

Q&A



Sheryl Nields

AIMEE MANN

Getting it right for her latest effort required a fresh start

AFTER NEARLY THREE DECADES IN the music biz and Grammy and Oscar nods under her belt, Aimee Mann wanted a new approach for *Charmer*, her eighth solo album—so she tossed her original batch of tunes. “I had some songs and played them all back to back and was like, ‘I’m not crazy about these,’” says the 53-year-old singer-songwriter and actress. “They didn’t really fit in with the kind of record I wanted to make, which was poppier.” Produced by longtime bassist Paul Bryan and featuring a duet with Shins’ frontman James Mercer, *Charmer* provides buzzy pop foil to Mann’s lyrical cynicism. She shared details on the album’s creation.

What inspired *Charmer*?

The song “Charmer” started about a friend of mine who is charming in a delightful way. But in the process of writing, I was thinking about the different aspects of charm and realized, “Oh, this is darker than I first saw it.” So it no longer became about him—I thought, “If this song was written about me, I wouldn’t be flattered.” It started to become about a character based on a bunch of different people.

Do you prefer to write about characters?

Even if I start out with a real person, it kind of has to turn into a character. It’s more interesting to tweak the details of the plot in order to make your point. Sometimes you have to streamline, because if you’re talking about one aspect, you don’t want to have characters that are completely fleshed out and real because it gets off topic.

What about the musical direction?

I was thinking about pop music and my personal definition of it. One of the first things that defined pop when I was a kid was Glen Campbell singing Jimmy Webb songs. In the ’70s, I was focused on one song, “Jackie Blue” by the Ozark Mountain Daredevils. I kept going back and listening to it. And then stuff from the ’80s, like Blondie and the Cars, that was a big influence. These are real pop songs.

Is the ’80s influence in the synthesizers?

When New Wave first came out, my visceral impression of it was, “My God, it’s so mechanical. It sounds so machine-like!” You go back now, and it’s really just a rock band with a synthesizer. I found that really funny,

that the impression that you get from this one extra, new element influences how you hear.

How did you team with James Mercer?

By a series of accidents, Paul Bryan and I ended up having drinks with [screenwriter] Aaron Sorkin. He started telling us about an idea he’d had for a musical that he wanted to write one day. It was kind of like he was saying, “If I ever write this musical, would you write music for it?” Of course! Paul and I went home and were like, “Based on a couple of characters he told us about, just for fun, let’s write a song.” “Living a Lie” was the song we came up with. I’m sure that will never happen, because Aaron Sorkin has 8 million projects he’s doing, but you never know. For me it was super-flattering to have the conversation. Then we were left with this song—I wasn’t writing it for the record, but we were kind of like, “Maybe we should see if we can find somebody to do this as a duet.” James Mercer was the first name that we came up with. He’s got such a strong voice and he’s so iconic. We were lucky that he happened to be in town and willing, and he liked the song, God bless him.

—Amanda Farrah

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