



**RISING FORCE**

# A PLACE TO CALL MY OWN

Personal demons, physical suffering and alcohol almost destroyed **EMMA RUTH RUNDLE**. Bold and spiritually heavy, her recent album **ON DARK HORSES** finds a unique songwriter that refuses to give in...

WORDS: JAMES MACKINNON PHOTOS: ASHLEY OSBORN

**E**mma Ruth Rundle is at a space in between. She paces the hallways of record label Sargent House's LA HQ, looking for a quiet place to talk. "I'm from LA, so I thought it would be a good time to touch base with family," she explains as she ducks into an unoccupied room. "Bring myself back down to Earth a little bit."

The 35-year-old is currently between European and U.S. West Coast tour legs in support of her fourth solo album, *On Dark Horses* – a brooding work that filters rich imagery through desert-noir soundscapes of thundering rhythms and dust-choked guitars. While her atmospheric music does not share the sonic heaviness of many bands she has toured with (Boris, Deafheaven, Chelsea Wolfe), there is a common fascination with the extremes of human experience that metalheads, hardcore kids and school teachers alike have embraced. Musing on her ability to move between these circles, Emma points to her time in post-rock experimentalists

Red Sparowes – featuring members of post-metal pioneers Isis and Emma's former band, Marriages – as giving her a free pass.

"I wouldn't necessarily describe my solo career as being 'metal' in any way, or even extreme," she says as she shifts. "But I think through that lineage of playing in those bands I've somehow been accepted. And I'm very comfortable in the world of heavy music, honestly. It's a happy place for me to exist, even though I don't fully belong."

Searching for a space she can call her own has taken Emma through various guises, from the gothic folk of The Nocturnes to Marriages' heavy post-rock textures and a one-off album of crushed electronic loops attributed to The Headless Prince Of Zolpidem. It was during her tenure in Red Sparowes, though, that she released her first album under her own name, *Electric Guitar: One*. The aptly-titled set of haunting instrumentals was recorded straight on to a laptop in the back of a van while the band were touring Scandinavia in 2010, where Emma would drink in the passing scenery.

She still considers the guitar to be her natural voice.

"I think I have a strength in conjuring atmospheres and sounds from the instrument, more so than my voice," she says. "There are so many states of mind that have such tangible detail that words can't even get close to. I feel like singing lyrics has just been something necessary for the last few records, [but] I don't know if it will remain part of what I do forever."

Despite what she says, words do carry great portent in Emma's music, mining a rich metaphorical seam that came to the fore on third album *Marked For Death*. The album was written in isolation at The Farm – a live-in compound situated in the desert an hour-and-a-half drive outside of LA – through the winter of 2015. In her months there, Emma rarely left the property, except to smoke a cigarette and stare into the cold, arid sands stretching away. The sensory deprivation, she says, allowed for "deeper things to work themselves out though my subconscious", but it also sent her into a spiral of depression and alcohol that took a physical and mental toll evident in the photograph adorning the album's cover. In a black-and-white portrait, the skin below her darkened eyes looks paper thin as if every nerve lies too close to the surface. She wraps an arm around one leg as if physically trying to hold herself together.

"That's why I chose that photo," she says today. "It was the most accurate description of those songs and the place they were coming from. I was distraught. I was totally fucked-up. But that's kind of a cycle I seem to go through. That was a particularly low one, a dark one."

The record obliquely deals with family, substance abuse, violent sexuality, mental and physical pain – or "disturbing content" as Emma says. *Real Big Sky* particularly finds a release from suffering through death, but ask Emma why she felt compelled to write it and she becomes tight-lipped. "I think the songs are revealing enough," she says. "There's only so much of the story I care to reveal."

Bar such moments, Emma is extremely open in conversation. She is candid describing the intense physical pain she suffered in that period due to issues with endometriosis, a chronic condition she still takes painkillers for and which lands her in the emergency room about once a year. She is equally candid talking about her on-again, off-again relationship with sobriety: "At the moment I'm on a sober kick. It's a constant struggle. I'm an alcoholic, is the honest truth, and it's difficult to get away from that."



The estate agent's listing made it look much nicer, tbh

## "WITHOUT HOPE, WE'RE FUCKED"

EMMA RUTH RUNDLE

Yet talking to her, you also sense a central tension that drives her. A tension between needing to express herself, but also needing to protect herself and those close to her. And perhaps after two years of being asked to explain these songs and singing them night after night, she's done talking about them.

"It's not so gut-wrenching anymore that I can't perform those songs," she insists, although only three survive on recent set lists. "For a long time they took me back to events that still are uncomfortable for me to confront. There is a lingering... It hasn't all been reconciled."

Louisville, Kentucky sits along the state border of Indiana, separated only by the turbulent Ohio River. It is here Emma recently settled after years of being "pretty transient" to live with partner and Jaye Jayle guitarist Evan Patterson. And while she confesses to still not feeling entirely at home there, it does seem that the change has done her good. Compared with its predecessor, *On Dark Horses* sounds like she is once more holding the reins.

Two practical measures also differentiate the albums. Firstly, *On Dark Horses* was recorded in a professional studio – La La Land in Louisville – which allowed for smoother recording sessions than those at The Farm. Secondly, this is the first album where Emma has collaborated in writing with a full band,

featuring members of Jaye Jayle. Although up until the day the band walked into the studio, Emma was still unsure about relinquishing some of her control, even considering doing a solo acoustic album instead. "I'm a conflicted person," she states simply. "There's a cognitive dissonance going on constantly and I'm trying to find the path that makes the most sense. But I think the special chemistry that we had worked up touring together outweighed my control issues."

There is still the restlessness that has always driven her music, but there is also a deeper boldness in the layers of rumbling guitars that sharpen your focus on the lyrics. The near-title-track *Darkhorse* is addressed to Emma's sister and references the abusive household

they grew up in, but also promises, 'In the wake of strange beginnings, we can still stand high.' "It's about taking the past and acknowledging that it's an influence, but not letting it dominate," she says, carefully.

The notion of a dark horse as an outlier who comes out ahead against seemingly insurmountable odds also courses through these eight tracks, with many characters bridling against deep struggles. Although the darkness is never far away, there is still space to offer comfort and compassion. This is particularly true of the closing track *You Don't Have To Cry*, a plaintive lullaby for a gay friend affected by rising far-right prejudice in Trump's America.

"I'm not a political artist in any way," Emma stresses, "but it's just so disturbing to me. People in gay communities don't feel safe. Women don't feel safe. People are shooting each other. He called me in tears like, 'How are we gonna live through this?' It's very real and that song is basically for him. In the end, he is loved and accepted."

Would you describe the album as uplifting? "Yeah. It's important to have hope. Without that, [we're] fucked."

As for Emma's hopes for her own future, she still has plans to record an instrumental follow-up to *Electric Guitar*: One, as well as that stripped-down acoustic album. But beyond that, nothing except the desire to create. "In the whole process of making records and travelling, coming to a sense of who you are can often be a roller-coaster of confusion, ego, psychological chaos," she says. "It's difficult to be anything other than just in the moment."

The road ahead may be unclear. But whatever it holds, Emma will meet it head on. **K!**

EMMA RUTH RUNDLE'S *ON DARK HORSES* IS OUT NOW VIA SARGENT HOUSE

## RIP UP THE RULEBOOK

EMMA RUTH RUNDLE identifies the creative risk-takers that have influenced her wide and varied career...

### MELVINS

"Doing an acoustic tour with King Buzzo [Melvins frontman Buzz Osborne] had a huge influence on my solo career. I was like, 'This shatters the whole perception of the singer-songwriter.'"



### SMASHING PUMPKINS

"Siamese Dream was the beginning of my journey in rock guitar and it's still an album I listen to. That guitar solo in *Soma* is just *it* for me. I had my first electric guitar at 12 and I would try to play along to that album, not knowing anything."

### PET

"This band combine genres in a way I admire. The guitarist Tyler Bates is in Marilyn Manson, and bassist Juan Alderete has worked with Manson and The Mars Volta, but Pet's self-titled debut was a revelation. I'll never understand how it has remained so obscure."

### MONO

"My initiation into the world of post-rock. The lack of vocals felt like a relief, and the dynamics and textures opened up a whole approach to the guitar and songwriting for me."

