards, including record of the year — modestly presented her as part of that "club," sharing credit with a Los Angeles studio coterie. But with the next albums, "Sheryl Crow" and "The Globe Sessions," she made it clear that the song writing, and much of the playing, was hers above all. For "Be Myself," she said, "This whole experience felt like the second record or the third record, where it was kind of us against them, and we were just like kids in a laboratory, stirring up these concoctions."

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Those early albums, blending rock, country and soul in ways that sounded easier than they were, would go on to influence a next generation of country music, as younger singers like Cam, Kelsea Ballerini and the trio Lady Antebellum looked as much toward California soft-rock as toward honky-tonk.

"She's one of those artists, super few and far between, that aren't defined by a genre," Ms. Ballerini said by phone. "She's indie and she's country and she's pop, all at the same time, and that's never even been questioned because she just makes timeless music that fits in everywhere."

She added: "All of her songs are written in a conversational tone, and I think that's honestly what makes it so relatable. As a fan, you're listening to her talk and it doesn't always rhyme perfectly, and the second verse doesn't exactly match the first, and it's not like a perfect pop song — it's really cool."

Cam, in a telephone interview, said Ms. Crow has a gift for sounding like herself and standing her ground. "I don't think anyone would ever come around and say she really played by the rules," she said. "She's a great example of being strong, being so easygoing and sweet



but also being completely ready to speak her mind.”

Ms. Crow’s own foray into modern country left her dissatisfied. Her 2013 album, “Feels Like Home,” tried a typical strategy for aging rock hitmakers: Head for Nashville to make a mainstream country album with the city’s in-group of songwriting collaborators and studio stalwarts. Ms. Crow had moved to the Nashville area, where she still lives, in 2006, and by the time she made “Feels Like Home,” mainstream country seemed like both a progression and a challenge. “The writing and the making, it was a good experience artistically,” she said. “I felt really proud of the craftsmanship.”

Yet country radio programmers treated her more like a carpetbagger than a forerunner. “I grew up loving country music and feeling like there was a pretty sturdy country influence in my music, but the format itself was really taxing for me,” she said. She played free promotional shows for radio stations, which in turn might grudgingly play her songs “between three and four in the morning, if that,” she said. “And they don’t really play women.”

“I did it the right way,” she added, “thinking that, ‘O.K., I want to be a part of this community.’ And it ultimately wound up being diametrically opposed to what I believe about music, which is that music isn’t commerce, and it actually does matter.”

The lyrics on “Be Myself” are up to the minute. In the title song, Ms. Crow strives briefly to be a hipster — singing about taking an Uber to a juice bar “To hear a new indie band play/They got 99 million followers/In only one day” — but gives it up, asking, “How many selfies can you take before you look like a jerk?”

Her new music could segue directly out of her 1990s tracks like “If It Makes You Happy” and “Everyday Is a Windy Road,” which were hits in a different musical climate. In the 1990s, those songs were pop contenders; in the 2010s, when the Top 10 is filled with digital sounds and Auto-Tuned voices, the songs are probably destined for Americana stations, AAA — Adult Album Alternative — radio and still, possibly, country stations. Ms. Crow refuses to worry about it.

Her plan for making the album was simple: “We know how to do this. Let’s just do what we do. Forget formats. We’re not going to aim for a format. We’re not going to aim for country, we’re not going to aim for pop. And it was really liberating.”

Ms. Crow and Mr. Trott worked as they always have: extensive advance conversations, fast-moving sessions. When the songs were written, Mr. Blake joined them to fill out the production, but most of the finished tracks have the original, spontaneous demos at their core.

Mr. Trott said by phone that while making the album: “I kept thinking, ‘If I was a Sheryl Crow fan, what would I like?’ It’s not all glossed over, it hasn’t been combed through too much. It’s not too shiny, but it has enough brilliance in it. I like it when she is just being herself. And there’s a sense of adventure and irreverence toward recording technique. It’s confidence. Once you have the songs, you think, ‘Yeah, let’s keep it raw.’”

The album was largely written and recorded before the 2016 election — optimistic times for liberals like Ms. Crow. But the acrimony and stress of the campaign also affected the songs. The first single from the album is “Halfway There,” a call for respectful dialogue between the leftist singer (driving a Volt, communing with nature, wearing ripped jeans) and a right-wing character who drives a Hummer, goes to church and wears Armani.

“There needs to be a conversation,” Ms. Crow said. “At the end of the day, don’t we want the same thing? And don’t our children deserve to see us, and mimic us, having conversations with people we don’t agree with, with a certain amount of decorum?”

Things get more sinister in the stamping, wailing rocker “Heartbeat Away,” which Ms. Crow said she wrote in August and finished recording in October, long before the F.B.I. investigation into the Trump campaign’s contacts with Russia was revealed. In one verse, she sings, “You bet the president is sweating/While Russia’s blowing up the phone/Deny, deny everything.”

When she wrote it, she said, it was only an espionage fantasy, “a song of fear and uncertainty,” she said. “The song is just based on this feeling of, what do we not know? How much of everything do we not know? And how much of what is happening around us is going to be revealed without us ever having seen it coming? And then look where we are. It’s eerie.”

On other tracks, she grapples with social media, while the music cheerfully twangs and thumps. In “Alone in the Dark,” her trust is betrayed by a partner who “went to the world and broadcast me”; in “Roller Skate” an embrace is interrupted by a text message, making her urge, “Put your phone away, let’s

roller-skate"; in "Woo Woo," she grouses that "Every time I check my Twitter/Somebody's butt is in my face."

She doesn't want to be a "parent-dinosaur" rejecting technology. "I don't think you can really subtract technology from relationships anymore," she said. "On this record I hope that I'm more of an observer than a critic of it. But I do look at the presence of technology and what it's doing to our relationships with real concern. It may connect all of us, but it's definitely creating a chasm between us. And raising two humans, which is my first and foremost job, I see how, as a parent, you have to figure out some way to navigate their relationship with technology."

For all her earnestness, Ms. Crow's music keeps a playful momentum, full of scruffy analog sounds and vocals that can sound just a moment from laughter. She has seen other aging artists grow "bitter" and is determined not to. Treatment for breast cancer in 2006, she said, pushed her into living purposefully yet savoring every moment. "I don't know what I would have felt like if I had not had the moment of reckoning," she said. "My life shifted into something that was more authentic in a lot of ways."

Mortality also has a part in her next album: the set of collaborations, gathered slowly over the past two years. When the songwriter Kris Kristofferson was struggling with memory loss, she decided to record with him and others while she could. "These artists that we love are supposed to be immortal," she

said. "There's certain people that, when they're not here, the world is going to feel empty for me."

She wrote a song to sing as a duet with Willie Nelson; she had Neil Young and Don Henley share a track with her. She also invited younger musicians, like the Texas bluesman Gary Clark Jr., to round out the lineup.

"I didn't want the record to sound like, 'Hey, I'm calling you because...'" she trailed off. "But you never know. Life is so short."

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RYAN FFLUGER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sheryl Crow opted to work with her 1990s collaborators on her new album.



KELSEY MCNEAL/ABC, VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sheryl Crow with Kelsea Ballerini, left, a young country singer influenced by Ms. Crow who praised her as someone who "just makes timeless music that fits in everywhere."