

## MUSICIAN



Rondee St. Nicholas

## ALISON KRAUSS

Two decades along, bluegrass' conquering angel is still on the move

By Russell Hall

IF THERE'S ONE LESSON ALISON KRAUSS LEARNED FROM working with producer T Bone Burnett on *Raising Sand*, the album she and Robert Plant made together in 2007, it's the importance of being in the moment. "I've always believed I could get a better vocal by re-singing it, or manufacturing a vocal by putting together multiple takes," she says. "But I was wrong. When you sing an entire song in a single pass, you capture something that can't be repeated. It's all about communicating a feeling."

She may still be looking for new and more effective ways to do it, but Krauss has been communicating feelings through song pretty convincingly for more than two decades. Krauss has won 26 Grammys and countless other accolades since releasing her first album in 1985 as a teen fiddle prodigy. By 1989 she had gathered the members of Union Station, the ace backing group that is still her primary musical home. During the mid-1990s she graduated from

the insular bluegrass circuit to a broader audience, and expanded her fan base yet again at the turn of the millennium with her crucial contributions to Burnett's multiplatinum *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack. Although grounded in bluegrass tradition, the 39-year-old Illinois native has always taken a broad musical view. "Growing up, I loved all types of music, not just bluegrass," she says.

Following her solo adventure with Plant (including an aborted attempt at a follow-up) she returns to Union Station—Dan Tyminski, Jerry Douglas, Barry Bales and Ron Block—for the new *Paper Airplane*. The album finds the group consolidating its sound with a straightforward set of originals, covers and contributions from reliable collaborators like songwriter Robert Lee Castleman (who penned the title cut). Krauss spoke from her home in Nashville about her expansive musical palette, what she's looking for in a song—and why she so rarely writes her own.



**'I'm drawn to songs that make me feel certain I'm telling the truth.'**

**Does the album have a theme?**

The songs are about working your way through a tough time and not knowing when you're going to come out of it. But that wasn't something we consciously went for. We just went for what felt right, and that's how it turned out. I have to sing things that are important for me to say. I don't want to do a song simply because it's catchy or clever. I'm drawn to songs that make me feel certain I'm telling the truth.

**Did recording go smoothly?**

Not at first. We went in and recorded for a week, and I thought, "This isn't happening." We had some good songs, but not enough for a strong album. I said, "Let's take a break. Let me go away and find some more material." Getting the title track proved to be key. When we regrouped, we really had some strong stuff.

**'I groan when I hear some of my early stuff. But the material is great on those albums.'**

**Why did you decide to cover Richard Thompson's "Dimming of the Day"?**

T Bone originally had that song in mind for Robert [Plant] and me. He showed it to us, and at the time I felt I couldn't do it. But I did keep thinking about it. Later, Robert Lee Castleman called and said, "I've got the perfect song for you, and I'm coming over to play it." I asked him what it was, and he said "Dimming of the Day." I said, "Oh, that's a great song, but I can't do it."

**Why not?**

It's been covered by such wonderful people, like Bonnie Raitt and Mary Black, that I felt there was no way we could do a version that would be worthy. But then I started thinking of excuses for why it would be OK. I tried to rationalize, telling myself, "Well, no one in bluegrass has done it yet." It was an intense vocal for me to sing, because it hits close to home. I ended up loving it.

**How do you pick songs?**

I spend years gathering songs, organizing and keeping them in cabinets and bins. I pick ones that will fit well together on an album, and hope that everyone likes them too. Oftentimes Ron and I get together and make demos for songs I feel need to be presented in a certain way. Barry wrote for the album, Ron and Jerry brought in a few things for us to listen to as well. We sift through everything. If I feel really strongly about something, even if everyone else doesn't like it, we still give it a shot.

**What led you to bluegrass?**

I loved harmony singing. I was also drawn to the themes—ideas of the simple life, the hard life, the importance of family and home. Where I grew up, you could drive anywhere and see the best farmland in the country. Bluegrass brings to mind such specific images.

**Did you take to the fiddle easily?**

No. I hated to practice and wanted no part of it. That said, when my brother [composer and bassist Viktor Krauss] and I played our instruments, our parents were always very excited. They were very encouraging. They knew they had to be to keep us interested in playing.

**Were you prepared for the spotlight at such an early age?**

Maybe I recorded too early. I groan when I hear some of the early stuff. My singing and playing was all at one speed. But the material is great on those albums, and the songs fit together well. They really mark a time in my life.

**Did the success of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* surprise you?**

Not as much as you might think. I always felt that if more people got a chance to hear this music they would love it. If I was surprised, it was only because it felt too good to be true. I remember the first date we played on that tour. We were playing an arena, and Norman Blake performed "Big Rock Candy Mountain." When he finished, there was a roar from the crowd like a massive wind blowing. I thought, "My goodness, people really do like this."

**What draws you to T Bone?**

His facility for encouragement. He truly believes in the players there with him. He's all about the personalities of the people who are playing and singing, and about establishing a mood. He casts the recordings based on very specific personality traits. During one

## ESSENTIAL KRAUSS

Alison Krauss' recorded legacy now encompasses 12 studio albums, as well as numerous collaborations and contributions to tribute albums, soundtracks and so on. Here's where to start.



**NOW THAT I'VE FOUND YOU: A COLLECTION**

(1994)

This double-platinum compendium marked many listeners' first exposure to an artist

whose recording career already stretched back a decade. But it was two new tracks, the hits "Baby, Now That I've Found You" and "When You Say Nothing at All," that thrust Krauss into the limelight.



**SO LONG SO WRONG**

(1997)

Nashville was intrigued by the idea of a young crossover solo star following the sudden success of

*Now That I've Found You*. But for the follow-up Krauss returned to Union Station and reasserted the still-developing outfit's identity as a unit—creating a sonic template that can still be heard today on *Paper Airplane*.



**A HUNDRED MILES OR MORE: A COLLECTION**

(2007)

The bookend compilation to *Now That I've Found You* offered fans one-stop

shopping for essential soundtrack numbers like "The Scarlet Tide" and "Down to the River to Pray," as well as duets with James Taylor, Sting, Brad Paisley and John Waite.



**RAISING SAND**

(2007)

Eyebrows raised at the news that Krauss was recording an album of duets with one-time Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant. But the

pair's explosive vocal chemistry and producer T Bone Burnett's smartly austere musical settings made for platinum sales and an Album of the Year Grammy win.

MUSICIAN



Rich Oliver

On stage with Union Station at the Rounder Records 40th Anniversary Concert, Nashville, October 2009

**'It's the songs you feel a kinship with that stay interesting.'**

song Robert, the band and I were cutting, he told me, "Don't change the way you're playing. Don't try to fit in with the other players. Just play like you play."

**How would you describe Plant?**

He's timeless and ageless and wildly intelligent. When people ask me what he's like, I usually say, "He would love you, and you would love him." As I've gotten to know him, it's easy for me to see why he's made such a mark on history. He's always on the path to the next thing.

**What went wrong when you tried to record a second album?**

It just wasn't happening. We probably shouldn't have gone right back into the studio after being on the road as long as

we were. But we've still got the project in mind—Robert and I talk about it every time we get together. Robert's very busy right now, and Union Station and I are doing things. But I wouldn't be surprised if we revisit the idea soon.

**Why do you so seldom write?**

I haven't been driven to do that. I've been lucky to be connected with songs that speak for me. Sometimes I hear something and think, "Oh, I have to say that." I've occasionally made the mistake of recording something simply because it was clever, but I never stay connected to those songs. They don't last and they're never fulfilling. It's the songs you feel a kinship with that stay interesting. And there are many songwriters who say what I want to say.

**SUDDENLY SPEECHLESS**

Alison Krauss recalls an onstage experience in the mid-'90s that proved unexpectedly overwhelming. She was slated to sing with Dolly Parton for the recording of a concert album at Parton's Dollywood theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. "I was singing harmony," Krauss explains. "I had always been a huge fan, and I became even more of a fan after I met her. She's so amazing, even more impressive than people imagine. We did about a week's worth of rehearsals, working really hard. Then the show starts, she comes out on stage in her beautiful dress and suddenly I can't sing! I just forgot everything. I was so taken with her whole presence that I became completely useless and forgot where to come in with the vocals. It was like, 'I'll be over here taking pictures if you need me.' Eventually I got straightened out, but for the first couple of songs I was a disaster."

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