

MARY CUTRUFELLO—*FIREFLIES TILL THEY'RE GONE*

CUTRUFELLO COMES FULL CIRCLE WITH NEW COUNTRY EP

On a chilly Minneapolis day in November 2011, Mary Cutrufello sat down in a recording studio and began work on a short collection of country songs. It was a happy day and a fruitful session. “Finally,” Mary says, “I was making the country record I’d been wanting to make for years and years. The sound of the honky tonks is back!”

The Saint Paul-based Cutrufello, 42, has been known as a Texas honky-tonk heroine, a fiery Midwestern roots-rocker, and a powerhouse acoustic performer in her more than 20 years in the music business. Connecticut-raised and Yale-educated, she’s made records showcasing all of those facets of her identity as her musical journey has taken her from the East Coast to Houston and now to Minnesota. But it’s been over 15 years since the release of *who to love + when to leave*, her only straight country recording, in 1996. “It was time,” she says. “Even though I’ve gone on and done other things musically, that country sound and feel has never been far away. It’s always in my mp3 player, always in my Tele playing, and *always* in my singing. I really wanted to focus on the singing part this time out.”

Recorded at Bathtub Shrine Studio in Minneapolis by drummer/producer Greg Schutte with a minimum of accompaniment, *Fireflies Till They're Gone* brings Cutrufello's vocals to the forefront. Those who have only heard her full-throated rock wail may be surprised at the control and quiet intensity she brings to these performances.

“That’s the style. Write—or find—some great songs, crawl inside ‘em, and bring out their soul. There’s no need to stand on a speaker cabinet or a pool table to get your point across,” she says with a wink, knowing full well that’s exactly what she was doing when the Texas country world first came across her as a 23-year-old firebrand in 1993. “Well, yeah, you can do that, too...but this is a record for a different part of the night.”

Indeed. *Fireflies Till They're Gone* is a quiet trip through the soul of country's late-night melancholy, the sound of the last cigarette, the lonely nightcap at the kitchen table by the 40-watt light of the range hood. Four of Cutrufello's own songs share space with two classics of the genre to tell the story.

The album begins with “My Wife's the Only One Who Knows,” in which a husband has resigned himself to a life of cheating...and apparently, so has his wife. “Well, these things do happen,” Cutrufello says. “All the decisions seem okay, or at least defensible, at the time, but the next thing you know, you're way down some messed-up road, and it's not so easy to stop, or turn around, or back out of it. Country music used to be full of moral-dilemma songs like this. That's what attracted me to it, actually. And then of course I had to write a few of my own. This is one of my very favorites.” Austin bass legend Kevin Smith played upright for just the right vintage vibe, and Cutrufello added percussion by “rubbing my hands together in front of a really hot mic. I kept trying to explain to Greg that I wanted *this*, and finally he goes, okay, let's just mic what you're doing right there.”

“Eight Second Lives” is Cutrufello's ode to the rodeo. “The cowboys, sure, but also us pickers, singers and dancers, semi-pro ballplayers...all of us out on the Interstate in the wee hours coming home from another go-round with the Dream. The guy in the song is made up, but I have a friend who played

minor-league ball who swears it's someone he knew from his playing days...and wonders how I knew him, too. That's when I realized just how pervasive the Dream really is. How much "loneliness and glory" really resonates with so many people, whether they embrace it or just wish they had, or still could. It's like an article of faith that the Dream is still out there, no matter how it plays out for you." Gruff-voiced Saint Paul singer-songwriter Nick Hensley sings the harmony part.

"I Just Can't Fall Out of Love with You," says Cutrufello, "is about as elemental a country heartbreak tune as I know how to write. Everything about it—the chords, the melody, the sentiment, the pedal steel—is right down the middle. Pushing envelopes and mixing genres is cool, but sometimes nestling right into the pocket of a style is pretty cool, too. Jake Hoffman, a great steel player out of Boise that I worked with in the Pinto Bennett Band in 2009, played on this and he gets it *exactly* right!"

"On a Sunday in March, 55082" (the title refers to the ZIP code for Stillwater, MN) is "my mash note to the North Country. I was living in Austin (Texas) in March of 2008. Now, March is a great time to be in Texas, with the bluebonnets in bloom and the temperature pushing 80. It can also be a trying time to be up North, where winter really starts to outstay its welcome. But I missed Minnesota anyway, and to prove it, I wrote a love song about arguably the crappiest month of the year. As for the line, 'it's snowin' down in Dallas,' well, March is a good month for weird weather...but as it turns out, it really did snow in Dallas in March of that year." This recording features Cleve and Sweet Mary Hattersley and John Jordan of Austin's legendary Greezy Wheels. "It was one of those things where Cleve and Sweet Mary and I had bumped into each other a few times right in a row," Cutrufello relates. "I had this new song, and Cleve said let's cut it! So we did. I just love Sweet Mary's playing. So delicate. A *violin*, not a fiddle!"

Rounding out the album are two tasty covers from the Outlaw songbook, Willie Nelson's "It's Not Supposed to Be That Way," and Waylon's "Dreaming My Dreams With You," a sad and insightful song from the pen of Allen Reynolds. "The Outlaw movement spoke to me deeply when I moved to Texas," Cutrufello says. "The artists were rock stars, but the songs were *songs*. And guys like Waylon weren't afraid to have feelings, show emotion, or be vulnerable in a song." Neither song has a long history in Cutrufello's setlist. "We've played all kinds of Outlaw songs over the years. I think the fact that these two are relatively new to me as a singer gives them a certain spark and energy." That's Jake on steel again along with Steve Fulton on piano on the Willie tune, and the twin cellos of Minneapolis' Jelloslave on the Waylon tune.

Twin cellos?

"Sure! Jelloslave is a cool experimental band here in the Cities. Jacqueline [Ultan] and Michelle [Kinney] are great players who improvise off each other a lot. I love what they do. My take is totally live, one pass of guitar and vocals into one mic, but I wanted a pad of some sort to flesh it out. So I got Jackie and Michelle, who had never heard the tune before and didn't know its history, set up in the studio, played them my track, and told them to play what they felt. It's a bit unorthodox maybe, but I think it's beautiful."

Beautiful it is. With *Fireflies Till They're Gone*, Mary Cutrufello comes back to the country and makes her mark again.