

Brennen Leigh's Obsessed with the West. (And that's a good thing.)

"I've been obsessed with western swing music since I was a kid and it's always been an influence. My records in the past have ranged from bluegrass to country music to folk, but I'd never fully explored swing until now." So says genre-busting Fargo-born, Austin-incubated, Nashville resident Brennen Leigh, whose new collaboration with the kings of modern-day western swing, Asleep at the Wheel, *Obsessed with the West* (Signature Sounds) is a showcase not just for The Wheel or Bob Wills fans, but for anyone who's ever curled up with Lefty Frizzell, Billie Holiday, Willie Nelson or even Louis Armstrong.

Leigh's graceful, refined voice and instrumental fluency, her interplay with Ray Benson, and the perennial brilliance of The Wheel serve up a treat on this, Leigh's seventh album, showcasing twelve self-penned songs. With cameos from Emily Gimble and Katie Shore (all the players get their moments in the sun), Leigh demonstrates her wit and vitality on the terrific jump 40's rhythm and blues, "Comin' in Hot," and the lonesome cowboy ballad "Riding Off Onto Sunset Boulevard." It's no question why Rodney Crowell, Charley Crockett and Lee Ann Womack have recorded her songs. *Obsessed with the West* is a celebration of music for music's sake in 2022, not just an exercise in anthropology.

"When I moved to Nashville from Texas," she explains, "for some reason it triggered another western swing phase in my life. I was out of Texas, but something about the swing was still grabbing me; I was listening to a lot of Bob Wills, and of course The Wheel. I had first been exposed to Western swing through my parents' Asleep At The Wheel records while I was growing up."

Born in North Dakota and raised in Minnesota, Leigh began touring at 14, while cultivating her classic country-informed songwriting. At 19, she moved to live music mecca Austin, Texas where she rubbed shoulders with and eventually inspired the esteem of Ray Benson. "I knew the band peripherally, and we'd talked about making a record years before, but I had just signed a publishing deal in Nashville and was about to move away from Texas. So for that reason our stars didn't align until more recently."

"I wrote thirty western swing songs in the beginning of 2021, alone and with different writer friends," she continues, "and we culled it down to twelve. Many of the songs have a 1940s Cindy Walker type vibe — she was at the forefront of my mind for this entire process, something of a spirit guide for me — but there's definitely a jazz influence, country, and a couple of songs that I would call cowboy or folk tunes."

"This is my love note to western swing; to the rich culture it comes from, as I see it," she adds, "I listen to and have been influenced by a lot of dead people, but our genre is important, and I think it deserves new life and new songs. The old stuff is where I come from, my songs turn out to be a melding of the old styles, whether I like it or not. You put cinnamon in something it's going to taste like a snickerdoodle. I don't know how *not* to put it in there."

No need to worry about that either. Western swing is a fine genre year after year, you can't beat Asleep at the Wheel, and Brennen Leigh is every bit their peer. *Obsessed with the West* is a treat for the ears and the heart, a damn fine snickerdoodle of great songs, top-flight instrumentalists, and the vibrant, still-evolving artistry of Brennen Leigh.