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Album: *Stories Behind Songs*
Artist: Shantell Ogden

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With a folk-inflected country feel and a sonic landscape like a field of swaying wild flowers, *Stories Behind Songs*, a new album from songwriter Shantell Ogden, creates a series of vignettes that examine growth, aging, and the processes of discovery that accompany them. Though every song on the one-theme album deals with love – having it, losing it, finding it again – Ogden still manages not to hit you over the head with it. Instead, she comes at the universal though used trope from a perspective wiser for its age and experience - the deep and insightful introspection of the album simply leaves no room for “see him across the room and fall head over heels.” Though not old, the album is certainly grown up.

Ogden opens with the stand-out track, “Till John Wayne Comes Along”, which maintains a modern, playful feel while harkening back to the idyllic “once upon a time” of old westerns. The song exhales hopefulness, and begs you to breathe deeply, even if the skeptic in you balks at the idea. Catchy and clever, it paints timeless images in a contemporary new light.

“What Matters the Most” slows the pace with weeping strings and almost haunting vocals, allowing the message of the song to seep deeply into the cracks and spread. Mingling wisdom with an all too uncannily familiar humanness, the reminder to examine your priorities is not new, but is touching none the less.

Ending strong, the album brings a look from the other side of love in “I Love Different Now”. Beautiful and intricate picking draws you in and a catchy chorus and the tear in Ogden's voice hold you still, where the message can do its work. The speaker may be jilted, but she's not giving up. The bonus track “Stay” follows, with some of the best vocal highlights of the album coupled with a lyrical tempo that comes the closest to rap that country might ever get. Although the song is a ballad, it packs in the lyrics, which flow steadily and tell a story where tragedy battles with the ever-present hope that permeates the album.

Honest and expectantly hopeful, the mostly mid-tempo album brings in a little bit of swagger, a lot of hard-earned wisdom, and plenty of spot-on musicianship to keep you listening.