

The third full-length and Atlantic Records debut from Shaina Taub, *Songs of the Great Hill* came to life over the course of countless daily trips to the enchanted spot of its title. In the bleakest days of lockdown, the New York City-based singer/songwriter would head to the North Woods of Central Park with notebook in hand, then set to work on the incandescent batch of songs that now comprise the album. “It felt very much like a metaphor for the time we were all living through—trying to trudge up this great big hill with some sense of grace, looking for some kind of hope in all the dread and isolation,” recalls Taub, also a multi-award-winning composer and actor in musical theater. “After a while, it felt like I was writing into existence all the songs I needed to hear.”

Produced by 3X GRAMMY nominee Josh Kaufman (The National, Bonny Light Horseman, The Hold Steady), *Songs of the Great Hill* fully channels the tension of the current moment while bearing a certain charmed quality that defies time and circumstance. With its graceful coalescence of social commentary and self-reflection, the album endlessly spotlights the radiant vocal work Taub has brought to such eclectic endeavors as starring in the original Off-Broadway casts of iconic shows like *Hadestown*, the Signature Theatre’s hit production *Old Hats*, and her own critically lauded original musical adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* (both of which were staged at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park). A massively prolific artist whose past triumphs also include winning the 2019 Kleban Prize, receiving a Jonathan Larson Grant in 2014, and working with Sara Bareilles and Josh Groban to co-write the Emmy Award-nominated opening number for the 2018 Tony Awards, she recently teamed up with Elton John to pen the lyrics for the upcoming Broadway musical *The Devil Wears Prada*. Along with *The Devil Wears Prada*, Shaina is now gearing up to star in her own original musical *Suffs*, premiering in spring 2022 at Off-Broadway’s Public Theater.

The follow-up to Taub’s independently released 2018 album *Die Happy*, *Songs of the Great Hill* expands on the crystalline and immaculately composed sound hailed by NPR as a “playful blend of Billy Joel’s piano-driven pop, Aretha’s soul and Regina Spektor’s whimsy.” In recording at the Clubhouse in Hudson Valley, the classically trained pianist and self-taught accordion player joined forces with Kaufman and a small crew of musicians, imbuing each track with a level of nuance that beautifully showcases her incisive yet intimately detailed lyrics. The result is a body of work that catalyzes the kind of joyful catharsis that can only come from singing your heart out. “One of the reasons I called the album *Songs of the Great Hill* is that I wanted it to be like a songbook you’d find in some dusty old piano bench,” says Taub. “These are songs you could sing with your community choir, your church or school or any other group. I want everyone to take them as their own and use them however they need to.”

The resplendent opening track to *Songs of the Great Hill*, “Sing Again” immediately conjures that communal spirit. “I started performing in community theater as a kid, so singing in groups has more of less defined my life,” says Taub, who grew up in a small Vermont town and made her debut at age three, playing a pirate in an experimental production of *Peter Pan.* “In the pandemic singing together was one of the most dangerous things you could possibly do, and there was a sort of existential heartbreak in knowing that so many artists were going through such a dark time without being able to do what we love.” With its lush Wurlitzer tones and smoldering horns, “Sing Again” emerges as a soul-stirring celebration of the creative spirit. “This song came from envisioning that moment of everyone finally gathering to sing again,” says Taub. “Because even after the worst devastation, people always come back together—the creativity of community always perseveres.”

A longtime activist and member of the Resistance Revival Chorus, Taub brings her political consciousness to tracks like “Tikkun Olam,” an elegantly fiery and rhythm-driven number whose lyrics lament a systemic lack of empathy (e.g., “In a city where schools have more police than they have nurses/In a country with more prison cells than hospital beds”). “In Hebrew ‘tikkun olam’ means to repair the broken world,” she explains. “I’m not even that religious, but I’ve always been drawn to the thought of taking all your rage and despair and turning them into an action.” One of the most gripping moments on *Songs of the Great Hill*, “The Last Song on Earth” adopts a more sardonic view of the state of the world (“We ruined the air/With all our gassy cars/But the billionaires are safe on Mars”), building to a gloriously chaotic free-for-all at the climax. “I wrote that song last fall as the election was looming, and it became a protest song disguised as an apocalyptic party song,” says Taub. “It’s imagining the last day on Earth but also acknowledging that we’re not quite there yet; there’s still time to change things.” And on “Possibility,” *Songs of the Great Hill* closes out with a full-hearted meditation on the potential for peace and equity, its final seconds graced with a gorgeous cacophony of overlapping voices. “I wrote ‘Possibility’ the day they called the presidential race—there was this incredible explosion of relief, but it was complicated by the knowledge that there’s still so much work to be done,” says Taub. “As I was watching the victory speeches the word ‘possibility’ kept coming up, and I knew that would be the hook. It doesn’t necessarily imply a good or bad outcome, just the chance that things could maybe turn out for the better.”

Elsewhere on *Songs of the Great Hill*, Taub looks inward to explore more personal terrain, such as on the sweetly luminous “Your Magic.” “Before the pandemic I’d been struggling with anxiety around performance, and through therapy I realized I’d never felt that way when I was younger—I was always so joyful and happy and free onstage,” she says. “‘Your Magic’ is about getting back to that child mind, and completely trusting and believing in yourself.” Meanwhile, on “The Least,” Taub delivers a delightfully idiosyncratic take on the classic love song (“You’re always on Twitter/You’re never on time/The sound of your snoring/Could be considered a crime/But out of everyone I’ve ever met/Honey, I hate you the least”). “I wanted to write about how a big part of love is finding someone who will accept all your irritating habits, and in return you’ll accept all of theirs,” she says. “I gravitate toward love songs that have a kick or a twist, so this is my version of that.”

In many ways a valentine to New York City, *Songs of the Great Hill* also includes tracks like “Waltz 20 in F Major,” a wistful tribute to an accordion busker she’d seen performing in Central Park throughout lockdown. Having moved to New York to study musical theater at New York University at the age of 16, Taub considers the city an essential force in her development as a songwriter. “Until I got to college and met other people who were making their own work, I didn’t think of songwriting as something that might actually be a career path,” she says, naming Carole King, Stevie Wonder, and Randy Newman among her formative influences. Over the years, she’s balanced her widely acclaimed work in musical theater with her career as a songwriter and solo artist, taking the stage at such iconic venues as Joe’s Pub and making her solo concert debut at Lincoln Center as part of its 2015 American Songbook series. “I grew up in such a homogenous place, so to live in New York and be constantly immersed in so much humanity and culture from all over the world is so inspiring to me,” says Taub. “I constantly get to collaborate with and be in community with people who’ve had a completely different life experience than I’ve had, and I value that so much.”

In sharing *Songs of the Great Hill* with the world, Taub seeks to extend that feeling of community to her audience, and ultimately provide them with a powerful antidote to cynicism and despair. “In Rebecca Solnit’s book *Hope in the Dark*, she talks about how hope is an active thing,” says Taub. “We don’t know yet how the future is going to turn out, and in that unknowing there’s still room to act. I’d love for people to connect with these songs and what they have to say about all the difficult things we’ve been through collectively and individually—but I’d also love to inspire them, and leave them with that very purposeful kind of hope.”

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