**Shannon Lay *August***

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**Sub Pop Records**

There is an entire sub-genre of poetry devoted to rivers and their persistent, meditative flow. Emily Dickinson’s “My River Runs to Thee” compares them to the cycle of life, while Alfred Tennyson’s “The Brook” deems them eternal and Kathleen Raine’s “The River” muses on the dream-state they evoke. For transcendent folk-pop artist Shannon Lay, the river is all of the above: It’s the metaphor driving her latest album, the exquisitely uplifting *August* (Sub Pop Records, out August, 23rd**)**—which doubles as an aural baptism renewing her purpose for making music. “I always picture music as this river. Everyone’s throwing things into this river, it’s a place you can go to and feed off of that energy,” she says, “and feel nourished by the fact that so many people are feeling what you’re feeling. It’s this beautiful exchange.”

The album’s name, *August*,refers tothe month in 2017 when Lay quit her day job and fully gave herself over to music. This was her liberation as an artist, and the album is devoted to paying that forward to her listeners. “It’s a thank you to the universe,” says the L.A. artist. The title track is a mystical, folk-psych expression that builds into a gentle gallop. “Open the doors that you cannot,” she sings with a feathery lightness. Notes Lay: “Everyone is capable of so much, but we have a tendency to stand in our own way.” The steady movement of the song captures the rapids of a river. “I was thinking about creating something with momentum,” she continues. “I started out with just the guitar and Laena Geronimo came in and added that gorgeous drone and when Nick Murray put his drum touch in there it was exactly what I never knew it would be.”

Lay may be the most chilled-out artist you’ll ever meet. Despite fronting her tranquil solo act *and* being a guitarist/singer in the indie-rock band Feels, she never pressures herself to overachieve. (Even though she regularly does—in a glowing review, Pitchfork anointed her last album, *Living Water* “captivating.”) “I learned to not beat myself up if I’m not writing all the time,” she says. “Music really does come in these waves of inspiration.” During the album’s graceful finale, “The Dream,” Lay addresses embracing uncertainty. “I’ve always felt like a lucky person, life is a dream and it is yours to manipulate. Create the world you want to live in, create your own reality, create your path. We have so much more control that we could ever imagine.”

With her life devoted to music, the artist often spends hours a day simply playing the guitar, challenging herself to become better “It just feels so good, doing something that is so much bigger than myself. I think so much of music is that, realizing that it’s coming from something beyond and you are just the messenger” says Lay, who took guitar lessons at age 13, which introduced her to Neil Young and The Beatles. After high school, she moved from Redondo Beach, Calif., to Hollywood and joined an indie-rock band. “It was an energy I needed to release,” she says. The exact type of energy may have changed, but her drive hasn’t. Her recent practice pays off transcendently in songs such as “Nowhere,” a wistful kindred spirit to “August” that evokes Nick Drake. “It’s about getting somewhere and not doing anything or meeting anyone,” Lay says, “the idea of just having a quieter journey, zero expectation.”

There are other lovely, solitary moments on *August*. The simple, soprano narrative “Shuffling Stoned,” for instance, serves no grander purpose than to capture a snapshot of the time Lay walked into a cool record store in New York City and watched the guy working there buy some weed off his dealer, as “this tiny, little spider crawled up on the records—it was such a cool, weird moment.” And “Sea Came to Shore,” in which Lay’s guitar finds its foil in a slightly askew violin, immediately teleports you, alone, to a breezy shore. “The ocean,” adds Lay, “is a good reminder of how small we are.”

*August* was mostly written in three months, during Lay’s first solo tour for *Living Water*. “For the most part, all of the songs were just guitar and voice,” she says. In keeping with the humbled, contemplative nature of *August*, most tracks clock-in at three minutes or less. She saved indulgence for the production. “Some songs as they were had this room to grow,” says Lay, who recorded the album with her longtime friend, musician Ty Segall at his home studio on the East Side. “I believe whoever you record with tends to affect the mood of music and Ty really brought this jovial sense that I hadn’t really explored yet,” she says. “Once you get rolling with him, he just throws these ideas at the wall. And you’re like, ‘I would never have thought of that!’ I couldn’t have hoped for a better guide and energy to help create this record.”

In this sense, the album’s opener, the mantra-like “Death Up Close” is also its centerpiece. “With that song, I wanted to recognize that everyone else is going through something and reflect on that. Don’t be so close-minded to think you’re the only one who’s got issues, in fact, find comfort in the thought that everyone is on their own journey” Lay explains. What starts as an Eastern-influenced song morphs into an avant-garde sound bath. “I had this idea of the violin ascending. Then Mikal Cronin came in with the saxophone and just blew me away. I love the idea of building a song like that, take people by surprise.”

“A lot of my friends who are really tough have admitted that they shed a tear when they hear my songs, and I think that really speaks to the visceral aspect of folk music,” Lay says. “It’s this ancient form of expressing yourself.” Think of *August* as a warm hug for your psyche. “I want to create as much music as I can,” she says, “and leave this spot by the river where people can go sit and enjoy.”