

Samantha Crain

A Small Death



Photo credit: Joanna Grace Babb

Samantha Crain thinks of her deeply personal new album *A Small Death* as the beginning of a second chance, a hard-won “bonus round” in life that came about through no small amount of physical and emotional upheaval.

Featuring 11 riveting new songs that are by turns anguished and redemptive, *A Small Death* finds the Oklahoma singer confronting decades of grief and trauma, dredged up by an incapacitating physical pain that often kept her home in bed. A string of car accidents the summer after she released her 2017 album *You Had Me at Goodbye* exacerbated a worsening tendinitis and carpal tunnel syndrome in her hands and arms, and the pain made it difficult to play an instrument. Crain was barely able to perform on a European tour, which created a huge amount of emotional stress that led to what she calls “a full-on breakdown.”

“My identity as a musician, that I had wrapped myself up in, was gone,” she says. “So then you’re faced with, OK, who are you as a person?”

She’s resilient, for starters. As she recovered the use of her hands and arms, Crain began writing songs that explored what she had been going through—but not just her recent experiences. “A lot of the stuff that I was writing about was me processing trauma through my whole life,” she says. The result is songs like “An Echo,”

the haunting album opener, where Crain’s dusky voice reverberates through drifts of steel guitar and guttural bass over a bed of acoustic guitar and spare drums. She finds a pattern to a lifetime of destructive behavior on “Tough for You” (“a real therapy song,” she says), singing in hushed, sorrowful tones over acoustic guitar and chiming piano. Though Crain wrestles with some heavy themes, the album isn’t all doom and darkness: “Pastime” is a song of self-discovery with a buoyant, propulsive backbeat and vocals that soar on the edge of joy when Crain gets to the sing-along chorus. There’s also a song in Choctaw, the language of her Native American ancestors. She wrote when “When We Remain” in the mode of the protest song “We Shall Overcome,” and it serves as a metaphor for her people’s perseverance, and her own.

What’s the significance of the title, *A Small Death*?

I didn’t completely die, but I feel like I died a little bit and that allowed me this new beginning. What I was trying to capture with this record, really, was a sense of reconstruction.

When did you start writing again?

Gradually, through various therapies, I began to recover physically, and as I saw this light at the end of the tunnel, I started writing some songs. At that point, I was just getting words down because I still couldn’t really play instruments. But then once I started being able to use my hands, things really

blossomed. I started looking back at what the previous two years had destroyed in me and seeing a clearer picture of myself and how lucky I was to get this second chance at doing this thing that I love and trying not to take that for granted. A lot of these songs came out of that time in my life.

Was there a song that set the tone for this album?

“An Echo” was the song that got me to a point where I wanted to see where this album was going to take me. I wrote the first two verses while I was in the throes of this heightened mental and emotional stress, and so that song touches on issues within my family, which was kind of falling apart at that time; my health declining; my personal life being in shambles. Then the last verse looks back at what those years had been and what they created. I wrote that right as a lot of these other songs started happening, and it kind of kicked off the rest of the songs.

How did your period of forced inactivity shape what you wrote about?

A lot of the stuff that I was writing about are things that I’ve been ruminating on in one way or another for 10 or 15 years. Having this time where I had hit rock bottom gave me this clarity and let me bring closure to a lot of things in my life. For instance, in “An Echo,” I talk briefly about my mother being in prison. She’s been in prison for eight or nine years now, but I’ve never addressed that in a song, mainly because it’s taken me eight or nine years to wrap my head around that and make it something that I could refer to in a song. Or with “Reunion,” those are all thoughts that I had at my 10-year high school reunion, which at this point was four or five years ago. Each one of those are things I’ve been thinking about for a long time, but sometimes it takes these massive meteoric explosions for the whole picture to make sense.

What did it mean for your self-identity when you weren’t able to play music?

It was the scariest thing that I’ve ever experienced. If I could get out of bed, I would look in the mirror and think, “I don’t know who I am.” Like, what are you, other than just this one sort of identification that you have? I felt like I was getting to know myself from scratch, like peeling off this costume that I’ve been in since I was a kid and fully leaning into my curiosities and sensitivities that I hadn’t allowed myself to do before. The song “Pastime” describes it like the excitement and giddiness of the early stages of a new romance, but the chorus is what it really is about: “It feels like you were always there.” I truly feel like finding these new facets of myself was like discovering this extra person that was trapped down inside me.

How are you feeling now?

I feel very hopeful. I’ve made so many records and I’ve been in this art medium for so long that I think when *You Had Me at Goodbye* came out, I was not really understanding my place in it. I do still struggle with the physical part of it, but now I know there are specific therapies that can help me with that. I feel like really good and hopeful and clear-headed. I’m in a state of gratefulness for being able to make music. Every time I get onstage and I can feel my fingers, that’s a good night for me. ■

**For more information, please contact
Samantha Tillman, Kate Rakvic or Carla Sacks at Sacks & Co., 212.741.1000,
samantha.tillman@sacksco.com, kate.rakvik@sacksco.com or carla@sacksco.com.**