





IRON & WINE

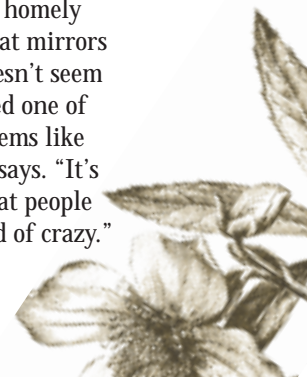
The Endless Private Universe

words by Matt Fink

“When you first start out, every metaphor is brand new to your portfolio. But it just gets harder and harder to do something that you haven’t done before,” says Sam Beam, discussing the new musical metaphors forged on *The Shepherd’s Dog*, by far the most elaborate and ornately imagined Iron & Wine release. Having made his reputation with the intimately homespun balladry and vivid imagery of his previous two full-length albums and two EPs, every Iron & Wine release leading up to 2006’s split release with Calexico has marked an incremental step towards the deftly layered arrangements and dark panoramic textures of his latest opus. Putting flesh on Beam’s singularly effecting skeletons, the result isn’t quite folk-rock, isn’t quite psych-rock and isn’t quite a singer/songwriter album, either. It’s simply Beam reinventing his creative universe, one character at a time.

Shy and soft-spoken, Beam answers questions with a disarming humility, sounding perfectly content to be living, writing and recording on his transplanted family homestead outside of Austin, Texas. But while his demeanor suggests that he’s the consummately humble craftsman, his work uncovers far greater ambitions. With characters big enough to fill the world he creates, his narratives are filled with fever-dream symbols and Biblical allusions—refurbished and re-imagined American myths that twist and tangle around each other. It’s a world you could spend weeks in and still not even find exactly where Beam himself figures in the mix. “I just don’t think my personal life is very interesting,” he laughs.

Maybe not, but the world created by *The Shepherd’s Dog* is anything but mundane, with an ominously rich backdrop of Holy Ghosts and devils, shepherds and homely birds, competing in an otherworldly chorus that mirrors the album’s cloaked sonic tone. Still, Beam doesn’t seem quite ready to believe that he is now considered one of America’s most imaginative tunesmiths. “It seems like such a fluke that I’m on the map anyway,” he says. “It’s kind of like a dream. I didn’t have any clue that people would react the way they did. It still feels kind of crazy.”





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Did the split album you made with Calexico get you thinking more in terms of band-sounding albums?

Yes and no. I did the Calexico thing, one, because I like their music, and I wanted to do some collaborations with them. But again, the whole reason I did it was because I was moving in that direction, too. Playing with them definitely taught me a lot. The new record would probably be different, but it would definitely be more of a step in that direction anyway.

Has it been difficult to take your songs from being a fairly straightforward, voice-and-guitar kind of thing and make them more elaborate?

It’s something that I enjoy. I definitely try to push myself. I don’t like putting out the same record every time. I want to do something different for the listener, but really for myself. There are only so many times you can play a D to a C chord. So it has been a natural progression for me. I’ve had to push myself into

some uncomfortable positions, but at the same time, it has never been labored.

Is it easy to get the people that are playing with you to share your vision for a song?

Well, it depends. A lot of my difficulty with playing with people initially was that it was all in my head and only existed with me overdubbing it on a four-track. You can’t really reproduce it. But over time, I’ve seen the benefits of collaboration. I’ve learned to enjoy what other people bring to the palette. In that sense, no, it’s not that difficult...because once you break that, you’ve learned to adapt to other people.

In general, as a lyricist, do you intend to communicate specific ideas or would you rather convey moods and images?

Well, it’s hard to say. In certain songs, it changes. But, in general, I don’t have too much to say, [laughs] so I suggest more than

“No one wants to be a writer anymore; they want to be rock and roll stars.”

explain. I think that’s more interesting anyway, as a listener.

Do you particularly mind if people don’t understand what you’re saying or if your songs are misinterpreted?

Well...I don’t really fancy the idea of people misinterpreting my songs, but at the same time, I try to leave them open for several interpretations. I don’t think people are going to draw a conclusion about a song that’s really contrary to what I was thinking. But as far as them not getting something...it’s not like an essay, where by the end of the spiel it’s like an argument. I treat it more like a poem than prose.

You’ve said that your writing on this record is more aggressive than on the past ones. What do you mean by that?

Well, I think [it’s] mostly with the instrumentation; there’s more of a pace in a lot of the songs. In some cases, there’s a lot more distortion. And the lyrics, in hindsight...I don’t seem to be trying to find peace with any given situation. There seems to be a little more violence, which is kind of a bizarre experience. But that’s OK, I guess.

Do you think you were reflecting a particularly confusing time or chaotic mood?

It’s kind of two-fold. One, I usually tool around with a guitar and then match a melody up with it, and the lyrics will usually come out of the mood of the song. So there were a lot of...more acoustic minor key songs. And also, I remember writing a lot of these songs around the time when Bush got re-elected, and it’s not like I was reacting to the political process, but I remember being so confused. I didn’t think he was going to win [laughs]. And it was one of those moments when you realize things aren’t the way you thought they were. So, I feel like there’s a bit of a chaotic feel to it, and it was borne of that, I bet.

Looking over the lyrics, I was struck by how much Biblical imagery turns up. Is that something that comes out subconsciously or is that really intentional on your part?

Well, both, I guess. I grew up in the Carolinas, so that’s my mythology. I went to Sunday school there, and those are the stories that you learn about life. Those are the characters that are in them. And it’s an American thing too, so when it comes up, I don’t shy away from it at all.

Is there a sense that as a songwriter, using those kinds of images is guaranteed to get a certain response?

It’s hard to say. I’m not really trying to instigate some kind of religious argument. For me it’s just that the stories exist, and

you can take them as poetry, or as stories, or as culture, and you can work against it. They’re out there. It’s modern.

Changing gears, did you have to shop your first record around a long time before you got interest from labels?

No, not at all, actually. It’s really an atypical story. Sub Pop called me [laughs]. And at first I was really flattered, because it has always been a dream to put out a record. But by the time it becomes a reality and you have to deal with the music industry, it’s not a dream anymore. So I was pretty hesitant. But I figured I didn’t have that much to lose.

Did you have to educate yourself about the business side of being a musician?

Definitely...definitely. I’m not stupid [laughs]. I got a couple of books, and I asked a lot of friends along the way that were in the business—people that didn’t have a common interest with mine. I got a lot of help.

Do you think it’s difficult to market someone like you, since your music sits between a lot of different genres?

Well, you can look at it two ways, like, “Fuck! What bin do we put it in?” Or you can look at it like it has parts that can appeal to a lot of different people. It depends on how you look at it, really. It depends how open-minded or close-minded you want to be about your promotional strategy.

With so many people involved—management, a label, publicity, et cetera—is it hard to keep business separate from the creative process?

No, not really. I went to art school, film school...so I’m sort of accustomed to the weird world where art and commerce meet and how to separate them. I mean, I definitely feel like I have to fight for my time, and there’s always a phone call that you have to take. You have to carve out your working time. But I’m kind of used to that now.

So would you have any advice for a songwriter starting out right now?

Not really. Not something like, “Make sure your contract looks like this.” But it’s always helpful to concentrate on your craft. If you don’t have songs, you don’t have much to work with. I mean, The Beatles split up about a decade before most of the people buying records now were born. They’ve grown up with these icons. No one wants to be a writer anymore; they want to be rock and roll stars. But you’ve got to put your work in. That’s the way it goes. ★