A rural-Georgia native whose first word was Elvis, Willow Avalon grew up playing piano in church, taught herself guitar at age 12, and soon started writing songs as a form of escape and salvation. After leaving home at 15 and briefly living in her car, the 25-year-old singer/songwriter made her way to California and eventually settled in New York City, where she resides in a Hell’s Kitchen apartment transformed into her own outlandish wonderland. Newly signed to Atlantic Records—thanks in part to the breakout success of her self-released single “Drivin”—Willow is now set to deliver her debut EP *Stranger*, a perfect introduction to her infinitely charmed and wildly unpredictable world.

Raised on soul legends like Roberta Flack and Sly Stone, Willow got her start playing in rock bands near her tiny hometown. “It’s got one stop sign, a biker bar that doesn’t allow women, a Baptist church, a liquor store that got run out by the Baptist church, and that’s about it,” says Willow, who also spent much of her childhood working on old cars. By age 14 she’d landed a gig opening for Drive-By Truckers in nearby Athens, a revelatory moment in her journey as a musician. “I remember seeing how their music touched every single person in the room, and I realized I wanted to do that too,” she recalls. Naming Lucinda Williams and Bonnie Raitt among her longtime inspirations, Willow continued crafting songs but struggled to find time for music as she worked to make ends meet. “For a while writing songs was just something I did before I went to sleep for a few hours between nannying and waitressing double shifts,” she says. “I was so poor and my guitar only had four strings, but music was my little release.”

Several years after leaving home for Los Angeles, Willow inked a record deal that quickly fell apart, a turn of events that led to her independently releasing her debut single in August 2021. With over three million streams to date, “Drivin” quickly made its way into regular rotation on esteemed L.A. radio station KCRW and later appeared on the Best Indie Songs of 2022 playlist from Spotify. As her audience expanded, Willow gained overnight fame via a massively viral late-2022 video in which she gave a tour of her apartment, showing off her now-departed pet possum Bowie (whom Willow often dressed in sweaters and cowboy hats) along with such thrifted treasures as a set of medical encyclopedias from the ’40s, a Stainer violin with a rattlesnake tail stuck inside, and the antique typewriter on which she writes many of her lyrics. By the following spring she’d signed her deal with Atlantic and began preparing for the release of *Stranger*, a five-song project recorded with a group of close friends and collaborators at the famed Electric Lady Studios in Greenwich Village.

Mainly produced by Willow and her guitarist JR Atkins, *Stranger* takes its title from a timeless and soul-baring track encapsulating the EP’s rich emotionality and captivating brand of country/folk. “‘Stranger’ is a heavy one for me,” says Willow. “It’s about how I never had a strong example of love in my life, so as a kid I started putting up walls and keeping people at a distance. I wrote that song thinking about how I wish I was different and didn’t have that foundation of distrust in others.” Gorgeously understated but lit up in lush textures and slow-burning grooves, *Stranger* also offers up love songs like “Honey Ain’t No Sweeter” (a warm and languid ode to an ex) and “Call Me On My Way Home” (a quietly sprawling stunner anchored in her intimately detailed storytelling). And on “The News,” Willow brings her beguiling vocals and soulful piano work to an incisive meditation on the more maddening aspects of the modern world. “I wrote that song in a moment of rage at everything happening in the country, especially in terms of how women are treated—the idea that a woman might not have control over her own body is insane to me,” she says. “It’s partly about being from the deep south and having so many people in my family who don’t share my beliefs, and trying to work through my feelings about all that.”

A self-described lone wolf when it comes to songwriting, Willow has long used her lyrics as both an emotional outlet and a conduit for self-understanding. “My upbringing was so turbulent and I went through a lot of trauma that I still haven’t fully processed—but I process it more and more every time I write a song,” she says. “I hope that by telling my story it’ll help people to see that you don’t always have to play the cards you were handed; you can do whatever it takes to change those cards. That’s what I did, and sometimes it was scary and I didn’t know if I’d make it out okay, but it got me to where I am today. Now I’m releasing a body of work that I put so much love into, and I couldn’t be more proud of it. All of this music is so wholeheartedly me—it’s me with my heart on my sleeve.”