

Hannah Frances
Keeper of the Shepherd
August 2023

Amidst peeling birch, sundried and fragrant husks, a flooded riverbed, and a solemn, wet, echoing cave, Hannah Frances returns with a dense and daring new album, *Keeper Of The Shepherd*.

At times raucous and toiling, and at times hypnotizing in its softness, *Keeper of The Shepherd* is a careful excavation through the ruins of Frances' past as she carves out what's been lost and buried, praising the possibility of a life more whole. This album is a rebirth in every sense of the word, showcasing Frances' virtuosic songwriting, arrangement, and musicality, while displaying a deep and churning emotional vulnerability. Across its seven sprawling tracks, here is an album that begs to be listened to on repeat, each subsequent turn revealing a new heart-splitting revelation, each song calling back to the one before it with a biting and clever clarity. In a gesture of frank and determined curiosity, Frances asks: What is mine to take hold of, and what is meant to be left behind? How do I love without losing myself? How do I heal what's been broken and feel myself worthy again?

Frances was a devoted and eager artist from the age of 5, taking dance, piano, trumpet and voice lessons, and starring in musical theater productions. While heavily shaped by the influence of her mother, a professional pianist and music educator, Frances saw her participation in performing arts as the most natural expression for herself, even as a child. She continued to sing and perform in theater and jazz band, and was heavily involved in the School of Rock program. After high school, Frances spent one year studying performing arts at Savannah College of Art and Design before dropping out. "As you should from art school." From there, she used her education money to launch herself into what she fittingly calls her "Patti Smith life". She moved to the East Village, did an NYU songwriting program for a summer, and then began nannying full time. She was 19.

By that time, Frances had already begun writing her own songs, confident in her innate and embodied relationship to her voice and singing. "But my guitar playing, that was learned," she explains. The discovery of Nick Drake and Joni Mitchell opened up a portal to guitar playing that Frances hadn't yet found. Using the expansive and infinite repertoire of Joni Mitchell's open guitar tunings, Frances slowly built an entirely new relationship to the instrument, and something clicked into place. "I found so much of myself. I was like, 'Oh this is how I want to play guitar, because it just *feels* so good'. It was all based on feeling, all based on intuition."

She released her first recorded project in 2017, and continued to record and release throughout the years following. Her last album, *Bedrock*, released independently in May of 2021 preluded a stark year with very little writing, that left Frances poised for something new.

Keeper of The Shepherd came to Frances at first in small pieces, and then all at once. After tinkering with “Bronwyn”’s ambling guitar part for almost a year, Frances finished writing the song in January of 2022, and “Floodplain” came shortly after (it’s common practice for Frances to write her albums in chronological order, with the track list almost exactly matching the order in which the songs were created). Frances honed those two songs over a summer of touring, tapping into nuanced themes, concepts, and textures as she spent more time with them. That fall, she moved back to Vermont with a clear conviction to finish writing an album. She immediately booked recording sessions with her friend Kevin Copeland, and finished writing the rest of the songs in 2 weeks, prompted only by song titles that had come through to her unprovoked.. “It felt very divined,” she says. “I remember laying on the beach here in the summer and I said to Elijah [Berlow], ‘I’m gonna make a project called “Keeper of The Shepherd”’, and I hadn’t even written the song yet.” Paired with the pressure of a looming deadline, having a conceptual container helped pragmatically frame the writing process in a way Frances hadn’t experimented with in her previous work. “I treated it like a thesis. I treated it very psychologically and objectively.” The album was recorded in Copeland’s home studio in Arlington, Vermont in two week-long chunks, spread out over the course of a month.

Despite the speed with which this album was both written and recorded, *Keeper Of The Shepherd*, is unbelievably gallant in its breadth of feeling and sound. In what feels like a grand act of generosity, Frances reveals some of her hardest truths confronted over the last several years, giving name to the disquiet that is often kept hidden – grief spurred by the death of her father, internalized patriarchal harm from years of religious trauma, and a collection of hollow, shorn relationships. “How can I be deeper within myself?” is the question Frances seems to return to across *Keeper Of The Shepherd*.

On “Floodplain”, over dancing acoustic guitar and shimmering violins Frances bellows “How long have I kept you? / How long have I kept the light on? How long have I been gone?” On “Vacant Intimacies” a tumbling and explosive anthem that highlights Hunter Diamond on saxophone, Frances pleads for a release from the patterns born from past wounds, as she urgently repeats “grasping to the absence/haunted by the lack”. “I just feel like I gave myself away and erased myself in love,” she says. Death too returns to Frances across *Keeper*, haunting and all encompassing. “Death is a husk/holding the shape of my life,” she sings on “Husk”, with such steady assuredness, and no trace of fear.

There is no singular way Frances grips us with her guitar, or her storytelling. Her voice is colossal in its strength, piercing, warm, and always poised to embrace, even in its quietest

expression. The momentum is constantly moving and shifting across *Keeper Of The Shepherd*. By the end, we're left nearly breathless, shaken by all the ways in which she's managed to hold tight to a feeling, and fling one song into the next.

It's hard work Frances has done here, unearthing the muddled mess of loss and dizzying displacement. In the end, the gift she gives herself is a gift we too might find in our listening: permission to release yourself from the burden of your past, the clinging weight of what no longer becomes you, and feel yourself open up, wide and gaping, with a song hurdling out of your throat. *Keeper of the Shepherd* is both a prayer and a shield. We are carefully freed from the ruin of what's hurt us, and kept safe, here, in a shining landscape more vast than we ever could have imagined.