

Surfing a career high, poised to bring her West Coast AM goth-folk reveries to UK stages next month, WEYES BLOOD's stately Natalie Mering digs into her Pentecostal parentage, noise-rock baby steps, and ponders her destiny. "Maybe there was something inevitable about all this," she says to BOB MEHR.

Photography by **NEELAM KHAN VELA**

WHEN NATALIE MERING WAS SIX YEARS OLD, SHE BECAME AWARE OF HER father's secret.

This was not a family scandal or stain of some dark past, but the fact that her dad had once been a professional musician. More than that, Sumner Mering had stood in the vanguard of Los Angeles' late-'70s new wave explosion, with a major-label deal in his back pocket.

"He always played guitar in church, where he was the worship leader," recalls Mering. "So I knew he played music. But around that time he sat me and my brother down and sang us these songs he'd written. It was a crazy moment where it clicked in my head: my dad was a rock star!? Really?"

Three decades later, Mering – recording and performing as Weyes Blood – has accepted that inheritance. Her path, however, has been circuitous, from precocious teenage freak-folker to noise-rock miscreant, to West Coast dream-pop diva worshipped by musical aristocrats. Featuring on recent albums by John Cale and Lana Del Rey, and on the eve of a world tour to support a fifth Weyes Blood LP, Mering seems poised for even greater triumphs.

"In my family, I think we knew that music was the secret, the top secret actual priority," she says. "Maybe there was something inevitable about all this."

IT'S A COLD GREY DECEMBER DAY IN THE LA COUNTY ARBORETUM, A 127-ACRE BOTANICAL garden nestled at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, known for its peacocks who mingle freely with patrons. Today that includes MOJO and – bundled in a large black coat and behind a pair of oversized orange sunglasses – Natalie Mering, still buzzing from recent shows at downtown LA's Ace Theatre, a celebration of her latest acclaimed album, *And In The Darkness, Hearts Aglow*.

"When I get to play a bigger venue, I feel more nervous, which is good for the show," she says, walking briskly ➤

Going with the glow:
Natalie Mering, AKA
Weyes Blood, steps out of
the darkness, London,
September 18, 2022.



“ANY TIME YOU THINK ABOUT CHANGING, THERE’S A LITTLE BIT OF A FEAR OF SELLING OUT.”

Natalie Mering

◀ through the park. “A bigger crowd helps me get psyched up – because I’ve been doing this since I was 15...”

Born in Santa Monica in 1988, Mering moved with her family between Southern and Northern California before resettling in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Her parents, both musicians, had left their former lives behind and become devout members of the Pentecostal faith. “It was a little more than that,” adjusts Mering. “They were born again, so it was kind of New Age-y.”

Regardless, it was a far cry from the Hollywood glamour that Summer Mering had once basked in. As the frontman of the titular band Sumner, he was a charismatic figure who’d once dated Joni Mitchell. In 1979, his group signed to Asylum/Elektra, and recorded their debut with Jack Nitzsche. The album, *Sumner*, came out in 1980 and disappeared soon after. His conversion, a career in medical publishing and the move east would follow.

From the start, music seemed part of his daughter’s DNA. She picked up piano and guitar by ear, wrote songs. In school, she dove deep into Radiohead and Ween – “weird” bands for Doylestown. “I’d read *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, and wanted to start a Sonic Youth-type band,” she says. “But nobody wanted me in their band.”

Experimenting with her father’s old 4-track, she ploughed a lonelier furrow. “Eventually, I heard Syd Barrett’s *The Madcap Laughs*, especially that track Terrapin, with the lazy acoustic guitar,” she says. “I got a nylon-string and went full-on folk weird and gave up on the whole idea of being in rock band.”

Working at a record store in Doylestown and making regular trips to nearby Philadelphia to catch underground concerts offered a period of accelerated development. “There was a certain turning point where I just decided, I’m gonna do this,” she says. “If there was any place where my family’s religious background came in, it was the fervour of pursuing my passion for music – as if it was the meaning of life or some weird spiritual practice.”

Graduating high school early, she moved to Philly, where she began the first iteration of Weyes Blood – pronounced *as per* Wise

Blood, Flannery O’Connor’s Southern gothic novel.

“I would just play my nylon-string and had two friends who would do tape sounds and play duelling saws,” says Mering. “It was a really great way for me to grow as an artist, but it wasn’t like I was exhibiting signs of creating high quality pop material.”

Mering’s gnarly muse decreed a move to the North-west – home of music she loved on labels like Sub Pop and K – where she attended Lewis & Clark College in Portland. But the welcome was not what she’d hoped. “I was just one of a thousand people making that kind of music,” she says. “No one was impressed with me at all.”

Mering’s immediate response: double down on gnarl. She toured on bass with improv experimentalists Jackie-O Motherfucker and played keyboards for theatrical throb-rockers Satanized.

“Noise was the zone where it felt like a lot of the energy was at,” says Mering. “In a way, it was like, OK, I’m going to make even *less* accessible music.”

OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS, MERING FLITTED between cities and music scenes, mostly along the East Coast – Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York – though her travels would also find her tapping maple trees for syrup in rural Kentucky and studying herbalism in the New Mexico desert. “I was a wandering minstrel, basically,” says Mering. “Any time a place got weird I could very easily leave. My life was so small it fit in my car.”

So far, the practical reality of a music career was eluding her. “My generation got emptied into a recession economy where you couldn’t work at a coffee shop and have a decent place to live and do art,” she notes. “The generation before could, so we all thought we could. I was wandering because I had no money. I was constantly looking for some way to make it all magically work.”

Meanwhile, Mering had come to the end of her romance with the largely male-dominated underground rock subculture.

“The scene I was in had become the most conformist circle jerk of all time,” she says. “It was so political and there was so many weird vibes.” The turning point for Mering came during a warehouse gig in Baltimore, where she got into a contretemps with a group of scenesters who’d set up a poker table in the middle of the floor. Mering upended their game by jumping on the table: “I was like, This is over. I don’t need to be here any more.”

Blood types: (clockwise from far left) Mering in her purple patch, Roskilde Festival, Denmark, 2019; Mering’s father’s 1980 LP; group shot supporting 2014’s *The Innocents*, The Fader Fort, New York; bringing the noise on-stage with Jackie-O Motherfucker; Mering with collaborators Lana Del Rey (centre) and Zella Day, 2019; a ghostly presence in London, September 2022; on-stage at the Ace Hotel, LA, last September.

Avalon/red; Getty (2); Doug Coombe; Neeleam Khan/Vela; Cameron McCool

WEYES GUISES

Weyes Blood, album by album, by Bob Mehr.

THE OUTSIDE ROOM

★★★

(*Not Not Fun*, 2011)

This six-song, 40-minute affair plays as a statement of intent: a goth-folk mix that draws on and reshapes everything from *Marble Index*-era Nico, the avant-garde atmospherics of Linda Perhacs, to the gauze-pop of Mazzy Star.

THE INNOCENTS

★★★

(*Mexican Summer*, 2014)

Melancholy mood pieces find further layers of depth with added electronic elements: tape effects and found sounds. Her voice – warbling alone or multi-tracked majestically – becomes the main character here, bringing a cinematic sensibility to the fore.

FRONT ROW SEAT TO EARTH

★★★★

(*Mexican Summer*, 2016)

Moving towards the sounds of ‘70s AM gold, with words of existential Gen Y dread, Mering heralds an expansion of her sonic universe, and a growing comfort with playful phrasing (variously recalling Joni Mitchell and Aimee Mann) and melodic pop.

TITANIC RISING

★★★★★

(*Sub Pop*, 2019)

“Enya meets Bob Seger,” Mering would offer in the press release. And something like that strange merger reveals itself across 10 songs of epic grandeur, New Age chill, and occasional rock ballast, with online dating and climate change among their topics.

AND IN THE DARKNESS, HEARTS AGLOW

★★★★★

(*Sub Pop*, 2022)

Born out of pandemic isolation, the songs on Mering’s latest seethe and swoon with an apocalyptic awareness. Meanwhile, evocative orchestrations and ethereal soundscapes eddy, finding new ways of making everyday dramas feel otherworldly and grand.

it felt for a moment pretty euphoric.”

Mering fell in with a crowd of SoCal natives, producers and engineers, including Foxygen’s Jonathan Rado, Deerhoof’s Chris Cohen, and Ariel Pink band veteran Kenny Gilmore. “The people who have worked on my records, they remember growing up here in LA,” says Mering. “We share these similar obsessions with music and movies, and this whole conglomerate, palace of sin thing.”

Mering’s first LA record, *Front Row Seat To Earth*, released in 2016, marked a creative breakthrough. Since then, they’ve kept coming. *Titanic Rising* (2019) found her refining her formula – wrapping her searching, dystopian lyrics inside soft-rock hymnals. Last year’s *And In The Darkness, Hearts Aglow*, continues that winning streak. Embracing collaboration in the studio – *Darkness* features contributions from drummer Joey Waronker, harpist Mary Lattimore, The Lemon Twigs and the Nona string quartet – has been a crucial change.

“There’s a part of me that’s a studio rat that would like to just build my own universe and make records all alone – pull a Todd Rundgren,” she says. “But working with other people has really sealed the deal on my songs. I was finally able to record what I heard in my head.”

Mering’s already looking ahead to her next LP – which she says will close out a thematic trilogy that began with *Titanic* – but admits to a niggling concern. Despite her decisive and confident manner, she is sensitive to the heightened expectations that have come with her recent elevation to LA’s Most Wanted.

“There’s this new-found idea of having ‘made it,’” she says, offering a smile. “So there’s more to lose. I can’t imagine what it must feel like when you *really* make it.”