

iron & wine

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Interview by Tina Essmaker / February 24, 2015

Sam Beam, better known by his stage name, Iron & Wine, is a singer-songwriter now based in North Carolina. Prior to music, he studied painting, earning a Bachelor's of Art from Virginia Commonwealth University and an MFA from Florida State University Film School. He was a professor of film and cinematography at the Miami International University of Art & Design before catching the attention of Sub Pop Records. His first full-length album, *The Creek Drank the Cradle*, debuted on Sub Pop in 2002, and he has since gone on to release five studio albums and various EPs and compilations. His newest album, *Archive Series Volume No. 1*, featuring otherwise unreleased home recordings from the Creek era and is now available on his own label, Black Cricket Recording Co.

Your new album, Archive Series Volume No. 1, features otherwise unreleased home recordings from the Creek era. What was your inspiration to dig through the archives for this album?

People have been asking me about this forever, and it's always been on the edge of my peripheral vision. When I put out my first album, it was made known that there was much more. That album wasn't written as a record; it included songs plucked from a big pile of songs that I'd been writing for years. I released some EPs after I made that first record, but then I kept writing new songs, so I wanted to put out the new stuff. Some of the early songs are out there on the Internet, but not in a curated kind of fashion. I liked all of those songs, and I wasn't trying to hide them, but at a certain point, I had to move on—and a lot of those songs were left behind.

I felt lucky that people had gravitated toward that first record and the feeling of those songs, because a lot of people don't even get that. But I was trying to push my audience by saying, "*This* is what I'm doing now." To go back and release the old stuff felt like putting out an alternative version of myself, and, for better or worse, I didn't want to give people alternatives. But I recently had a window where some projects I was working on needed time to develop, and it seemed like a good point to put out this older stuff.

It also seemed like there had been enough time since those songs had been written—it's been over a decade since I put out that first album. I don't sit around and listen to my music, so when I decided to release this album, I had to go back through everything. Some of those songs are now 15 years old or more, and you can feel the distance. Listening to them was like shaking hands with myself—that's a strange feeling.

And you'll be releasing multiple archive albums since this is volume one?

That's the idea. There's still a lot of stuff from that pile of songs, which was whittled down into something digestible for this album.

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Will you be playing any shows in the near future?

There are a few things in the works. When I get an offer for one show, I try to string a few other shows along on the same trip so I'm not paying to go play. It takes so much money just to get out the door, especially when you have a band. I do know there's some West Coast stuff coming up.

Speaking of shows, what was your first one like?

You know, it's odd. That touring lifestyle wasn't on my radar when I was into music as a kid, or even when I was in college. Now I've been doing it long enough to know venues in most places. It's fun to have traveled so much and have an immediate connection with someone who works at a venue or someone else who's traveling through and also has a connection to that place.

The first show I ever played in front of people was a test show, which sounds ridiculous now. I had been talking with Sub Pop Records, and they told me I should go on tour. They were putting out this side project called Ugly Casanova, which was by Isaac Brock of Modest Mouse. Sub Pop was looking for an opening band, so they sent Isaac down to Florida to play a show, which I opened for. I basically played a solo show at the Dorsch Gallery in Miami for Isaac, some Sub Poppers, and a bunch of friends. I was petrified, and I'm sure it sounded like ass, but they didn't care. It was a way for Sub Pop to figure out if I was cool and if I'd be good to hang with on tour, because I couldn't imagine anyone saying, "I need that to open my show."

That was the first official show I played, and then I had to put together a band. I called my sister because I knew she could sing, and I called some friends of mine from Tallahassee because I knew they had bands and could play. We had a crash course to learn my tunes, which luckily only had a few chords in them. And then we went on the road, opening up for Isaac.

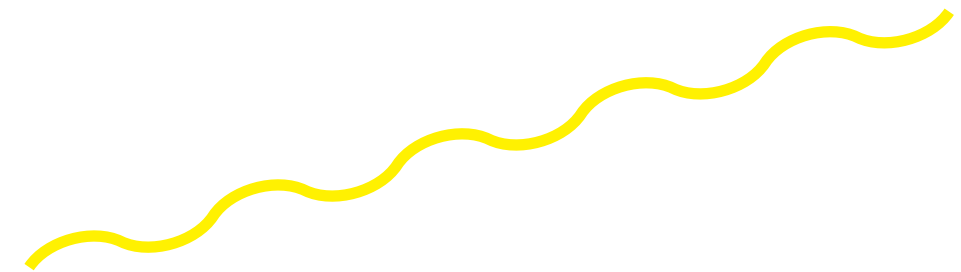
Was your family surprised when you started playing music?

I think my whole music career was a surprise to everyone in my family because I was always such a strident introvert. I can make conversation with anyone, and I like people, but I've never felt the desire to get up on stage and strut around. That's something I've had to learn to enjoy. I was okay with being in front of people because I had been teaching for a while, but playing music had a learning curve attached to it. The hurdle wasn't about being able to do it, because I could get up there and play—it was really about enjoying it.

“I like polishing things before I present them to people, so when I record, I’m like a pig in shit. I love it. But playing shows is immediate and I’m not in control. It took me a long time to enjoy that spontaneity and take chances.”

I was spending a lot of time up there, but I wasn't enjoying it because it was contrary to my personality. I like polishing things before I present them to people, so when I record, I'm like a pig in shit. I love it. But playing shows is immediate and I'm not in control. It took me a long time to enjoy that spontaneity and take chances. It took fucking up in front of a lot of people enough times over a long period to realize that it doesn't matter. Your intent is so much more important, but it took me the better part of a decade to learn that lesson.

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In addition to *Archive Series Volume No. 1*, do you have any other projects in the works right now?

Yeah, over the summer I did a record of covers with Ben Bridwell from Band of Horses. He and I grew up together and have been trying to figure out a way to collaborate for years. We cleared the books last summer and did this covers album, which we hope to put out this year. And then I’m getting ready to go into the studio to record duets I’ve been writing over the last year or so with an artist named Jesca Hoop. She’s amazing, and it’s been a real treat. We’ll be recording that next month.

Well, we can’t wait to hear it.