

ADRIANNE LENKER

BRIGHT FUTURE

On *Bright Future*, Adrienne Lenker, a songwriter known for turns of phrase and currents of rhyme, says it plainly, “You have my heart // I want it back.” Documented with analog precision, what began as an experiment in collaboration, became proof Adrienne’s heart did return, full to the brim, daring her into the unknown. During the high vibrance of autumn, 2022, the Big Thief band member got lucky. Everyone could come. Three musical friends, “Some of my favorite people,” had space in their busy touring schedules to join her at the forest-hidden, analog studio, Double Infinity. The musicians were known to Adrienne but newer to each other. “I had no idea what the outcome would be,” she recalls. The result? “It was magical,” she says. Adrienne’s musical risk became *Bright Future*, the studio’s first album, a 12-track telling of a journeyed heart. *Bright Future*’s co-producer and engineer, Philip Weinrobe, prepared the studio. He has been Adrienne’s partner on previous solo albums, but this was something new. Adrienne did not intend to make an album. They would instead explore the songs with no expectations. Even with an open outcome, from the start, Phil wanted to capture the sessions with the purest, technical honesty. He rolled onto Double Infinity’s old cherry wood floors an Otari 1/2 inch 8-Track and Studer console. To fill the air of the 150 year-old main room, Adrienne wanted piano, guitar, and violin. Mat Davidson plays them all. “I’ve known Mat a long time,” she says, “It doesn’t matter what instrument, his spirit just pours through.” At 17, Adrienne met Nick Hakim. She trusted her friend of 15 years to bring his sensitivity to the piano. “The way Nick would hold my songs, he would put every ounce of love.” Adrienne first met Josefin Runsteen in an Italian castle, and sought the classically trained violinist and percussionist’s “magnetic and contagious” energy. “She has such fire.” In addition to instrumentation, they made a chorus, adding carefully measured vocal harmonies. The sessions impressed and enchanted Adrienne. “I think the thing these people have in common, they are some of the best listeners I know musically. They have extreme presence.” They worked morning through afternoon. “It was daytime energy,” Adrienne says, “Evening, we ate dinner and hungout by the fireplace, sat in the living room playing records. Not always talking to each other, but being near each other. Lots of walks in the woods. The truest sense of hanging out. It was so refreshing.” The shelter and ease of the woodland Double Infinity studio is an element of the recordings. “It felt like everyone’s nervous systems released,” she says. “Once we were IN the song, somehow we just knew. No one stopped a take. We didn’t listen back. I only listened after everybody else left.” As a result, *Bright Future* has the best qualities of thoughtful engineering with the spontaneous swim of a field recording. There are details to savor, fingertips on strings, felt pads nodding in the piano, the harmonies a few steps back, all smoothly laid to tape. It comes together to allow

Adrienne's songs to be as they are, unarmored and light-footed. The lyrics of Bright Future let roam the contradictions of love's promise and pains. The same heart that admits on "No Machine," "I don't know what I'd do without you," sings luminously into a darkness, "Love spells Evol backwards people" on the cinematic "Evol." When Adrienne calls for her heart's return, she may be speaking to a lover, or the past, perhaps all of creation. Her strategy, track after track, is to cast musical beauty to reel her heart home. The past is first to arrive on Bright Future with a song of childhood. Though as it begins, we are embraced by the present. The opening seconds of "Real House" establish the dimensions of Double Infinity's welcoming room as droplets of piano land glossily, a violin bow dabbles, and players settling in their chairs. The engineering offers the sensation even the air is audible, transporting the waveforms of Adrienne's careful remembrances. "I'm a child humming into the clarity of black space where stars shine like tears on the night's face." She steadily sings to her mother the tide pools of early memories, dipping finally into the day her mother, at last, allowed herself tears. "Your love is all I want." "Sadness As A Gift" tells us time is catching up. The aliveness of Adrienne's voice keeps her poetry aloft. She sings in a circle completed by guitar, piano, violin, and all voices. "The seasons go so fast // Thinking that this one was going to last // Maybe the question was too much to ask." With bent, plucked, and trembling strings, "Fool" chases its tail for answers with softened beach glass geometry. "If I were him, would you be my family too?" she asks an indecisive lover who wishes to live two lives at once. Adrienne finds no advice. A course is needed. Any direction will do. "Just say what it is that you want." It is the doldrums sailors fear. "What more can I possibly say?" "No Machine" tells us adoration takes it all, even our sense of direction. "I don't know where I'd go without you." Chiming finger picking, harmonies, and simmering strings travel to the salt-sprayed point. "To the ocean of your love I am a river." Delicate, sturdied by harmonies with guitars paired shoulder-to-shoulder, "Free Treasure" takes us home. Here we have the best cooking, a warm fire, understanding, and "Love without measure." It is a road-worn traveler's paradise. And free to whomever lays it all down. "Just when I thought I couldn't feel more, I feel a little more." The heart of the album, "Evol" studies love in a mirror. Words are reversed. Kiss is Ssik. Meaning appears and goes out of frame. "Words are lethal." Epiphany is close on the high notes. Weightlessly, voices and violin repeat Adrienne's summing melody. She accepts what she sees. "The giver takes // The taker gives." Adrienne lights every candle on "Ruined," the finale. She tours scenes from a love affair, or a holy quest. Small moments dazzle. There is a bed, a fern leaning towards a basement window, a time where one future ends and rescue by another is still beyond sight. Glimmering, galactic swells surround the bare piano, which insists on paving ahead. Adrienne unfolds her ballad as nature would, relentlessly till full bloom. "So much coming through // Every hour too // Can't get

enough of you // You come around, I'm ruined." Ruined or reborn, she is asking for more. Admirers of Adrienne's solo music and Big Thief will find on Bright Future her reliable talent captured in stunning, magnetic clarity. In the company of parlor instruments, Adrienne's modern melodic and lyrical inventions create new traditions. Her vocal flights at times outwit gravity, then land, guiding along an earthly path. The wholeness of the unspliced recordings preserve a time of musical friendship during a golden season. Although they recorded for only some days, in Adrienne's recollection, "It felt like we were together forever."