

Autonomy: (n) *self-directing freedom and especially moral independence*

To be able to make your own decisions—to truly own the course your life takes, is a freedom that can take a while to embrace. As we get older, we realize our decisions are, in fact, our own to make and no longer belong to the whim of others. In the five years since she walked away from her publishing deal, singer-songwriter Stephanie Lambring has taken a step away from music—and returned to make an album on her own terms, titled *Autonomy*.

“The more spins around this earth I get, the more I realize the importance of being seen and heard,” Stephanie says. “When I walked away from my publishing deal, I asked a lot of questions. In the time since, I’ve learned about persevering through the doubt. About thinking for myself. Trusting myself. This album is about coming back to music in an authentic way—and writing a whole damn record by myself.”

The 10 songs on *Autonomy* find Stephanie working through complex emotions, diving deep into themes including progressive—and non-progressive—Christianity, sexuality, domestic violence, body image, and suicide. While many of the topics she covers can be heavy, they’re approached through a lens of someone trying to reconcile their feelings about each. It sounds familiar, like things you’ve thought about before, from childhood embarrassments that still pop up now and again to relationships that were bad choices from the beginning, from the constant desire to (still) please parents, to what in the world it feels like to try and understand evangelical Christianity in the current iteration of America.

Album standout “Joy of Jesus” is the product of years inside the church—yet, still struggling to find the feelings that are supposed to accompany the phrase. Stephanie wrote the song after talking with a friend who was relentlessly harassed on the internet by the same person who told her to find Jesus and repent.

“I finally began to let myself lean into the questions that my experience begged me to ask,” she says. “I had grown up in the church, but I had never known God without fear being a motivating factor. I was tired of performing. I ached over the agony that weighed heavily on my gay Christian friends at the hands of the church. I couldn’t reconcile the pain I had felt and observed with the elusive joy I was ‘supposed’ to feel.”

“This song has been one of the spaces I have been able to wrestle with that. In my times of brooding over the New Testament, I discovered what I hoped to be the essence of Jesus: ‘For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin’ (Hebrews 4:15, NIV). The first part of the verse paints a posture of understanding. Of empathy. Of being seen.”

“I don’t have the answers. I am still on my break from God. *Or am I?* I slightly lean toward no—I feel more at peace and internally aligned than ever. I do know that it was important to me to take a step back, acknowledge the pain, ask questions, and start to think for myself.”

Stephanie released her first record at age 22, and soon signed a publishing deal. She spent five years on Music Row, learning the craft of songwriting. After she realized she was no longer writing for herself, she decided to walk away. She went to bartending school. She poured Yazoo beer at a cart in the Nashville airport. She got a job waiting tables. She crisscrossed the country, adorning her fridge with a collage of national park magnets. With music on the back-burner, she continued to trust that everything would work out as it should—eventually, slowly, coming back to writing, this time for herself.

Credited with being the song she “had to write to be able to write authentically again,” album opener “Daddy’s Disappointment” happened while Stephanie was waiting tables and got to know Grammy-winning songwriter Tom Douglas. One night, he challenged Stephanie to start writing again, saying anyone can write a song in two weeks.

“I went home feeling inspired for the first time in a long time,” she says. “I sat down at my kitchen table with my guitar, and the first two lines poured out of me. My soul was ready.”

“I knew that to process my complex relationship with music, I would have to dive into my dynamic with my dad, and then the music industry. I finished the song nearly two weeks to the day from the issued challenge and sent it to Tom. I was nervous, but I felt a quiet confidence forming. The song was raw, uncensored me. *Truly* me.”

When Tom replied, he told Stephanie that he and his wife wept as they listened again and again. He said that he related to the song as a father and as a son.

“I was humbled. Relieved. Validated. Joyful. *I still have it*, I thought. To take music back for myself, I had to tell my whole story. This song set the tone for the honesty and vulnerability I wanted in my writing moving forward.”

After a chance encounter with producer Teddy Morgan, she decided to make this album, on her own terms, saying what she wanted.

“Teddy and I spent November to June crafting the record at Creative Workshop in Berry Hill,” she says. “It was a true joy to work with him. For a few hours, a few days every week, we’d get together and chip away at the record. The two of us played most of the instruments ourselves, so we had time to give the songs the space they needed to breathe and reveal where they wanted to go. It was life-giving work. I cried on the day the record was mastered—I didn’t want it to be over.”

Throughout the album, Stephanie looks closer at past experiences, examining how they’ve shaped who she is now. “Pretty” dives into complex emotions stemming from her childhood, though this time tackling body image and the small, or not-so-small, comments kids can hurl at each other. The kind of insults that stick in the back of your mind, ready to show themselves again when you’re at just the right level of vulnerable for them to still sting.

“I had wanted to write a song for ‘little me’ for a long time. A few years ago I read through my 5th-grade journal, and nearly every entry expressed anxieties about ever being pretty. At first, I found it amusing how superficial my aspirations were. But then I really felt for that little girl. For me, diving into the pain caused by society’s skinniness standards has been healing on the trajectory toward loving and understanding myself and my body.”

“Fine” is all about adulthood—how it feels to not adhere to societal timelines, but also having to explain that choice at every twist and turn. “Whether it’s a relationship or a career path or a spiritual journey, every experience is important. Formative. There is no deadline to live out our stories.”

“Mr. Wonderful” is a window to the highs and the haze of a controlling relationship. The fairytale, can’t-get-enough-of-each-other beginning to the other side of jealous text messages, exhausting hours of arguments and crippling self-doubt.

“Little White Lie,” an idea that had been in Stephanie’s head for years, discusses the dissolution of a marriage that perhaps was never really meant to be in the first place.

“I reflected on painful divorces I’d observed and channeled the sinking pit in my stomach I’d felt when previous boyfriends had brought up getting married,” she says. “A few months ago, as a recently-separated friend was moving out of her house, she came across her wedding dress. We all took a few moments to take it in. It was beautiful. It was love. It was truth. It was deception. It was growth. It was pain. And soon, it was in a garbage bag destined for Goodwill.”

Both “Somebody Else’s Dress” and “Save Me Tonight” continue the theme of examining rigid adherence to religion. The previous delves into homosexuality inside of evangelical Christianity, and how harmful the comments can be. The latter finds Stephanie processing questions about her inherited faith, and finding a way to express her need for space when it comes to spirituality.

“Old Folks Home” is exactly what it sounds like—a piercingly authentic look at what it means to grow old and also to watch someone get old, too.

“621 South Sugar Street is the address of the nursing home where both of my grandmothers spent some time—one only a couple of months and the other nearly six years,” Stephanie says. “From piano recitals when I was young, to volunteering at a facility’s bingo night in college, to visiting my grandmother in her final years, I’ve often wondered what it’s like to be on that side of the door alarm.”

“It’s a jolt of reality about the stage of life many of us dread for ourselves and our loved ones. It’s the loneliness that hangs heavy over the nurses’ stations. It’s the vacant faces. It’s the smell. It’s the guilt a granddaughter feels as she visits less and less as the grandmother she knew fades away. It’s the impossible decision of uprooting your loved one from their home. It’s the sad smile of someone who hopes you’ll visit again. It’s feeling understood. It’s being seen. It’s going home.”

Album closer “Birdsong Hollow” was inspired by a breathtaking valley on the Natchez Trace, about half an hour southwest of Nashville. Stretching over the valley is a double arch bridge, with a haunting sign: “There is still hope. Call anytime.”

“It shocked me when I read that the Natchez Trace Parkway is one of the country’s deadliest parks because of the suicide deaths off the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge,” she says. “I felt compelled to write about it. I began somewhat of an after-work ritual where I’d drive out to Birdsong Hollow, roll my windows down, and play a voice recording of my most recent incarnation of the song. I asked the souls to help me tell their stories—kind of hippie-ish for me! My hope is that this song is cathartic for all affected by suicide or suicidal thoughts. To offer a space to grieve, to feel understood, and to find a little bit of comfort.”

Within its 10 tracks, *Autonomy* is exactly what it says it is—Stephanie coming to terms with what her life and her world are made of. She asks listeners to take a moment and think about what makes them, and everyone who surrounds them, so human. The scars, the fears, the doubts, the resolution and the lights at the end of the tunnel.

“*Everything is a little less worse when someone sees you like a person,*” she sings in “Old Folks Home.” And that is what it’s all about.