

Exodus of Venus
Elizabeth Cook

Elizabeth Cook didn't quite know what she was doing. But she knew there were songs, and they had to get out. Six even years since her critically acclaimed **Welder**, as well as much personal tumult, there were songs that needed to be born.

"If anything, (**Exodus**) is a pledge of allegiance for the bad girls and the Homecoming Queens who got caught in a scandal. It's a bill of rights, and a testimony for those good girls who got away with more than they should have.

"I'm slow, and getting slower," laughs the lanky blond, unapologetically. "I'm taking my time, really drilling down. There were nine versions of 'Methadone Blues.' I've *never* done that before. I love that entrenchment and dedication – and I wasn't going to do any less than what needed to be done."

From Dexter Green's (also the album's producer) opening electric guitar, equal parts foreboding and fraught, "Exodus of Venus" hurls a churlish witness to erotic upheaval and the drives that subsume our best notions. "Exodus" is an exhortation of sexual surrender that pushes past the brink of reason.

For fans of the Florida-born'n'raised Cook, a Grand Ole Opry regular, SiriusXM Outlaw Country hostess and David Letterman favorite, **Exodus of Venus** will be something of a shock. If she maintains the tang of her drawl, what emerges – beyond Cook's always vibrant and vivid sense of detail – is a song cycle soaked in turpentine, musk and honey.

From the sweltering tumble of B-3 on the funky, shuffling "Methadone Blues" to the elegiac dignity of "Tabitha Tuder's Mama" and the Velvet Underground on fire bristle of "Brokedown in London on the M25," Cook's shouldering a deeper passion for the state of living today – and the crashing into the wall reality we all go through. If in the past Cook relied on wit and a certain dogpatch charm, **Venus** commands a raw knuckled truth that's even more searing.

"There hasn't been a lot to laugh about," confesses the effervescent songwriter who once penned "It Takes Balls To Be A Woman" with equal parts Dolly Parton pluck and Loretta Lynn brio. "Things have been heavy and dark, and I feel really different. I aspire to be more than clever or dark or poignant, but to be *honest*. I want that to supersede everything.

"Emotionally, mentally, physically – it's all been tested," she continues, "and it set me up straight. It was hard, but it's a good thing. Really hard lessons in resilience... *All* of it is in the record."

That resilience rises like steam from the narcotic "Dyin'," as Cook professes her by any means necessary strength, "Gonna be a diamond, gonna make hay/ If you don't like it, gonna do it anyway/ Gonna put on the pistols, gonna cause a scene/ Gonna goddamn save the queen..." Flowing from there to the attenuated starkly haunted "Evacuation," a slow build of defiance that eschews the easy for holding onto one's roots – and casting a parallel with New Orleans' own spirit that mines a deep desire to live, die and celebrate where one's essence lies.

"During the years when family was dying and houses were burning down and I was in divorce court and David Letterman was calling and doing shows with Anthony Bourdain, the whiplash was almost too much," Cook admits. "To keep up with all this great stuff, while I'd been sheltered for such a long time from tragedy, it transforms you. It really does."

Cook emerged a tougher, wiser woman. If her years as a rough stock Minnie Pearl, part comedienne, part chronicler of life beyond the urban hipeoisie, had cast her first glass of champagne ebullience as a sparkling presence of hillbilly authenticity, **Exodus of Venus** suggests a woman tapping into the force of her true power. Frank, stumbling, angry, exhausted, triumphant, she owns the ragged edges, the torn seams and worn thin places.

Joined by hard country soul singer Patty Loveless on “Straight Jacket Love,” she catcalls a frantic surrender, “On and off the wagon/Lighting fire to grease/Knives are made for stabbing/Arms are made for peace...” as the CMA Female Vocalist maintains perfect mountain harmony. “I blind emailed her management, fingers crossed – because I heard her voice all over this record – then sent her two or three songs, saying, ‘This is my record. If you hear anything...’

“She honed right in on ‘Straight Jacket Love.’ Maybe it felt like some real dark Appalachian kind of thing. She has such authentic texture and power when she sings. She shows me what I’m trying to do...”

Not that Cook needs any teaching. A kid singer in her late-in-life parents’ country music aspirations, she learned bar life early – and getting by with a pretty smile and a good line. Her mother – diagnosed with uterine cancer at 42 while pregnant with Elizabeth – and “raging alcoholic Daddy” had big plans.

“I’m the miracle child sent to heal my father, and I was bewildered by that. I was a princess, but the king was a monster. And if things weren’t okay, I was failing.”

After years of getting by on charm, with dysfunction part of the family’s functionality, it all came apart in Cook’s hands. But in the wreckage of death and divorce, Cook found liberation and emancipation.

“I’m not trying to be the good girl anymore, and that brought some joy to all of it. I almost care more – or different,” she explains. “These songs are more poignant. They’re honest, and all about compassion or grace. For myself, and from a place of experience. Not that *any* of it was wrong, but I look back and have pride for all that happened and what I’ve survived.”

On “Cutting Diamonds,” Cook tosses the declaration “She has no line on polished pearls/Those are for the proper girls...” like confetti. Then on the kick’n’snare’n’piano roll underscored “Orange Blossom Trail,” she kicks up a bit of savory dust, with the celebratory toast, “Players talk while Thieves set sail/It’s the fragrant air of the underbelly/ On the Orange Blossom Trail...”

“Living on the shady side, there’s a comfort level I have in that kind of environment,” Cook offers. “That’s where the reckless or the brave both say, ‘Yeah, why not?’ I’m doing what I’m supposed to do – (for me, writing these songs) is a necessity. It’s the only power, the only tool, the only weapon I have.

“Listen! We’re going from Little Feat to REM, then put Appalachian harmonies on it. It’s all funky grooves with dark guitars, burning guitars. People were tweeting me, ‘Are you keeping it country?’ And the truth is: No, I’m keeping it real. Not to a genre, but to what these songs are.

“It’s an imperfect balancing act: a lesson in compassion and grace and tolerance. You know, all these songs are either requiring it or exhibiting it.”

Cook laughs as she says this, knowing full well it’s in banging into the furniture and stumbling down the halls that one learns to walk through the dark.

“Get out there and make mistakes – and don’t apologize! I’m not ashamed. *This* happened – and I’ll tell you all about it.”