

Jonatha Brooke borrowed the title of her latest album, *The Works*, from a Woody Guthrie lyric she came across in a notebook stored at the Guthrie archives – “I am the WORKS, the whole WORKS,” the American folk legend had scribbled, “The saint, the sinner, the drinker, the thinker....” Placing hitherto unseen Guthrie lyrics in contemporary musical settings to create brand-new songs, Brooke, backed by a small combo of stellar jazz and rock players, indeed offers us the works -- an extraordinarily intimate, emotionally revealing portrait of an American folk legend and an album that’s very much her own.

Others have pored through Guthrie’s writings to find material for new songs, most notably Billy Bragg and Wilco on the Grammy-nominated *Mermaid Avenue*. But Brooke is the first female artist offered unfettered access to the archives for that purpose. The image of Guthrie that Brooke creates by piecing together the contents of file cabinets and folders is one of a man both brash and tender, morally outraged and spiritually longing, a dreamer, sensualist, prankster, husband, lover, wanderer, troubadour. Says Brooke, “I started finding these really personal lyrics -- searching, spiritual ones -- and this gorgeous, sexy poetry, and it was fascinating. It drew me in and made me think I could do something really cool with this material.”

This ambitious project -- the follow-up to her 2007 disc, *Careful What You Wish For* -- is the result of a serendipitous chain of events that brought Brooke to an entirely unexpected juncture in her nearly two-decade-long career as a singer-songwriter. The Philadelphia Folksong Society was organizing a benefit that would include a tribute to the Guthrie family; the Guthries wanted to invite a small group of singer-songwriters to visit the archives and choose lyrics for a new song. Two deejays from influential radio station WXPB gave Brooke name to Woody’s daughter, Nora.

As Brooke recalls, “I really had no idea what to expect, but I thought I can’t really turn down writing a song with an icon, as it were. I went to the archives and I absolutely fell in love and got this idea of doing more. I didn’t want to overwhelm Nora with my enthusiasm, so I kept saying, ‘Wow, I love this song too, can I take this one? Can I work on this one?’ I think I walked out of the archives with, like, forty lyrics I wanted to work with. I emailed Nora from time to time telling her I’d like to do more and is there any way we can do a full length project. She kept saying, let’s see what happens in Philly, let’s see how it goes. After the concert, she was in tears, basically, and she came up to me and said, ‘I never knew my father’s work could sound like this.’”

Though there is vivid social commentary on a song like “Madonna on the Curb,” most of what Brooke chose has deeper personal roots in Guthrie’s life, starting with “My Sweet and Bitter Bowl,” a devotional track that deftly juggles the rapture and at times harsh realities of a life-long relationship. On the other hand, “More True Lovers Than One,” -- performed in an anthemic rock arrangement with friend and frequent collaborator Eric Brazilian -- is like Guthrie’s version of “Love The One You’re With,” inspired by the first time the native Oklahoman saw the ocean as well as by the girl beside him in the sand, who, he confessed in his journal, “was there to give this song its start, she knows her name better than I do.”

“All You Gotta Do Is Touch Me, “one of three songs Brooke performed at the Folksong Society benefit, is a litany of good natured come-ons, performed as a playfully flirtatious duet with folk-bluesman Keb Mo. But she gives the piece more gravity and honesty by adding a B-section to the lyrics incorporating the “whole works” lines she found elsewhere in Guthrie’s writings. That’s something Brooke does throughout *The Works*, finding complementary passages from different periods in Guthrie’s life to blend into a single song. Says Brooke, “Nora definitely gave me her blessing. Little by little, I would show her my ideas about combining things and/or re-editing things, and she was really on board with that. It was a little scary the first time, but she told me, ‘Woody would have been thrilled. I’m so glad somebody is doing what I had hoped with these words, making the most of them, combining things, pulling out the gems.’”

Finding a sound that acknowledged the roots of this material while reflecting Brooke’s own history was the next step: “For me to be happy, I did have to take it musically to where I live. That was the challenge and that was the fun. How do I make this really musically satisfying to myself yet stay true to these lyrics that are so classic? I wanted to track the songs live, I wanted there to be an immediacy to it, and I wanted to call the best musicians I could.”

She assembled a small, impressive crew of seriously seasoned musicians: keyboardist Joe Sample (Eric Clapton, B.B. King), bassist Christian McBride (Sting, Diana Krall) drummer Steve Gadd (Paul Simon, David Sanborn), and steel guitarist Greg Leisz (k.d. lang, Wilco). Virtuoso guitarist/singer Glenn Phillips duets with Brooke on the ballad “Sweetest Angel”; Derek Trucks contributes evocative slide playing to the gentle “New Star.” Brooke co-produced the album with studio legend and longtime friend Bob Clearmountain, who had first worked with Brooke on her 2001 album, *Steady Pull*. In two days of live-in-the-studio sessions, they built a sturdy foundation for *The Works*, marked by some remarkable, spontaneous playing – check out McBride’s eloquent upright bass lines on “Sweet and Bitter Bowl” or Sample’s soulful organ riffs on “More True Lovers Than One.”

Brooke also performs two songs of her own, “Little Bird” and “Taste Of Danger”:
“Somehow they just snuck in. ‘Little Bird’ was one of the first songs I wrote. It seemed to be coming directly from Woody. He was like this little bird singing all day long, he didn’t censor himself, he didn’t stop; he just kept doing his thing no matter what. Whenever I would hit a wall or get stuck on something, I would sing that song to myself and it completely freed me. ‘A Taste of Danger’ was the opposite side of him, the woody that I was finding in the archives, the philanderer, the sexy guy who couldn’t stay away from women. Everybody’s got that devil that takes over the wheel sometimes, and that was a big part of him as well. So I thought I should include that.”

“I feel like this is the love of my life, this record,” Brooke concludes. “It keeps surprising me. It kind of fell out of the heavens into my lap, and that’s what I love the most about it. I wasn’t thinking about it, I wasn’t planning it, it just happened, and it was unstoppable.”

-- Michael Hill