

Stumble Into Grace may be the title of Emmylou Harris' new record, but it's hard to imagine this quintessentially elegant musician making even the smallest misstep. In a career that has spanned '60s coffeehouse folk, '70s cosmic country, '80s Nashville and '90s alternative, Harris has fused genres, foregone stereotypes and forged alliances with musicians all over the musical map. Her latest outing, produced by Daniel Lanois protégé Malcolm Burn, has the feel of a musical quilting bee, featuring collaborations with many of the women who have shared Harris' esoteric sonic journey. Linda Ronstadt, Kate and Anna McGarrigle, Julie Miller, Jane Siberry, and Jill Cuniff of Luscious Jackson all co-wrote, added harmonies or contributed arrangements to the 11 songs. The result is as surefooted as ever. Exploiting Burn's gift for densely layered textures and eclectic musical forms, the songs—each written or co-written by Harris—jump from the Celtic feel of "Little Bird" to the rollicking pop of "Jupiter's Rising" to the gamelan-like harmonics of "O Evangeline." It was clearly a fun, creatively inspired record to make. "Basically, I'm in an exploring mode right now," Harris says by phone from Washington, D.C., where she is visiting her oldest daughter, Hallie, and some family friends. (Youngest daughter Meghann is attending college in California.) "I'm very much enjoying the opportunity to work with people who are coming from a different musical place."

But this is no lighthearted romp. Most of the songs are dark and introspective, linked by a theme of profound loneliness and the unavoidable solitude that comes with aging. "Where you are in your life can't help but come through in your songwriting," Harris tells me, confirming my suggestion that she's been exploring ever deeper,

("I divide my life into two periods, B.B. and A.B., Before Buddy and After Buddy.") It's clear that collaboration fuels the ubiquitous singer's seemingly boundless fires. From her leap onto the musical stage courtesy of her early-'70s partnership with the now-iconic Gram Parsons through her platinum-selling Nashville hits *Trio* and *Trio 2* with Linda Ronstadt and Dolly Parton, to her central role in the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* phenomenon, Harris has put her indelible stamp on hundreds of concerts and recordings, including recent duets with Dave Matthews and Mark Knopfler. This fall she'll play 10 dates with Neil Young, a pairing she dubs "a fantasy come true."

After Parsons' untimely death in 1973, Harris launched a solo career with the instantly acclaimed *Pieces of the Sky*, which was the first of eight consecutive gold records. But in the early '80s, as Nashville got glitzier, Harris returned to her roots, recording the spare, acoustic *Roses in the Snow* and the glorious gospel *Angel Band*, among others. She was Americana before the genre existed, alt.country before the term was coined. And then in 1995, *Wrecking Ball* took her in a completely different direction, and she's never looked back. "This is not a country record at all," Harris acknowledges, in a voice with just a hint of a Southern lilt. "My creative ideas are coming out of another place right now."

That place can seem pretty dark, from the cry for help in "Can You Hear Me Now" to what she calls the "ropes and razorblades" territory of "Lost Unto This World." "Let's face it," she says laughing, "anybody who's happy all the time is either on Prozac or is not thinking too deeply about the state of the world around them." Harris says she wrote "Lost Unto This World" in response to

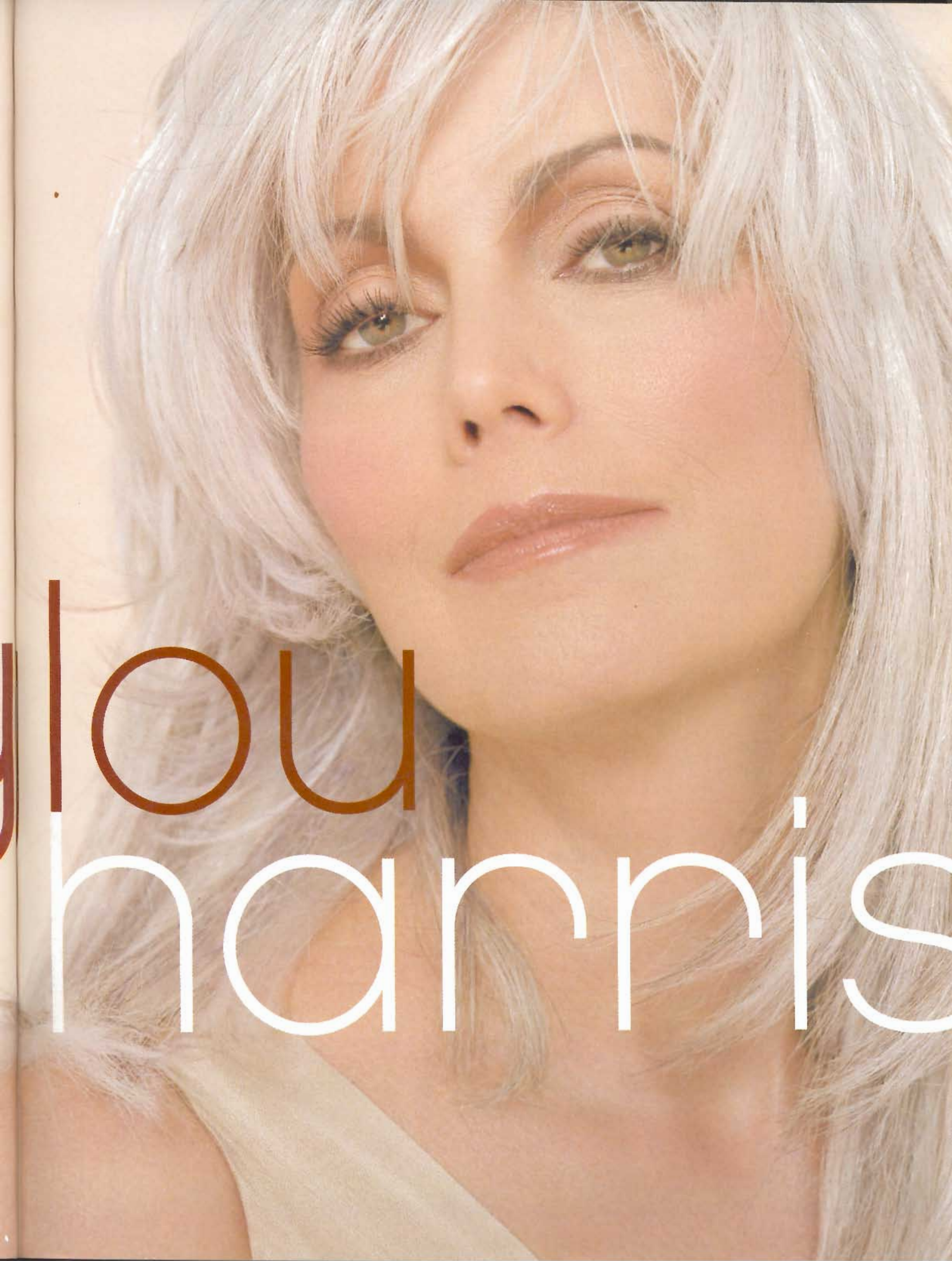
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EVER GRACEFUL By Melanie Haiken

more spiritual territory with each release since 1995's career-rejuvenating *Wrecking Ball*. I ask about the longing that reverberates through "Here I Am" and "I Will Dream" ("And though you say you do not love me / and your dreams are never of me / I will dream my dream of you"). "It's a truism that we're born alone and we die alone, but along the way there are extraordinary joys—children, lovers, friends, relationships," Harris answers. "We all have a space that needs to be filled, a longing for physical and emotional companionship." Famously reticent about her personal life, Harris says no more and I don't press her, though she peppers the conversation with mention of the many men she has worked closely with and deeply admires, from ex-husband Paul Kennerly, with whom she co-wrote "Jupiter's Rising," to producer extraordinaire Daniel Lanois ("Dan" to her) who co-wrote "Lost Unto This World" and added backup vocals to several tracks, to, Buddy Miller, her lead guitar player without whom she says she can't imagine living,

numerous tragedies that have haunted her, from a New York Times article on the Lost Boys of the Sudan ("It made me wonder, what about the Lost Girls of the Sudan?") to the seminal 1962 New York City murder of Kitty Genovese, who was stalked and stabbed while people watched and did nothing. "I think of this song as a microcosm for the way we witness this kind of thing every day," Harris says. "And we don't know what to do, how to take some kind of action. Where is the 911 number? We all bear the guilt for these murders and tragedies."

While Harris has always written songs—"From Boulder to Birmingham"—her elegy for Gram Parsons, has been a staple of her live shows for almost 30 years—her records rarely featured more than one or two self-penned songs. The exception was 1984's overlooked *The Ballad of Sally Rose*, which met with such a cool reception that Harris didn't try again until 2000's *Red Dirt Girl*, on which she wrote every song except one.



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In interviews just as *Red Dirt Girl* was coming out, Harris sounded tentative and a bit unsure, perhaps for the first time in her career. Now with *Red Dirt Girl*'s Grammy for Best New Folk album under her belt and reams of critical acclaim, she speaks confidently about her new identity as a songwriter. “Once I got those muscles going, I didn’t have much choice but to keep on,” Harris says. “Obviously I set the bar high for myself with *Red Dirt Girl*, and I would have disappointed myself as well as others if I hadn’t continued with it, so I just kept going.”

Harris says she writes in all sorts of ways, the secret being to keep guitars all over the house and a tape recorder with her at all times. “My one piece of advice to aspiring songwriters would be to never be without a guitar,” Harris says, adding that she asked Gibson to make her signature model—of which she’s justifiably proud—small enough to fit on an airport conveyor belt so it would be easy to travel with. She even keeps a guitar in her bedroom in case a song comes to her in the middle of the night. Such was the case with “Strong Hand,” her heartfelt tribute to June Carter Cash. “I got the news about June being in the hospital, and that she probably wasn’t going to make it,” Harris says, her voice becoming soft and sad. “I called up right away and spoke to Roseanne and John. And I just sat down that night and wrote that song and recorded it the next day. I believe June had something to do with it—she really did have that much power.” The song, with its elegiac refrain, “And it’s a miracle / How one soul finds another” is a powerful tribute to the famous marriage and to all such lifelong loves. “We all long for that, don’t we?” Harris says, “so in that sense it’s a celebration. But the downside is that when one goes first, it’s so hard for the other to go on alone.”

I ask if the song is also about her parents and she answers that yes, it is; “They were married 50 years and more in love on the day my father died than when they first met each other and fell in love at first sight.”

Harris’ mother, Eugenia, has lived with her in Nashville since her father’s death 10 years ago and often travels to shows with her daughter, sitting enthusiastically in the audience as I saw her do in a San Francisco nightclub last year. I ask Harris if her mother will be coming back to San Francisco for this fall’s Strictly Bluegrass Festival, which Harris will

headline in early October. She says yes, then immediately asks if I’d like to come backstage and meet her mother. I have to pinch myself.

Harris’ mother was among her inspirations for one of the most memorable songs on *Stumble*, the hypnotic “Cup of Kindness,” which grounds the search for spiritual fulfillment concretely in the everyday. (“You sailed the oceans looking for / The secret of the key / To unlock a truth that you may never find / For it was in a cup of kindness all the time.”) “We look for answers all over the place, but ultimately it’s the way we treat each other on earth that matters,” Harris says. “My mother is an incredibly kind and gracious person and she always says that if people would just mind their manners, the world wouldn’t be in so much trouble. I hate to say it, but I’m coming to agree with her.”

Harris’ own kindness is legendary, both to the legions of friends and musical partners whose careers she’s tirelessly boosted, and to the various charities and causes she’s supported. Since 1997, she’s worked with the Campaign for a Landmine Free World, hosting fundraisers in her home and putting together high-profile concerts featuring herself along with such luminaries as Steve Earle, Lucinda Williams, Patty Griffin and Guy Clark. She also hosts an annual fundraising concert in Nashville to benefit the Second Harvest Food Bank, and recently performed an unannounced benefit concert to fund renovation at her mother’s church, Holy Trinity Episcopal in Nashville. She has played a huge role in bringing friends such as Buddy and Julie Miller and Gillian Welch into the public spotlight.

After we lament the state of contemporary radio—“I don’t even bother to send my stuff to any mainstream stations except the NPR and Americana ones,” says Harris, the former Nashville darling—she tells me she’s taking it on herself to publicize the music she loves, one listener at a time. “I’ve decided I’m going to start traveling with a bunch of CDs and just hand them to people and say ‘Here, this is what you need to be listening to right now.’ I just want to be able to say to people, ‘This is my gift to you.’”

Harris may not realize it, but with *Stumble Into Grace*, she’s given us just such a gift. 