

# Loma

## *Loma*

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Loma's self-titled debut reveals a band obsessed with songs as *sound*. There are endless details to discover here, stoked by the album's urgent and searching lyrical themes (exquisitely delivered by the translucent voice of Emily Cross); and on headphones, the album feels both intimate and expansive, like casting your eyes over a detailed painting on a vast canvas.

It's also the product of a joint pilgrimage around the globe by fellow touring musicians. Jonathan Meiburg is best known as the singer of Shearwater; Cross and the multi-instrumentalist and engineer Dan Duszynski form Cross Record, originally from Chicago. They met through Ben Goldberg (of Badabing! records, who helped launch the careers of Tune-Yards, Beirut, and Sharon Van Etten), who sent Meiburg Cross Record's 2015 album *Wabi-Sabi*, which led to the two bands traveling together across America and Europe throughout Shearwater's 2016 tour for *Jet Plane and Oxbow*, often crammed into the same van. The tour was Cross Record's first, but Meiburg was shocked by their maturity and confidence. "I couldn't believe all that sound was coming out of two people," he says. "They had their own world, their own rules, and they slayed every night. They were mesmerizing."

While in the van or at soundchecks, they shared their musical knowledge and love of nature and animals. "I think Jonathan is one of the most special people we've ever met," says Cross. "It's hard not to like him. He has such a curious mind." And after an especially memorable show in Belgium, Meiburg approached Cross and Duszynski about working together. "I fell in love with their music," he admits, "and I wanted to know how they did it."

They convened for two weeks in the house outside Austin where Cross Record recorded *Wabi-Sabi* to see what would happen, recording "Joy", the gorgeously ambivalent "I Don't Want Children", and the beginnings of five more songs. An album seemed surprisingly imminent. "There was something special about the combination of the three of us," Meiburg says, "and very different from either of our bands. But I think we were afraid to say so out loud, for fear of jinxing it."

For the next few months, they convened for two weeks at a time, shaping new songs and casting away others. It was a strangely charged time, not least because when the album began, Cross and Duszynski were a married couple, but their relationship came to an end during the sessions—an atmosphere Meiburg found challenging but strangely inspiring. "There was no drama where I was concerned," he recalls, "and I didn't really know what was happening; but there was an unspoken feeling of urgency, and a sense that a big change was coming for all of us, and I think we all tried to channel that into the work." The house was out in the country, off a dirt road, surrounded by the sounds of birds and wind; and it seemed like a world of its own—full of joy, fear, and heartbreak.

The place itself became the album's muse. "I got sort of obsessed with capturing every sound inside and outside the house," recalls Meiburg. ("Remember the whippoorwills?" asks Cross; Meiburg doesn't know offhand if they made it into the album or not). From the cicadas and frogs of "Relay Runner" to the whooshes of wind and leaves on "White Glass" and "Black Willow", *Loma* often sounds as if you're not so much listening to it as living inside it. "The 'dog solo' on 'Sun Dogs' is one of my favorite moments," Meiburg says; "and I remember Emily making a drum out of the cast-iron pot we cooked breakfast in. There were

no rules; nobody was the designated drummer, or the bass player, or the guitarist. This freedom from their usual roles gave the trio a fresh rulebook to invent from. “Jonathan's melodies were so different from the ones I'd choose,” says Cross. “He has a rich knowledge of songwriting. My approach is more unrefined and experimental, and it created a strong balance.”

Meiburg had never written for someone else before. “What a relief!” he laughs. “I was scared at first, but I tried to project myself into things I imagined Emily might say, or sing, or think—and in the end we landed on a voice that's not quite her—but it's not me either.” Cross, meanwhile, found a freedom in singing someone else's words. “Usually vocals are scary for me,” she says, “but since I didn't feel like I had to present entirely as myself, I felt open to doing things I wouldn't normally do.” The album became a place where buried thoughts and energies found expression; Cross wrung catharsis from Meiburg's lyrics and melodies while Duszynski buried himself in the sonic details of engineering and mixing (and conjured up some catharsis of his own in the hammering drums of “Dark Oscillations”).

The process also helped Cross locate a voice she'd never found before. While tracking “I Don't Want Children,” her vocals were accidentally recorded at the wrong speed, and when played back, they were pitched slightly lower and slower than normal, yielding a voice that was recognizably hers, but deeper and more coarse-grained—a sound she decided to use for the rest of the album.

This sense of discovery extends to the listener; at times, *Loma* almost seems to be listening to *you*. But it doesn't sound small, or hushed; “Dark Oscillations” and “Jornada” have a gritty, futuristic grandeur, and there's also the loping groove of “Relay Runner”, the galloping euphoria of “Joy”, and the resolutely ambiguous choir of “Black Willow.” “The album is a journey,” muses Meiburg, “but we didn't know where we were going until we arrived.” The journey's end came with a surprising lesson. “It's about having to let some precious things go,” Meiburg says, “so that new ones can take their place.”