

Kris Delmhorst *Blood Test*

On her first album of original material since 2008's *Shotgun Singer*, acclaimed singer/songwriter Kris Delmhorst consciously strips things down. Recorded in Brooklyn with a band composed of guitarist/vocalist Anders Parker (who also co-produced), drummer Konrad Meissner and multi-instrumentalist Mark Spencer, *Blood Test* is a poetic record with a warm, live sound that complements a collection of songs speaking to presence, empathy, broadening perspective and striving for authentic experience in a frenetic time.

Recent years have seen the broadening of Delmhorst's perspective as she and husband (fellow songwriter) Jeffrey Foucault welcomed a daughter in 2008. And while *Blood Test* is not explicitly about becoming a parent (only a few songs even subtly reference it), it is unquestionably an element of Delmhorst's worldview that shines in her newest songs.

Blood Test joins Delmhorst's catalog of nine albums and EPs released since 1998, spanning a range of band configurations and musical genres. She has also recorded vocals, cello and fiddle on over 50 albums from artists such as Peter Wolf, Mary Gauthier, Chris Smither and Lori McKenna, and she records and performs with Jeffrey Foucault and Peter Mulvey as Redbird.



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Where did the songs on *Blood Test* originate? Is there a thematic through-line to the songs as a collection?

These songs are the first batch I've written after becoming a mother, and for much of the time leading up to the recording I thought I was making what a friend of mine calls a "What's-in-the-fridge?" record—just throwing together whatever unrelated songs happened to be at hand. It was only in the process of recording them, and listening to them thousands of times, that I really understood how linked they are. These songs all have something to do with taking stock of big-picture life questions: where am I, how did I get here, where am I going, what have I lost, what have I gained, what parts of all this really matter? Some songs are from an individual perspective and some from a collective one, but they all swirl around that central idea of a moment of reckoning.

What does your writing process generally look like?

I tend to have a ton of progress at once, like a row of plants. I often start songs in the car or when I'm out and about, walking, running, working in the garden... I record quick snippets into my phone and dig through the piles

later. Finishing them is the part that feels like heavy lifting and I usually need to leave home to focus on it. "92nd St" is the first one I wrote in its entirety after having my daughter and that made it a beautiful shining beacon of hope that I had come through to the other side of that event still able to write. That might seem obvious, but I think it's a fear most artists have.

How would you describe the recording sessions?

My last few records have been casts-of-thousands, kitchen-sink affairs. This time I was interested in paring things down to their elements—less flesh, more bone. So it's just the four of us on this one: my friend Anders Parker and Konrad Meissner and Mark Spencer, who he introduced me to. I first met Konrad and Mark on the first day of recording—we just shook hands and got right to making music! We did the basic tracking in three days, with only a few overdubs, playing the songs and letting the imperfections be part of the story. We were new to each other as a band, and the songs were new to everyone, many of them even to me. So there's a freshness and spirit of discovery in the tracks that I think shines through and gives them a lot of life. It's a

situation that requires intense focus, listening, responsiveness if it's going to work. Everyone involved from the players to the engineer brought these things and more.

You've lived in Massachusetts for the past 20 years, but were born and raised in Brooklyn, NY—which is also where you recorded *Blood Test*. What was it like recording the album back where you grew up?

The great studio where we made the record, Brooklyn Recording, turned out to be right in my old stomping grounds. I was staying with friends in my old neighborhood, getting coffee at the deli I used to go to in high school, and then walking to the studio. It was a kind of vertigo feeling to be working there, a little dizzying, but also really satisfying; it somehow completed a circle. There are some songs on the record that refer way back to that time in my life—"92nd St" most directly—and it felt like time folding in on itself in a fascinating way.

What effect would you say your New York upbringing has had on your perspective as an artist?

As an arty kid New York was an amazing place to grow up. I used to go on epic walks around the city—hours, miles, universes. There was incredible freedom and possibility in being an invisible, anonymous set of senses just roaming around and taking it all in. I think that the feeling of breadth, of limitless variation and possibility, were formative to who I am as a person, and maybe as a writer too. The way the city demonstrated to me that you actually can see or do or be anything, on any given day, and the way that so many incredibly disparate things are piled right up on top of each other. That created a feeling of richness and freedom and possibility that I still get high on when I spend time there. That kind of defines the tradition I come from—that vibrant collage.

Were you involved with the NYC music scene while you were living there?

I was a pretty serious student of classical cello and piano. I didn't play guitar or write songs at all until my twenties. But starting in my early teens I absorbed a ton of different music. I would go to all the little clubs downtown, see the show and hang around afterwards to talk to the band. What I wanted was to *be* the band, but I didn't realize it at the time. Looking back I can see the way I was drawn like a sleepwalker to all the artists and musicians I could find. I wanted to be near them, with them, of them. Those were my people, you know? But I didn't know how to find my way in there yet.

It actually took leaving the city to find my own way into being a musician. I lived on a remote subsistence farm in Maine and learned traditional tunes on the fiddle, worked on a sailboat and learned old sea songs, picked up a guitar and started making up music to keep myself company on very long winter nights with no electricity and no other humans for miles. When I eventually got to Boston and started playing open mics, it was like the gates opened and I felt welcomed into my tribe for the first time—all the other people who spent their childhoods geeking out over the radio, learning songs, obsessing about lyrics. As a kid in NYC, it was amazing to have so many creative people around, and I could sort of fill up on that energy from the sidelines, and learn from it. But finally being a participant in a creative community... That's where I was trying to get my whole life.

A lot has happened since you wrote and released an album of original material... For one thing, you and your husband, Jeffrey Foucault, have had a daughter. How has that affected your approach to your music?

Well, I would say that it's an inescapable ingredient of where I'm writing from. Becoming a parent affords a dramatically new view of yourself and your place—in your life, your family, as an artist, in the continuum of all life. I don't know how that perspective could *not* inform any creative person's work once they have it. But it's not something I've written directly about much, at least not yet. The last song on the album, "Lighthouse," is about the profound shift when suddenly there's someone in the world you're more worried about than you are about yourself. There are ways that being an artist and a parent is difficult, because both the child and the work are 24/7 concerns, and they're often demanding contradictory things of you at the same time. But the flip side is the way that art and parenthood inform each other, and in the best moments I'm finding they each help the other situation feel deeper and more connected.

We all experience the times when something comes along to make us reassess the big picture; having a child is just one version of it. You go along in your life and everything's leading up to the next thing, but you can't see how it all fits or what it's all for. Then there's some big shift, and for a moment it's like you're seeing your life from an airplane, with enough distance to see the patterns and the overall shape of what's happening. These songs are like letters written from that fleeting, dizzying, revelatory moment before the clouds move back in and you're back in the day to day.

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