



## DEEP SEA DIVER

### BILLBOARD HEART

#### Bio

In the middle of July 2023 in a Los Angeles studio, Deep Sea Diver mastermind Jessica Dobson took a guitar solo but somehow felt nothing. Just days earlier, her Seattle band played a series of semi-secret shows for devotees at a hometown bar, de facto rehearsals for cutting a new record. The sets had gone well, but, almost immediately, the sessions didn't. The songs' essence seemed muddled, Dobson's conviction lost somewhere in the 1,000 miles between Southern California and the home studio she shares with partner, drummer, and frequent cowriter Peter Mansen. On that first night in Los Angeles, she broke down, wondering what she was doing there, what her band could do to fix it. For the first time ever, Deep Sea Diver retreated, heading home without an album. Did they need to scrap it all, to begin again with new material?

Not at all: Following a brief break, Dobson found a renewed sense of self, a trust in her vision for her band and songs and her ability to capture them. After that Los Angeles hiccup, longtime collaborator Andy Park asked Dobson how the new stuff was going over an early fall dinner. She admitted she needed help. In that humbling confession, she soon found ways of working that helped her reimagine and reinvigorate Deep Sea Diver and led directly to the power and brilliance of *Billboard Heart*, Deep Sea Diver's fourth album and first for Sub Pop. It is a coup, a triumph over self-doubt in which what first felt like failure became an opportunity to find new freedom, belief, and strength. You can hear it in each of these 11 songs, the beating heart that makes everything here feel like a new anthem for finding your own way forward.

The cocksure Bad Seeds swagger of "Shovel," the tender mercies of "Loose Change," the serpentine machinations of "Let Me Go," where Dobson tangles with fellow guitar dynamo Madison Cunningham: *Billboard Heart* immediately puts Deep Sea Diver in the company of St. Vincent, TV on the Radio, and Flock of Dimes, bands that have found newly ornate and magnetic ways to make indie rock by discarding notions of how it must sound or what it must say. Dobson punches through her past here. As she howls during *Billboard Heart*'s rapturous title track, she is "welcoming the future by letting go of it."

Exactly three years before Dobson's galvanizing dinner with Park, Deep Sea Diver issued its third album, 2020's *Impossible Weight*, via ATO, the colossal indie imprint that has helped My Morning Jacket, Alabama Shakes, and King Gizzard build careers across the last quarter-century. It was a significant step up for a band that had self-released its first two LPs. The surge of resources resulted in a groundswell of exposure, even a spot on *Billboard* charts.

That success, though, caused Dobson to doubt her impulses, to begin thinking about what an idea's impact or reception might be as much the strength of the idea itself. During this period of second-guessing, she and Mansen sat near the wide windows of their Seattle living room, with her on piano as he hammered a guitar nearby. "See in the Dark"—a song about coveting your

own notions, despite the occasional sense they're slipping away—emerged in that single sitting, its gothic elegance and pop grandeur proffering a blueprint for what else could come.

That moment of domestic creation proved essential for several reasons. Before *Impossible Weight*, Dobson and Mansen wrote many of Deep Sea Diver's songs together; this was a return to that bond, which carried over to more than half of *Billboard Heart*. What's more, the pair began recording more at home, too. They borrowed microphones and a small clutch of essential gear to capture guitars and vocals in their basement. When talks later began in earnest with Park following the Los Angeles debacle, Dobson began revisiting those earlier recordings, realizing that she had captured so much of that ineffable spark at home, where the atmosphere was of her own design. Mansen and Park helped convince her these weren't just good enough to use but riveting in their realness. These early versions became templates and blueprints to build upon and frame, plus a way for Dobson to believe again in the material and, most important, herself.

And from end to end, the material on *Billboard Heart* is astonishing. The title track is the one song Deep Sea Diver actually finished in Los Angeles. It's a radiant and magnificent thing, the billowing synths of member Elliot Jackson and tunneling pedal steel of guest Greg Leisz pushing up an anthem for fearlessly advancing into the future, as best you can. "Emergency" links hardcore's famous vim to electroclash's instant allure, Dobson's italicized voice racing like a gust of wind. Her brief guitar solo at the end is an all-timer, a few hiccupping notes suddenly moving like a sports car in terrifyingly tight corners. Tender and vulnerable, "Tiny Threads" is a sweeping anthem for anyone trying to hold anything together—life, love, themselves. "If it haunts me, let it haunt me," Dobson sings softly over a stillness framed only by bass and noise. She lets her guitar careen into feedback, then steadily sculpts it into something tuneful. It's a lifetime of anxiety and sublimation, crystallized into 10 seconds. *Billboard Heart* feels that way at large.

For a minute there, Dobson let that mix of art and commerce we call the music industry cloud her judgment and interfere with her impulses, a common enough story for anyone whose decades of work suddenly yield success. She found her way out of that wormhole by embracing newness, whether that meant practicing songwriting as if it were collegiate homework, believing in her skills recording at home, or playing bass herself because the band had blown so much money during those aborted Los Angeles sessions. (N.B. The big but elastic bass lines are a consistent highlight here, so: good choice.)

Mostly, she let go of the fear that comes when we think about our jobs, no matter what they are, and remembered that making music is less work than a way of reckoning and playing with the world, of healing and finding other ways forward. *Billboard Heart* emerged when Dobson trusted her instincts, a personal breakthrough that prompted an artistic one. It is, in turn, the best Deep Sea Diver album yet, a defiant and brilliant exclamation mark at the end of a long period of wandering.