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Essence gives heartache flight on 'Black Wings'

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People will hear the songs of heartbreak and betrayal on Essence Goldman's new album, "Black Wings," and think they have it all figured out: marriage, children, midlife crisis, discontent, the usual. They have no idea.

"All of that is totally natural," she says. "That is not what happened in my situation."

It's a foggy summer morning in the Inner Richmond, and having ditched the coffee shop blasting Maroon 5, the San Francisco singer-songwriter ducks into one of her neighborhood's typically eclectic shopping arcades, where a furniture reupholstering business operates alongside a Chinese travel agent and acupuncture clinic.

With a paper cup of tea in hand to ward off the chill outside, she finds a pair of plastic chairs in the back and lays out the inventory that went into the making of the album: two marriages. Two children. One house fire. Four record deals. One producer who fell victim to addiction. Another stuck in the throes of alcoholism. The death of her father. Years of emotional abuse. And innumerable scars.

"I was paralyzed by my life," she says, explaining the seven-year gap between her latest and previous release, "Feels Like the Future."



"I was deeply grief-stricken, and I became isolated. I went into survival mode."

Goldman, who headlines a record release party at the Sweetwater Music Hall in Mill Valley on Thursday, Aug. 25, spares no details recounting the traumas that turned her life upside down but reignited her passion for making music. The important thing is, with the support of a few key collaborators and confidantes, she came out of it with a career-defining album.

"I had to flat-line creatively to find myself," says Goldman.

A San Francisco native born to a bohemian family in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood ("my dad always had a parrot on his shoulder and was smoking a joint," she recalls), Goldman grew up listening to Bob Dylan and watching family friends like the Grateful Dead and Big Brother and the Holding Company come and go.

"My parents were awesome artists, but they were not cookie-cutter people in any way," she says. "I went to 14 schools before the fifth grade."

She wrote her first song when she was 15, shortly after her dad took her to see Prince's "Purple Rain" tour at the Cow Palace in Daly City.

"It was like a lightning bolt went through my body," Goldman says. "I could feel his honesty in the songs, and it changed me. I knew I wanted to do that, whatever my version of that would be."

She made her name playing coffeehouses around the city and released her first album, "Conception," in 1997, which led to an ill-fated deal with MCA.

A year later she won a national Lilith Fair Songwriting Contest (after losing the local competition), scoring the opportunity to tour with Sarah McLachlan and other major female artists. At the Rose Bowl



in Pasadena, she performed alongside Natalie Merchant and Joan Baez in front of 80,000 people.

A subsequent deal with RCA Records also fell through, killing the momentum she had built by performing regularly at local venues like Slim's and the Fillmore.

Goldman then released her second album, "Mariposa," independently in 2003, which led to yet another contract. This time it was with Or Music, who signed her at the same time as Los Lonely Boys. While the company dealt with the success of that group's breakout hit "Heaven," Goldman was again cast adrift.

Feeling dejected, she turned her attention to starting a family. Goldman left her first marriage and entered into a tumultuous second marriage. Within a week of coming across some emails that suggested that her new husband was being unfaithful, she discovered she was pregnant with the first of their two children. A month later her father, whom she described as her rock, died.

"When I fell in love, I fell really hard," she says. "I really wanted to have the family that I never had myself growing up because I was the child of divorce. I was going to do everything to make it work. I turned myself into June Cleaver. I was all about cooking, cleaning, keeping myself trim. I put my career aside."

During that time, Goldman released just one album, a collection of children's songs in 2013 called "A Dog Named Moo and His Friend Roo."

"I wanted to shoot myself," she says now of the experience.

Then their house burned down.

Goldman took it as a clear sign that it was time to move on. After several rounds of therapy — together and alone — she separated from her husband and set out to reconnect with her muse.

Egged on by her support system — a stable of co-writers including Jeffrey Pease, Ira Marlowe, Alec McChesney and Merkle, who developed a system called Ping Song where they collaborated on material via text message; and producers like Roger Rocha, Dave Simon-Baker and Daniel Berkman — she came up with a set of songs that candidly retraced the failings of her relationship.

“By putting my experiences into songs, I don’t have to carry them anymore,” she says. “It was a very healing process, but I’m still going through the thick of it.”

The first single from the album, “Headed North,” has amassed more than 650,000 views on YouTube. Others, like “Camels and Diesel” and “Honeyed Out,” reveal a shift in her songwriting, moving away from an electronic-leaning folk sound to relatively spare and raw arrangements. The transformation had an unlikely source.

“The kids’ album was instrumental in creating my sonic development,” she says. “That was the first album where I let go of this notion of electronics. It was this organic sound and I loved it, but it was kids’ music. I decided what I wanted to do is take that palette and give it some teeth. That’s ‘Black Wings.’”

Through all her ups and downs and, well, more downs, Goldman never gave up on music.

“It was the thing that nobody could take away from me,” she says. “I think this record is the record I’ve been wanting to make all along. But I guess I couldn’t have made it if I hadn’t been through it — all of it.”

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