

Steel Tubes, Green Space and Sarah Palin

A Q&A with singer-songwriter Dar Williams

Dar Williams fans, rejoice: There's a new album. And no, she hasn't sold out.

True, producer Brad Wood brings some fresh sounds. But *Promised Land* brims with vintage moments like "It's Alright," when pop hooks meet Williams' complex lyrics.

In contrast to the sounds of "It's Alright" or "The Buzzer," a driving tune that mines the history of psychology, the album also contains the traditional sound of "Holly Tree" and the mellow "The Tide Falls Away," not to mention the lovely cover of Hedwig and the Angry Inch's "Midnight Radio." *EW* spoke to her at a break in the *Promised Land* tour.

How did the contemporary art museum Dia:Beacon inspired these songs?

Dia:Beacon is about 7 miles from my house, and I love it! When I was younger, I was in an exhibit with my dad, who used to curate modern art. The paintings got progressively less representational, and we were coming into the first part of the 20th century, to WWI, and my dad said, "We just came to a point where representation was no longer sufficient." That, I thought, was beautiful. I love where the mind has a departure point into pure abstraction. Contemporary art pulls my mind out and forces me to make associations like, "What is the connection between world war and corrugated steel tubing?"

What about the artwork in the album?

It's honoring the world that I was steeped in as I wrote this record. My neighbor, who made me a little working habitat, is an artist, and my friend Val has beautiful paintings. Then I was in a café near my house, and I saw something called *Cervical Spine* that I thought would be perfect for "Holly Tree." I thought, my goodness, here's this thing at the local café, here are my artist neighbors, here's my friend Val — it was a great coming together.

I'm curious about "Holly Tree."

There's a book where they did a financial study of the [Salem] witches, and most of them were women coming upon an inheritance of some kind or another.

For the record, I'm truly disgusted by this YouTube thing with Sarah Palin's minister putting something on her to dispel witchcraft. Continuing to frame witchcraft as the enemy when it was an incarnation created as a way to reinforce not just a religion but a socioeconomic structure, seeing a continuation of this phobia with no awareness of the lever that it provided in history — a lever used to torture and intimidate and keep a specific economic system going — that's cynical and sadistic.

So that's what the song's about: There's a woman giving birth, and the next thing you know, there's nobody there. Now there's a farm, and the pastor's coming to give his blessing to the new landowner.



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So ... the baby's dead?

Yes! That's what happens when the persecutors show up instead of the doctor. Those are the consequences we pay all the time for our cynical politics. When I write about this stuff, it's cautionary — the way we bring stories into relief to caution ourselves about what we're capable of. To see somebody flaunting that capability, and the phobic response to it, is so sick.

What about the green world, as in the new song "Summerday"?

This is a specific community that I live in, a community concerned with making sure the green world exists. When you have a child, it's so tempting to get out your bulk card, go to a big box thing, throw up your hands and say, "I'm feeding a family!" A lot of people are getting around that by growing their own garden. It's how to keep a vision of the world while doing the frazzled housewife thing. It's parents who are serious about not being great parents if we don't keep our green space, our own imaginations and space for the kids' imaginations.

What does "The Buzzer" mean in terms of Iraq and planetary destruction?

It's an antithesis. The last eight years have been about an anti-government — they're multinational, they don't care about this nation or its security or its stability, but one of the things that came out was an understanding of personal responsibility that's more acute. I believe in good government, but I also believe that we have to participate. We've been in crisis mode for a long time now, and, and ... Obama '08!

EW

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