

Five years sounds like a long break between albums. But for Birdy, the singer and songwriter who shot to fame at just 12, taking time to stop, take stock and find out who she really is was a necessary circuit break. Though she’s now 24, she’s lived a lot of life; a Grammy nomination, relentless touring and opening the 2012 Paralympic Games (to name just a few highlights) had, she realized, got in the way of some essential growing up. Falling in love, exploring the world, all the rites of passages that the non-famous among us take for granted: it was time to experience them all.

“It’s been a slow process,” she laughs now, talking about her accomplished fourth album, *Young Heart*. When she started working on the first songs some three or four years ago, she found that they just wouldn’t come. She couldn’t process the emotions she was feeling into music that felt right. Her first love had recently ended and, though she had felt the right thing for her at this point in her life to spread her wings and experience the world as an independent person, she was still struggling to manage the feelings: residual love, loneliness… a sense of well, what now?

She turned, unintentionally, to the masters of heartbreak, singers who she was naturally drawn to during that difficult time. “When I started the album I was listening to a lot of Etta James and Nina Simone. The last song on the album, “Young Heart,” was the first song I wrote for it, so that was really inspired by those artists, I think you can kind of hear that soulfulness.” You really can; it’s the most emotionally raw track on the record and was recorded by Birdy alone at home. The pain of the separation and the push and pull between wanting to stay and go rings through in a vocal line that digs deep into the pit of the trauma.

Though the song “Young Heart” had been written, the rest of the album still eluded her. “I had quite bad writer's block for a long time in the beginning, because it was just too painful to write the songs - I had all the ideas, but it was too hard to finish them,” she says, looking back. So she travelled.

“I started listening to Joni Mitchell who, weirdly, I’d never really got before. I don’t know if maybe that’s an age thing! And suddenly I was like, oh my god this is obviously the best! Almost to the point where it made it harder to write because I’d listened so much I would think, if it’s not as good as this then what’s the point?” It made sense, then, for her to travel first to LA where she began to find her stride: not in the present-day LA ‘scene’, necessarily, but the LA of Joni Mitchell and Nick Drake. The music began to make a bit more sense to her; the vastness of the city allowing her to step outside of herself, think of herself within a new context.

The gorgeous surroundings and collaborators who seemed to know, instinctively, how to draw the words out from her as well as the music, imbued *Young Heart* with strokes of the artists who had gone before. Again the music took on its surroundings. Where her early work was inspired by her native New Forest, dark and wild, the natural elements that are at play on *Young Heart* are much more widescreen. “Being in LA and feeling very small in this huge city, it's so vast with the city and these huge mountains in the background - it just feels so completely different being there.” The songs on the album tussle between light and dark, between that vastness of space and the interior of home. The conflict between wanting to hide away and being compelled to go away, to new places and new experiences play out across the record.

The opening track, “Voyager,” sets the scene, a beautifully wrought song about knowing that she will end a relationship but the no-man’s land where her partner doesn’t know yet. “I won’t wait for you, I’m already gone, like moonlight leaves with the dawn.” From there, the record speaks of the fallout - the loneliness, the pain of missing the person she still loves, the longing for travel but the pull of the familiarity of home. “Have I made the right decision? Is this a terrible idea?” Birdy remembers thinking. “It was so hard writing it, you want that person [that you love] to get you through - I think that’s where a lot of the conflict came from. I was suddenly having to make a lot of these decisions solo and trust my instincts.” Natural visions - the moon, the grass, the clouds painted across the sky - ground the words in music that is stripped back to its bones.

After her stint in LA, Birdy moved next to Nashville, the city that fizzes with musicians on every block and home to some of the greatest heartache songs ever written. “Nashville is so different. It’s very different! Everyone is really friendly - people will just come up to you on the street,” unlike the UK where random interactions with strangers is a much more foreign concept. It helped Birdy to feel a little at sea - to be a bit lost in a new place, having new adventures and experiences to draw from.

Though she’s always felt that there’s a bit of country in her, the musicality of Nashville was also an inspiration. “Writing there is a completely different experience because everyone is a musician themselves. They’re all players and real storytellers - so they really understood me. Most of the time when I’m writing, the music comes first whereas lyrics don’t come so quickly; I always have a sense of what the song is about and what each line wants to say but it's quite nice having someone to pull the words out of me. I felt I needed someone to be like, ‘this is what you're trying to say,’ you know, until it's the right thing.”

*Young Heart* is not what you would describe as a country album by any stretch, but it is quite a departure from her previous record, 2015’s dramatic Beautiful Lies. “The last album was a lot more theatrical,” she says. “There was a lot going on, it was a big production. Whereas this is quite stripped back compared to that - anything that didn’t need to be there, isn’t there. There’s no decoration.” Where *Beautiful Lies* was a fairytale, *Young Heart* is a gritty realist portrait of the artist in pain. “This album just feels very personal,” she says. “I just want to protect it.”

The irony of having struck out on her own for the first time only for the universe to push her back home for most of 2020 is not lost on Birdy. She moved into a new flat in London, only to realize that the Coronavirus outbreak would be better weathered in the New Forest with her family. She spent much of the year fine-tuning the album, but also painting, bingeing Netflix, and enjoying the gift of time back with her loved ones. She also adopted an abandoned duckling found in a neighbor’s pool - a very Birdy thing to have done. “It was amazing, she’d sleep on me and follow me around. We’d go swimming together, and she loved to fly - she’d fly off and she’d come back when we called her. And then one day she just didn't come back. She felt that call of the wild again.”

Sometimes she and her sister would think they’d seen their duck out by the lake but not be sure, because all the ducks look so similar. “I’d call to her, and she’s the only one who’d turn her head slightly. It was like she was saying, ‘don’t embarrass me! I’m with my friends!’”

It’s hard not to draw the obvious parallel between Birdy and her duckling. Both found safety and comfort in a relationship and both knew when it was time to answer that call of the wild. For Birdy, on *Young Heart*, home is always an option - just not necessarily the right one. To work through love, loss, learning to let go, and finding your feet in the world in such a beautifully honest piece of work is nothing short of astonishing.