

It was a beautiful afternoon in June of 2019, and Kris Delmhorst was sitting in her backyard in western Massachusetts, idly playing guitar and listening to the bluebirds sing. Out of nowhere, the kernel of a new song arrived: an existential pep talk. These had been showing up a lot lately. This one counseled persistence: *Keep on pushing and you'll find a way through*, the tagline urged.

"The fact that I kept unintentionally coming up with songs that said, in one way or another, "Hang in there" - it revealed to me how much anxiety was lurking beneath the surface of daily life," says Delmhorst. "Climate change, political turmoil, the endless treadmill of outrage and heartbreak in the news..." The flowers around her may have been in bloom, but there was a darkness bubbling up from somewhere urgent. The songs were no accident - they held up a mirror that allowed her to get at the truth.

"As these songs arrived, they brought words of encouragement I realized I myself needed to hear," says Delmhorst. "Not in a shallow way, like 'Everything's fine.' They felt like a friend's voice saying, 'Look, I get it, life gets incredibly dark. And you need to find a way to stay connected to the beautiful parts.'"

Then she realized: that might just be what other people need to hear right now, too.

Long Day in the Milky Way, out August 14, is the result. A lush, warm, immersive record, it finds a gifted lyricist at the height of her craft and working with a strong sense of purpose. World-weary but hopeful, Delmhorst responds to a time of global anxiety with a missive straight from the chest.

"*No shame in the long game, look around and see that time as all we got*," she sings in "Wind's Gonna Find a Way," an album-opener full of subtle swagger, as vocals and strings coalesce into their own weather system, sinuous cloud formations and bright glints of sunlight. "*Slow hands in the shadowlands, patient fingers working at the patient knots*."

Called "bold and brilliant" by the *Boston Globe* and "transcendent" by the *LA Times*, Delmhorst is a veteran of the independent Americana world, with vivid songwriting, soulful delivery, and intricate arrangements that stretch the limits of genre. She's been compared to artists as various as Anaïs Mitchell, Lucinda Williams, and Juana Molina - though she cites Rickie Lee Jones, in all her fearless joy and complexity, as an artistic north star.

With *Long Day in the Milky Way*, her eighth studio record, Delmhorst offers the purest distillation yet of her musical sensibilities. "I thought a lot about landscape, and about fabric," she says of her arrangements. There are few solos on the album; instead, Delmhorst and her band craft a world out of subtle variations that coalesce into larger patterns. "I was thinking about the variations in a handwoven cloth, or in a forest. It called for collective-minded, flexible, non-ego-driven players."

Recording in seclusion at Great North Sound Society, a studio built into a nearly 300-year-old farmhouse in Maine, Delmhorst enlisted a versatile team of multi-instrumentalists - piano, guitars, trumpet, drums, bass, harp, violin, and more - and an ethereal trio of backing singers. With all nine players tracking takes live, the band's subtle interweaving is almost telepathic, instruments trading lines fluidly and finishing each other's sentences. The backing singers, Delmhorst's friends and fellow songwriters Rose Polenzani, Rose Cousins, and Annie Lynch, are a central presence, providing support and commentary throughout, and lifting the songs beyond the individual voice to access the universal.

On "Horses in the Sky," Delmhorst describes the way pain can build upon itself: "*Now it is a fever, now it is a raging sea / never leaves your body, never gives a moment's peace.*" In response, the backing singers form a unified entity like a Greek chorus: "*We all know / We all know the way.*" At the chorus, the song opens up - warm, expansive, a deep breath of open air: "*Horses in the sky, roll on by,*" all the voices sing together, urging the listener to see the possibility of hope amid hopelessness. "*Don't you close your eyes, watch 'em fly...*"

Sitting in her backyard that blue-sky day last summer, Kris Delmhorst couldn't see the future. She couldn't know about the coming pandemic and the havoc it would wreak, or the headlines that bring fresh troubles daily. But she knew about sorrow. She knew about doubt. And she knew how deep unease can lurk under a seemingly placid surface. The particulars change and change again, but the uneasy coexistence of darkness and light is eternal, and inevitably sometimes becomes too much for any one person to hold.

What's on offer in *Long Day in the Milky Way* is not an escape from the turmoil but a companion for it, a steadying hand reaching through the chaos. Delmhorst invites the listener to look both out and in, to experience the full kaleidoscope of life's contradictions - persistence, frustration, heartbreak, love - and to locate the grace within the struggle, the beauty in the dark.