

## Features

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## Best of What's Next: Chris Pureka



**On Chris Pureka's new album, *How I Learned to See in the Dark* (out now), you'll notice some pretty gloomy song titles**

—“Wrecking Ball,” “Shipwreck,” “Hangman.” The Massachusetts-based singer/songwriter has been noted before for incorporating sad imagery into her music, but on *Dark* she's made an effort to sound even darker than usual. Unlike her two previous efforts, which mostly paired her songs with an acoustic guitar, *Dark* places

her fragile, somber delivery against an atmospheric, gritty palette that happily conjures images of the grayer sides of life. Scenes of heartbreak, despair and even the death of life that autumn represents pervade the set, but Pureka is hardly feeling gloomy about it. "I love all my past projects but I'm really excited about this one," she says. *Paste* caught with her via phone earlier this month, just before she kicked off her spring tour in Portland, Ore., to talk about the new album, playing with a band and the inspirational aspects of bad weather.

**Paste:** I have to ask the obvious question here. What is the darkness that you're trying to see through and how did you learn to see in the dark—and do the rest of us that are still in the dark really want to find out?

**Chris Pureka:** (*Laughs*) That's a hard question to answer, I think. The name of the record title comes from one of the songs. It comes from the first track, "Wrecking Ball." I think the reason I named the record that is there's a lot of light and dark imagery on it and it works with scenes of moving through something really hard to get to something better. And that is true on this record. I mean, "How I learned to see in the dark"—the line in the song is basically a song about being heartbroken. And it's sort of just like how you can make something good out of something hard—to take the good out of something negative.

**Paste:** Was it hard to make this record?

**Pureka:** It was. This was the hardest thing I've maybe ever done, actually. It took me a year. I worked on it from basically last January, February until it was getting mastered in December. And I was working on it—not the entire time, but I worked on it a lot in the spring and a lot in the fall. But it just spans such a long time-frame. And there were a lot of internal factors that factored into that. But it was really hard for me. It was very difficult.

**Paste:** I know that making a record is never really easy, but I can see how someone that puts so much of their emotions into songs the way that you do—I can see how it could be a little excruciating.

**Pureka:** Yeah, but I mean, I've always sort of done that. And I've actually, well, this is my third full-length record and the first two records just came so much easier. They were a lot easier to make and I think part of it is I had a much more ambitious plan [with this record]. I had [Tune-Yard's Merrill Garbus] come in and help me co-produce it. Just because of the layering on it, there's so much going on that everything just took longer. First of all, there's more tracking happening and then you just have to try to kind of balance and figure out all these layers and how they're going to fit together. And the more layers you have, the more permutations of things you have. The previous projects have been much more stripped down and I really enjoyed working that way because it offers so much simplicity. This was really different from that but it

was also really rewarding and I really learned a lot from the process. And I feel like it was worth it in the end.

**Paste:** What did you want to accomplish with this record?

**Pureka:** I wanted it to feel like a deeper, darker record and I wanted it to feel different. I feel like the songs are different, the way I've been writing feels like it's evolved in a new way and I wanted the production to complement that. And I've been playing more with a band and so there's more of a focus on band arrangements and less of a focus on just songwriter/guitar stuff. And I wanted the record to reflect that. I wanted it to feel like growth and maturity, which is how I feel it turned out. I feel like it's a natural progression from where I was before.

**Paste:** How do you go about songwriting?

**Pureka:** Usually, I sit down and start playing around with whatever comes to mind on guitar. And then usually a melody develops out of a guitar part. And then I write the lyrics last. The lyrics are the hardest part for me, actually. I think they take the longest.

**Paste:** Everyone has their own process. For some people it's right the opposite, starting with the lyrics. Why are the lyrics the hardest part for you?

**Pureka:** For one thing, a lot of people keep journals and keep these notebooks of ideas and have all these thoughts and are always writing things down. And I really don't do any of that. The only time I ever really write is when I write songs, which is kind of crazy. But I think it works a little bit to my advantage because all the processing sort of happens in the head. And then when I'm ready to work on the song I'm really focused about it. I don't have to read through all this stuff. But I don't know, everyone does do those things differently and I've just never been the kind of person to write down everything all the time. So when it comes down to writing lyrics I have to really, really get into it.

**Paste:** How do you get yourself into it?

**Pureka:** Honestly, my songs revolve around a phrase that first comes to mind. And then I'll build the song around that idea. I gather images and imagery and build it onto the song and onto the idea of the song. It's pretty rare that I would start writing a song and be like, "This is what the song's going to be about" before I even start writing it. Usually I'm writing the song before I know what it's about and then I decide and build things on top of it.

**Paste:** I could easily see you writing a novel or something because your songs—the imagery is very good and you have a lot of atmosphere. You also have this fragility and this pain and you're only 30 years old. Was that always present for you or is that something that has just come with living?



**Pureka:** Yeah, well I've always written that way. I think songwriting is my way of getting everything I need to get out, out. I think it's my emotional outlet. I don't know. Other people, they do yoga, they do other stuff, they write in their journal but songs are the way I work through things that I'm going through. I guess there's just a lot of intensity in that. And it is sort of the way that I've always written. All of my songs have always been a very "heart on your sleeve" kind of style. I can't really explain it, but that's just the way that I write. I don't really know another way to write.

**Paste:** Well, you began writing at 8 years old so I'm curious what an 8-year-old was writing about.

**Pureka:** (*Laughs*) Well, those songs, I never really—yeah, those songs were 8-year-old songs! We had a piano in my basement and I don't even play piano. I would just make things up. They were legitimately melodic songs but I didn't know what I was doing. There was kind of a big gap. I had all this interest in music as a young person but then I didn't actually start taking it seriously until I was 16. And that was when I really started writing songs. And at that time 16 was a really difficult time and that was sort of why guitar I think became such an important part of my life—well, music did in general.

**Paste:** New England has historically been this hotbed for folk music—how did you become exposed to it?

**Pureka:** Well, I grew up here. I grew up in Connecticut and I went to college in Connecticut and I now live in Massachusetts so I've pretty much spent my whole life here—it's a big part of me. I really connect with this part of the country and this place. The seasons here are so important to me. I feel like it's almost important for my songwriting process too. It allows you to reflect on so many emotions as the weather changes and everything changes.

**Paste:** What's your favorite season?

**Pureka:** I love the fall—it's my favorite! I look forward to it all year long.

**Paste:** How does that turn up in your songwriting?

**Pureka:** It does a lot. I include a lot of weather imagery and seasonality. I even have a song [on *How I Learned to See in the Dark*] called "Song for November" and it's about being, well, it's a really depressing song. (*Laughs*) It's just about connecting to that time of year.

**Paste:** I think a lot creative people tend to like the fall. I love fall. And I love winter as well. I'm the only person I know who likes winter. I like it because it's kind of depressing.

**Pureka:** Yeah! I agree.

**Paste:** Good! Thank you! I have a comrade in arms here. Everyone else thinks I'm crazy.

**Pureka:** No! The thing is, winter makes you appreciate the other seasons, that's why. It's kind of like with this record, getting through something hard to get to something better. The winter is that incarnate. You can't really appreciate how good spring is unless winter kicks your ass a little bit.

**Paste:** Absolutely. Was it hard for you, though, growing up in a small town?

**Pureka:** Yeah, I hated it.

**Paste:** Don't mince any words, Chris.

**Pureka:** I mean, it's a pretty well-known fact at this point that I really hated where I grew up. It was really hard for me. Later, I went Wesleyan University, which is a super progressive liberal school and I made a lot of great connections there. I feel like that was the place that allowed me to become a musician, to be honest. So, I feel like I got lucky [in that respect].

**Paste:** What's interesting though, is while you were at Wesleyan you were studying biology. Where did that come from?

**Pureka:** I was always really interested in biology and science. When I was a kid I was really into nature. I volunteered at the nature center and all that stuff. So, that's where my interest in biology came from. I really do love it. I was doing music simultaneously. I graduated from college and worked in a lab—I worked in a lab shop for four years. I was playing music and building a following at the same time and eventually I had enough work from shows—touring—that I could leave the lab, so I did.

**Paste:** It seems like that would be difficult with two diametrically opposed ways of thinking. You have your creative side and then the scientific side. Was there conflict there going back and forth?

**Pureka:** Not at all, actually. It was kind of refreshing because it exercised both sides of my mind. I would go and work in the lab during the day and have some real analytical thinking going on and then I would come home and be really creative. I enjoyed it. I think what's really interesting and what they have in common is for both biology and for songwriting you have to have keen a sense of observation. And that's kind of what songwriting's all about. And that's sort of what biology is about too is observing stuff and keeping track of it—recording it.

**Paste:** Do you think it's helped you in the way you approach songwriting—from a practical standpoint?

**Pureka:** Well, one thing I do think is that I tend to think in a more linear way than a lot of songwriters. My songs tend to have a beginning and an end and a progression

throughout them. And a lot of songwriters think more circularly or just jump around a lot, making connections. But I usually have a linear process which is related to that. I think that's how my brain works best.

**Paste:** Where do you see yourself fitting in among singer/songwriters? You've been called Americana, folk and everything in between.

**Pureka:** I don't think this record I just made—I wouldn't consider it an Americana record. I think that my last record was an Americana record, so I don't really know exactly how to negotiate those labels. But I think my new record, I would call it a singer/songwriter, indie singer/songwriter record. I mean, what do you call a Neko Case or an Elvis Perkins? I feel like that's the sort of thing that I want, the sort of genre I want to be included in. I don't know, what do you call them? They're just singer/songwriters. But they're not like John Gorka or Dar Williams. (*Laughs*)