

The Huntress and Holder of Hands- *Avalon* Bio

In 2015, on a sunny April afternoon, MorganEve Swain was telling a reporter about the new identity she had recently accepted as her own. It was the day after her 30th birthday, a night that ended with maybe a little too much whiskey. Sitting in her quiet Rhode Island home, she reluctantly labeled who she had been since age 28: a widow.

Two years later, Swain has channeled her lingering disbelief and recurring bouts of grief and redemption into the Huntress and Holder of Hands. Don't call it a new band or project; it's so much more than that. It's a potent reminder that even when life turns out differently than we expect, the human spirit is indomitable, our capacity to love and persevere immeasurable.

For the past decade, Swain has been known for her work with Brown Bird, a chameleonic duo she fronted with her late husband, Dave Lamb. They charged out of Providence in the early 2000s like no other group from their home state, a heady hybrid of "Dark Americana," blues, Eastern-European folk, and the far-flung influences of their upbringings that seeped into their music.

Just as Brown Bird was taking flight, with a handful of acclaimed albums, nonstop touring, and a star-making performance at the Newport Folk Festival, Lamb was diagnosed with leukemia. Though the year-long ordeal that followed was full of incredible support and unwavering hope, he succumbed in April 2014, gone far too soon at 36, leaving Swain on her own to carry a torch for the duo's brief but enduring legacy.

Her latest band took its name – not to mention the title of its debut new album – from the last words that haunted the end of Brown Bird's final album, 2015's devastating *Axis Mundi*. In an intimate home recording he'd given her as a Christmas present, Lamb inadvertently laid out Swain's artistic arc.

"You're a huntress and a healer and a holder of hands/ And your heart is the Avalon that I seek for my end," he sang to her.

It's fitting, then, that Swain's *Avalon* is a powerful bookend to Brown Bird's farewell statement. It picks up where that album left off, a moment of reckoning that completes the story of how Brown Bird will be remembered. *Avalon* is a tough but important listen, a harrowing account of not just Swain's anguish but also her resolve and profound love for Lamb

and the community that formed around them and lifted her when she needed it the most.

She knew almost immediately that she would continue to make music without Lamb but wasn't sure what direction it would take – or if it would even happen at all. She got to work within months of his passing.

“I had a very conscious realization that either I start writing my own music or I never touch music ever again,” Swain says. “It seemed totally black-and-white to me. I thought, ‘If I don’t do this now, and if too much time passes, I’ll never do it.’”

“Part of the urgency was because I was afraid of forgetting how Dave and I worked together,” she adds. “I never really trusted myself as a composer of music. Most of the time, Dave had an idea, shared it with me, and we’d work it out together. It’s a really strange feeling to be starting over, but I’m crossing my fingers that Brown Bird fans will be interested in what I’m doing now.”

After laying down the demos in the home she shared with Lamb, Swain took the Huntress to Machines With Magnets, a studio in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. To flesh out the songs with more might and muscle, Swain assembled what she considers the perfect band: James Maple and Rachel Blumberg on drums, Spencer Swain on bass, Liz Isenberg on upright string bass, Emily Dix Thomas on cello, harmonies by Liz, Emily and Emily Shaw, and a guest-appearance by Deer Tick's Ian O'Neil. Together, they framed Swain's songs with a careful balance of restraint and roar, depending on what the music required. In addition to lead vocals, we hear Swain on five-string viola, guitar, basses, and ukulele.

Swain sees the Huntress and Holder of Hands as both an extension of her previous band and as a fresh start for her.

“It’s definitely a departure from what Brown Bird was doing,” she says. “But it’s important to me to keep Brown Bird part of it, at least for now. I’m still very anxious to keep Brown Bird in people’s ears.”

By design, *Avalon* occasionally brims with echoes of Brown Bird. In the middle of “Borealis,” the instrumentation suddenly darts into an interlude of Eastern European melodies, the type of musical flight of fancy that Brown Bird often deployed in its shape-shifting songs.

And yet the Huntress' debut is its own beast, a strange brew of heavy psychedelia, murky blues, freewheeling solos, and sophisticated

orchestrations. Songs such as "Shadow of the Hunted" and "Etude" are clear showcases for the band's ferocious prowess.

Let's be honest: These 10 songs close cut to the bone – and sometimes clean through it – especially if you're familiar with Brown Bird's story. (Be prepared for a badass version of "Severed Soul," a Brown Bird song that Swain wrote and originally appeared on the band's 2009 album, *The Devil Dancing*.)

And yet the beauty of *Avalon* is that you don't need to know anything about Swain's past to feel the visceral power of her latest project. Everything you need to know is right there in the songs.

Throughout the album, we hear its maker gathering strength like a hurricane barreling toward a coastline. "Once you were my kingdom/ Once I was your queen/ Now I sit on this dark throne/ I am stronger than I seem," Swain sings on "My Kingdom" – and you believe her.

"That song was kind of a conversation with myself," she says. "I realized I actually am stronger than I seem. I had to remind myself that each wave of grief was going to pass, and I'd get back up, and hey, I've already written three songs. I'm going to be OK."

She's perhaps too modest to admit it, but the album marks a seismic shift in Swain's role as a musician, band leader, and particularly as a songwriter. Swain is the first to admit she's never been comfortable as a focal point in a band. But with *Avalon* she commands your attention not only with what she has to say, but with how she expresses it.

"Shake Off Your Flesh" is a startling revelation. Unfurling to nearly six minutes, the song erupts into a snarl of taut, wailing guitars and thunderous drums. Out of nowhere, Swain's voice rises above the fray, raw and coarse with jagged emotion she's never unleashed on record before. It was the sort of studio moment where everyone looked around afterward and thought, "What the fuck was that?"

"The big challenge for me is being the frontperson of something, because that's really not a natural place for me to be. At least it wasn't until now," Swain says. "Dave and I always wanted to get heavier. It was always a struggle: How do we get heavier but stay true to what Brown Bird was? But with the Huntress I don't need to stay true to anything or anyone but myself."

