****

On the verge of a breakdown, Genevieve Stokes found her breakthrough.

For the last few years, Stokes has been on a steady rise as one of alternative-pop’s buzziest acts. The 23-year-old cut her teeth on SoundCloud while in high school, with her independently released songs racking up 7 million streams as well as buzz from *Complex* and *Earmilk*. She signed with Atlantic and has since released two EPs: 2021’s *Swimming Lessons* and 2023’s *Catching Rabbits*. She was hailed as “indie pop’s dark academia icon” in *Ones to Watch* and has been covered in *Rolling Stone* and *Paper Magazine*.

Now, Stokes is set to release her debut album *With a Lightning Strike* (out October 4th via Atlantic Records). Continuing with the fairy tale allusions and ethereal confessions of *Catching Rabbits*, Stokes’ latest is a darker take on the search for childhood whimsy than her previous releases.

To capture the vibrancy she had been seeking, Stokes moved back to her childhood home in Portland, Maine last year. She had recorded her previous EP out in LA and then lived in New Orleans for some time, but once her lease was up it felt natural to go back to a place she is always seeking to capture in her music.

“I think there's a specific magic to my childhood home that makes it easy to access the whimsical part of the album,” Stokes explains, further describing the stream and crabapple trees on the property that proved for mystical fodder both when she was a child and now. “There’s this whole imaginary world that me and my siblings created in our backyard.”

Being back in Maine also helped Stokes shift the way she thought about recording music, too. *With a Lightning Strike* was recorded mostly with her friends, like drummer Fiona Stocks-Lyons and her music director Pete Cafarella, who played synth and bass on the album.

“I was writing the songs when I was in a dark headspace, but the recording was actually fun and light-feeling,” Stokes says. Some of the lyrics date back years, written during a personal mental health crisis Stokes had been navigating. “During the creation of the album, I felt a lot freer. Being in Maine with my friends, we were just joking around, and it felt a lot less serious. I was able to access that vibrancy again. It just felt like hanging out with friends.”

Stokes was able to unlock a rawness that comes across in both the vocals and production, especially feeling more knowledgeable of how to produce herself during the process. “Making this album changed my perspective on recording because in the past I was so focused on perfection and creating a sterile environment to make music in,” she says. This time around, she didn’t overly edit herself and often captured vocals in just a few takes. “That freedom changed my understanding of what a good recording is.”

A guiding light for Stokes during the process was producer Tony Berg (Phoebe Bridgers, Paul McCartney, Taylor Swift), whom she worked with on *Catching Rabbits*. She would finish the songs at LA’s legendary Sound City Studios with him, where classic albums by Nirvana and Fleetwood Mac were recorded.

While writing the album, Stokes suffered immensely from paranoia and out-of-body experiences. In her vivid dreams, she would visit other planets and encounter mythical creatures. “I had so many dreams that inspired the artwork and what I was writing about,” she says. “The paranoia made me feel separated from reality. People looked like masked figures that were hiding their true identities.”

Days before an acid trip that would spur some of her mental anguish, Stokes had pulled the Tower card from a tarot deck while on a walk with a friend. The card represents upheaval and destruction in one’s life, or an event that causes one’s foundation of reality to shift. It ended up being a reference point throughout Stokes’ album-making process and artwork, which features a lightning bolt hitting a lighthouse, a symbol of both safety and Maine.

“That’s the crux of the album: feeling disconnected from your intuition.”

The songs veer between anguish and euphoria. Lead single “Dreamer” channels much more of the latter. It was one of the last songs written for the album, when Stokes wanted to capture that feeling of summer ending.

“It’s about the specific headspace you have during summer that things don’t matter. It’s reflecting on having to go back into the real world when summer ends,” she explains. “It’s also reflecting on different relationships where you’re holding on to someone but know it won’t last.” For the video, Stokes filmed a day in Maine, one where she visits all her favorite spots and captures what she loves most about that season in her home state.

On “Desert Eagle,” Stokes channels Fiona Apple’s “Paper Bag.” She wrote the song on a piano in her parents’ poorly insulated garage, where the instrument often gets water damaged. It was entirely composed on a patch of keys that happened to not be sticky the day she played. “The song is really chaotic and extreme and I’m being super dramatic in it, which is really fun,” she says. “I wanted it to feel like a mess.”

Songs like “Amusing” and “God” get straight to the core of the physical and mental confusion Stokes was enduring. “Amusing” most directly chronicles the highs and lows: “It’s about going from this feeling of ‘This is fun and amusing to be disconnected from my body’ to spiraling, then accepting that I’m out of control.” It’s directly followed by “God” which she describes as the “hangover of emotions when you accept the meaninglessness of life.”

This October, Stokes will set out on a headlining tour in support of *With a Lightning Strike*. She wrote a lot of these songs with those shows in mind and will be on the road with the same band that recorded with her.

“I think after my first headlining tour, I felt so much more confident about what I was doing,” Stokes says. She had been terrified of opening herself up to the experience of having people sing her songs back to her because she was so afraid of losing it. “Now I realize that there have been people throughout my whole career that have stuck with me, have seen the progress and really care about me as a person as well.”

###

