



GRACE POTTER

On the Road, Again

BY TINA BENITEZ-EVES | PHOTOS BY GRACE POTTER



When she was nine, Grace Potter ran away from home. It was the middle of March in Vermont, and Potter, dressed in just a bathing suit, showed up at the home of her best friend, Caitlin Welters. Standing at their door, she told her friend's parents, Bobby and Valerie, a tall tale that she was an Ecuadorian orphan escaping the orphanage and begged them to let her stay with them. They obliged and allowed the young Potter to "run away" for the day.

"I don't remember exactly what I was thinking, but I know it had something to do with wanting Caitlin's parent's food because they made amazing food at their house," Potter tells American Songwriter. "With my mom, Cheerios was a big deal, but I think they had Trix, Fruity Pebbles, Pop Tarts."

After a few hours, Potter's ploy backfired when she realized no one was looking for her. "It started to feel kind of terrifying, but it was a choice that I had made, so there were a lot of questions that I had to answer very quickly," she remembers of her 24-hour sojourn. "I think my parents were giving me the space and the time to understand."

The experience, Potter says, also gave her the permission to revisit this event decades later. Nearly three decades after Potter absconded from her childhood home, she escaped once again, on a road trip across the country.

After relocating from Los Angeles with her husband, Eric Valentine, Potter moved back to Vermont with their young son, Sagan, to Moretown, less than five miles from where she grew up in Waitsfield. Up for another adventure, Potter flew out to Los Angeles during the pandemic to drive their new Volkswagen Atlas back to Vermont. She ended up having a two-week, life-altering, life-affirming, trek across Route 66.

Between roadside motel stays and sharing stories with people she was destined to meet, Potter began writing her fifth solo album *Mother Road*. "I was just reveling in the opportunity to be alone and sit with the feeling of transience that was so real for me," Potter says. "I felt completely constricted and hemmed in by fear, and by this experience of needing to solve a problem and not having any idea where to begin solving it, and it was so scary for me. I know so many people who went through the same thing, and I met some of them along the way."

"They come to a concert to get fortified or to realign themselves with something that they've been trying to reconnect with, and it certainly had been lost on me until that point."

For Potter, many of the people she ended up meeting along Route 66 helped her make sense of some memories and experiences, and bring them into better focus. "I found that I had more in common with strangers than I did with the people that were closest to me," Potter says, "and that was a scary revelation. I felt so connected to a bunch of strangers along the way, who helped me, who gave me advice, and asked me questions."

On the trip, Potter related most to those who had become accustomed to visitors passing through. "They were used to having people like me come through, and never seeing them again," Potter says. "It's like having these incredible soul connections, then knowing that, 'This person says they're gonna write me, or that they'll be back in a couple of weeks, but they won't,' and what it must feel like having the world blow right through you. I was feeling that same sensation in my own life of: 'Is life just gonna happen to me, or am I just sitting here observing it, or am I participating in it?'"

Naturally transient as a touring musician, Potter knew the feeling all too well, running through towns for two decades since her days with Grace Potter and the Nocturnals and through her solo career. "I was blowing through towns, but towns are also blowing through me, in a very similar way to a diner waitress, or even someone who owns a laundromat," says Potter. "People come to a concert to get right. They come to a concert to get fortified or to realign themselves with something that they've been trying to reconnect with, and it certainly had been lost on me until that point."

It took slowing down, and reconnection, for Potter to open up the bank of memories again, particularly the "what if" of the track "Little Hitchhiker," an alternate account of her pre-teen escapade. "It was in a way, the most joyful trauma of my life," says Potter of her runaway-inspired track. "Having somebody meet me with my imagination and see it as that with non-judgment, instead of just labeling me as a liar, brought me to a better place in my development, and helped me forward."

"Little Hitchhiker" meets the halfway point of *Mother Road*. Co-written with Natalie Hemby, it tells an alternate ending to Potter's pre-teen misadventure that doesn't end so well: *They found a red bag floating in the river / And a rag doll washed up on the banks / It's been 30 years and they never found her / Legend goes she still roams these old highways.*

"That lyric, *I guess sometimes mother road can't keep you safe*, is



Road is the name of the album not simply because of Route 66, or the term “mother.” I think motherhood has taught me to expect absolutely nothing, that everything you plan for is going to sort of defy the union of you and the universe. You have to be prepared for that, and buckle up.”

She continues: “Physically, emotionally, your brain is going to restructure itself, and the you that you think you are, is going to be erased, and you’re going to have to start with a new and fresh canvas with a lot of forgiveness for yourself.”

Mother Road was also the result of uprooting, experiencing life in Los Angeles, before returning to Vermont, where she and Valentine built a home studio. “Everybody uprooted their lives and changed everything, and I was an eager participant in the, ‘Let’s shake things up,’ until I realized that it was going to take me right back to where I came from,” Potter says about her return to Vermont during the pandemic. “It really felt like going out to pasture. It felt like a failure. It wasn’t this grand homecoming. It was sort of tuck tail and run from the big, bad, scary city. It felt really fear-induced, but I think a lot of people were making fear-induced choices during the pandemic.”

The decision to retreat to Vermont resulted from a snowball of occurrences, including a home invasion. “There were a bunch of things that happened in 2019, 2020 that stirred important questions inside of

me,” Potter said. “Most of the decisions that we were making were based on fear of losing the people that are closest to us, and concerns about raising our child in a city where a home invasion is a totally normal thing.”

There was also the continuation of a sentence Potter started with her previous album, *Daylight*, in 2019, on *Mother Road*. “I didn’t get to finish the sentence,” she says. “I didn’t realize how much I missed the stage and missed the experience of baring my soul in order to assist other people in baring their souls. I didn’t realize how much of that I was relying on for my own healing until it was gone, and *Daylight* was a very important record of facing the doom and gloom of a divorce, of the band [Nocturnals] falling apart, becoming a new mother, and marrying this amazing person. I had so much to say, and I wasn’t able to finish that sentence

before the pandemic.”

Continuing her unfinished sentence, Potter says she honors being back on the road again, on tour and considers *Mother Road* her “existential tantrum” with “rock and roll energy.”

“I’m a storyteller, and the stories and the way that I see the world is fundamentally different than anybody else,” Potter says. “For some reason, it still manages to connect for people that I’m not some alien from outer space, that doesn’t belong. But at the same time, maybe we all don’t belong. And that’s okay.” ★

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bone-chilling, but I'm still here," says Potter. "I can't believe I made it."

She has made it for a long while. From her earlier days with the Nocturnals, and divorce from drummer Matt Burr, finding new love, moving to Los Angeles, motherhood, and returning home to Vermont, *Mother Road* finds Grace processing all the fears and regrets along the way in the most honest songs she can reveal.

"There's so much that brought me into memories of my childhood, and places where the deeper traumas were these little tiny slices into my soul, whether it was something that a teacher once said or a ski race that I lost, or just little side comments—little feelings that started to creep in and why I wanted to get out into the bigger, wider world," Potter shares. "*Mother Road* came through the simplest, and in its cleanest form, like, 'Look, maybe the road isn't where good things happen, but it has worked for me so far.'"

Opening on the bluesy "Mother Road," the story takes another turn with a 47-second "Truck Stop Angels." Filled with highway-stop sounds, the short interlude is juxtaposed with the sweeter harmony of Potter's vocals echoing like a 1940s girl group on the radio singing an ode to *Mother Road* — *Looking for my true north / In the Southwest / Tumbleweeds and lonely towns / Rolling down the Mother Road / As the gold sun sets / And wherever I'm headed / I know she won't let it be down.*

More funk and soul slip into *Mother Road* with "Ready Set Go" and "Good Time." The latter is a reflective track on the days of fewer boundaries. The album also features cinematic, spaghetti western vibes on "Lady Vagabond"—Potter's paean to anti-heroines—and the reflective country

rock of "Rose Colored Rearview."

Co-written with Hilary Lindsay, Margaret McRee, and Cary Barlowe, "All My Ghosts" finds Potter circling back to old spirits still haunting her. Set to a bluesier, Janis Joplin delivery, Potter grapples with more unruly times—*All my ghosts are on Adderall / Ripping sinks from my bathroom walls*—before the rockier glam-rock pulse of "Futureland" and a piano-clanging "Masterpiece," contemplating her seventh-grade self.

Produced by Valentine, and recorded at the famed RCA Studio A in Nashville, Tennessee, and Topangadise in Topanga, California, *Mother Road* is as much about losing oneself as it is Potter's own guidebook to heal.

Pulled from John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *Grapes of Wrath*, and its reference to Route 66 as "The Mother of all roads ... the road of flight," *Mother Road* meant more than a cross-country trek to Potter. It also summed up the wound-licking and healing, following a chain of events that brought her back home, and a miscarriage several years earlier.

"That really tore me up," Potter says of losing her baby. "On a physical level, too, there was a bunch of after-effects and damage and things that I hadn't really been tending to on a personal level. It was a big turn of events, and a big turnover of my cellular understanding of where I wanted to be in the world and how I wanted to exist, separate from being a songwriter, or Grace fucking Potter—whatever that is."

Potter eventually gave birth to Sagan in 2018 but still needed to face her previous loss. "I think so many women go through [a miscarriage], and they don't talk about it, but I've always talked about it," she said. "*Mother*



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