

**Kaia Kater's** JUNO-winning and Polaris nominated album, ***Strange Medicine***, opens with a haunting vision. Accompanied by **Aoife O'Donovan**, Kater sings of the women burned at the stake as witches in 17th century Salem, Massachusetts and their wish to strike back: "I dreamt I moved through you and / Burned my name into your chest". It's an opening salvo from an album that celebrates the power of women and oppressed people throughout history as they rise up and turn the poison of centuries of oppression into a strange kind of medicine. Kater's songs are dialogues with these historical figures and meditations on her own modern life as well. In the years since her 2018 album, *Grenades*, on Smithsonian Folkways, Kater has taken time to reinvent herself and hone her skills, first attending film school to learn composition, then diving deeper into her songwriting to come up with her most personal album yet. Feeling the pressure as a talented young songwriter, banjo player, and bandleader with three successful albums and an NPR Tiny Desk Concert under her belt, Kater struggled initially with the expectations of her adopted genre, Americana. "I was factoring everybody else's perception into my songwriting," she says. "Would I write more honestly if I knew that no one would ever hear this?" With that in mind, Kater retreated to her apartment in Montréal. Sitting at home with her banjo, the songs unfolded in personal intimacy, revealing windows into the perspective of women and revolutionaries through history. Co-producing with **Joe Grass** (Elisapie, The Barr Brothers), Kater invited close friends and colleagues O'Donovan and **Allison Russell** to sing on the album, along with longtime hero and American legend **Taj Mahal**. With lush arrangements and unexpected musical ideas drawn from genres as surprising as minimalist composition, jazz drumming, and film scores, ***Strange Medicine*** is the bold next step in Kater's career. It's an album made beyond the white gaze of Americana, un beholden to a music industry that so often tokenizes and silences marginalized voices, a Black Feminist perspective on a genre that refuses to cede power to Black women. But ultimately it's a celebration of the self. The words of the poem "won't you celebrate with me" by Lucille Clifton echoed in Kater's ears throughout the process of making this album:

"born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?"

The anchor behind this celebration of self came, as with many artists, from the down time forced upon the world by the pandemic. Facing serious writer's block and little work, Kater expanded the scope of her creativity. She recorded with other artists, released an innovative and unexpected single of her own with jazz artist Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, and completed a residency in film scoring and composition. In time off from touring, she found an unexpectedly fertile ground for developing her skills, talents, and creative perspective. And she found herself falling back in love with the banjo. Though the banjo was where she first made her mark as an artist (what "started her journey", as she says), she had

been pushing back against expectations she felt as one of few Black banjo players. Her previous album, *Grenades*, had minimal banjo. Now that she had time alone at home, the songs began to flow more freely and she felt open to new ideas on the instrument. The looping minimalism of composer Steve Reich was a strong influence, heard in looped banjo lines throughout the album. The frenetic jazz drumming of Brian Blade and the unsettling orchestral scores of film composer Jonny Greenwood were other influences, as were the spiraling rhythms of the West African kora. She realized, as she says, that "It's me. I am the source of the creativity; it's not necessarily my instrument." This freed her to bring a new perspective to the banjo, and to look at ways to arrange new soundscapes around the instrument and her songs. Just as Kater reworked her banjo and guitar playing with the new ideas she was absorbing, the lyrics and song structures on ***Strange Medicine*** reflect this subtle experimentation. On "Mechanics of the Mind," she references Reich's looped compositions by fading rhythms and vocals in and out cyclically. With "The Internet", she riffs on old broadband modem sounds by rendering some of the lyrics barely intelligible and slightly garbled.

Even factoring in the down time from the pandemic, *Strange Medicine* had a long gestation period. During lockdown she reached out to Montréal friend Joe Grass, known for his work producing The Barr Brothers and Elisapie. "He's a roots musician, but with really big ears," she says. Working together as producers they kicked songs back and forth and went through demos. "We built it up slowly," she says. "It was a really different process from what I had previously done." With other albums, like most artists, Kater had assembled a band and gone in over a couple days to track the full album. Here the process carefully and thoughtfully unrolled over a year and a half. Working with arrangers Franky Rousseau (Andrew Bird, Chris Thile) and Dominic Mekky (Caroline Shaw, Sara Bareilles), Kater was able to build soundscapes around each song. The strings on neo folk song "Often as the Autumn", as an example, unspool like a rolling field, mixing with electronics and harmonics in a deeply beautiful way. Rob Moose (Bon Iver, Phoebe Bridgers, Paul Simon) provided the strings on the album, while Robbie Kuster (Patrick Watson) and Phil Melanson (Andy Shauf, Sam Gendel) brought an array of unusual percussion instruments.

It was a long road from the bedroom recordings on guitar and banjo that first created these songs, but with such enveloping arrangements, Kaia Kater's songs on *Strange Medicine* ring out with personal truth. "Who's the maker, and who's the taker?" she sings on the album's second track, referencing the uncomfortable nature of commodified art, the loneliness of being an artist today, and the importance of creating as a life-giving compulsion. "In Montréal" is a meditation on the struggles of trying to make a home in the place you grew up. Allison Russell also grew up in Montréal, another reason Kater asked her to sing on the track, and has spoken about how the place you grow up can be like a dungeon

and a refuge. Even on one of the least personal songs, "Fédon" –about an 18th century Caribbean revolutionary, Julien Fédon–the personal aspect is still strong. Inspired by the Haitian revolution, Fédon formed an army of enslaved and free Black people in Grenada, the home island of Kater's father and the subject of her previous album. Taj Mahal was a key person to invite to sing on this song, given his love of Caribbean music and his knowledge of the French language.

On songs that are based on historical events ("Fédon", "The Witch"), imagined characters ("Often as the Autumn", "Tiger"), or from Kater's experience herself ("Maker Taker", "Floodlights", "History in Motion") Kater pushed to give power and control to the women and people of the global majority who have long been denied this. She was inspired by a piece of advice from the author Whitney French, who said "Give your characters the agency that you never had." In some cases on the album, this agency manifested as a language of violence. Tired of long-standing tropes in Americana and country for insecure women in love songs, Kater looked instead to what kind of language she'd been wanting to use in songs for a long time but hadn't felt was acceptable. "Women aren't supposed to talk about violence, because we're considered to be peaceable," she explains, "but the reality is that we actually deal with violence all the time." Her songs also go against long-held stereotypes and clichés of women. "The Witch", for example, is ostensibly about Tituba, the first woman—an enslaved Caribbean—who was burned as a witch in the Salem witch trials, but Kater's also using the witch as a stand-in for the lingering sexist perceptions of modern women as harpies, sirens, shrews and temptresses.

For all the personal narratives of resistance on the album, ultimately the songs on *Strange Medicine* are all about the stories for Kaia Kater. "The through line for me," she says, "is just stories. It was the story of my dad on Grenades, and on *Strange Medicine* it's the story of people in history who might not have had their proper shrift. It's also my chance to finally write about the times in my life when I didn't feel like I had a voice, in order to give myself one now." As an uncommonly gifted songwriter, Kater excels at telling stories through song, drawing from her love of poetry, literature, and composition to fold these stories into a larger narrative of the people who have been left behind by history. She's tapping into the full kaleidoscope of her emotions to create a place for collective grief and celebration, inviting the ancestors to a place of honor at the table.