

There's a story that bandleader Sarah Dunn likes to tell about the extraordinary way in which she entered the world 27 years ago. Her mother Deborah, nine months pregnant, completed a full shift at the restaurant where she worked, drove herself to a midwife a half hour away to give birth and then drove back home with her baby girl on the same day. Incredible as that may be, she wasn't finished.

"Then she mowed the yard with a push mower," says Dunn, shaking her head in disbelief. "That is a woman! That's where I get my toughness."

Like her mother before her, Dunn possesses a resilience that resonates loud and clear through her music. The Missouri-based singer-fiddle player, whose *Wild Wild Heart* EP came out in 2016, follows that release by stepping fully into her own with the new album *Unbridle Me*. Combining the scrappy attitude of its predecessor with Dunn's growing confidence to tackle new subjects as a writer, *Unbridle Me* reflects a life of growing up tough and holding on to the things that matter.

Born and raised in southwestern Missouri, Dunn grew up surrounded by a musical family. Her grandfather was an early rock & roller in the area, and she started learning to sing by sitting at the piano while her mother played. Music was also a respite from the hours of hard work Dunn's family had to put in on their small farm. They didn't have much in the way of material wealth, but they had one another and worked to inoculate themselves against lean times. They'd can vegetables for later use and raise a pig or cow for butchering, doing whatever they had to do to survive.

"We worked so hard, there was not very much time for entertainment," says Dunn. "So at the end of the day that's why music is so important to me. It's such a rock in my life because that was a lot of our fun time."

Across its nine tracks, *Unbridle Me* plays up that irrepressible freedom offered by performing music, along with serious dives into relationship politics and personal tragedies. First single "Figure It Out" rumbles dramatically with cello and piano while depicting a woman in the immediate aftermath of a breakup, sifting through the rubble as she grieves. "How could you move on so fast with your life, when I can't even close my eyes at night?" she sings.

"I feel like I had chosen this one to introduce the album a long time ago, in my heart," says Dunn. "I feel a sense of confidence and certainly a sense of freedom that comes with change in your life."

"Figure It Out" is the first time Dunn has released a heavy ballad as a single, a sign of the liberating experience she enjoyed while recording *Unbridle Me* and taking new chances with her songwriting. The album's title track nods at that process, appealing for someone take off her metaphorical restraints.

"It's about being able to appreciate someone or something for exactly what their nature is," she says. "I'm a person who loves adventure, freedom, open spaces, and thankfully I'm surrounded by people in life who've always understood that, like my mama."

The presence of a strong maternal figure reappears on *Unbridle Me's* searing "The Ballad of Ellie Nesler," where Dunn relates the complicated real-life story of a California woman who shot and killed her son's alleged abuser in an act of vigilante justice. "What a raw, emotional story," says Dunn, who initially heard about Nesler while binge-watching true crime shows. "I was so gripped that I just turned off the TV and walked around to the counter and wrote the entire song in 10 minutes. When I got it done, I stepped back and thought, that's kind of dark."

"The Ballad of Ellie Nesler" certainly offers no easy answers, leaving listeners to wrestle with their own feelings about how this act of violence played out. How far would you go for your children and how can you judge unless you've been there?

"That's why I say, 'There's nobody volunteering to walk a mile in her shoes,'" says Dunn. "You can stand back and talk about it all you want it, but unless you've lived that, you don't know exactly what you would've done."

While "The Ballad of Ellie Nesler" certainly shows Dunn to be pushing herself as a songwriter, she hasn't left her past behind on *Unbridle Me*. "Dreamer," which shimmers with cascading guitar leads and washes of steel guitar, is actually one of Dunn's oldest compositions and ties back in to the album's theme of liberation.

"It took at least 10 years from the time I wrote it to the time it was recorded," she says, laughing. "I guess it took that long to mature."

Dunn recalls family history for "A Cowboy's Face," honoring her uncle Gene. She also plays contented partner and reckless heartbreaker with equal zeal, sweetly embodying the former on "I'll Let You Drive" and devilishly embracing the latter on "A Cautionary Tale." She even injects a winking bit of humor into "Weddings and Funerals," lampooning family dysfunction and the inevitability of both. Dunn was actually her hometown's go-to funeral singer for a stretch.

"I hate attending both, to be honest," says Dunn. "But you have to remember that it's a huge honor – it's the last thing on earth that you can do for a person."

Whether she's honoring the departed or singing about vigilante justice, Dunn is bold and uncompromising in her choices. *Unbridle Me* taught her to have faith and trust what her instincts were saying.

"I shouldn't second-guess myself or hide," she says. "If it's meaningful to me, I sometimes need to think about how it could have an impact on someone else."

With *Unbridle Me*, Sarah Dunn embraces freedom to sing for the dreamers, the misunderstood and the restless romantics.