M

usically as well as figuratively, Iowa-born singer-songwriter, Pieta Brown (https://www.pietabrown.com) honors the long sustain—a fact which was amply evidenced by her sold-out fall 2017 performance in the Grinnell (Iowa) Area Arts Council’s (https://www.grinnellarts.org) gallery space, backed by Grammy-award winning guitarist Bo Ramsey (https://www.boramsey.com). Her layered refrains make for a straightforward but lush musical atmosphere that recalls traditional folk and blues, while her strong yet breathy vocals run more indie and alt-country. It’s an infectious blend that ably supports Brown’s clear sense of tradition and place. Put another way, her music epitomizes contemporary Middle-America songwriting.

Watching her play, I found myself watching her fingers on the guitar neck at the end of each song. On each song ending, she pressed the strings and gently waved the neck, drawing the final sound out in a reverent, lasting fade. This impression of that night has stayed with me: that resonant, purposeful close, which was really an intention to remain. After the concert, playing Brown’s music over the long Iowa freeze, I managed to stay mindful of what was alive, woven as kith, under the cold ground of our prairie winter. The roots that anchor the tallgrasses, summer coneflowers, and September asters exemplify the sort of anchoring that flourishes in Pieta Brown’s music. Her artistry honors that long sustain of kinship and season.

“I really believe in the land-music connection,” Brown said.

Brown’s Iowa roots do run deep. She played the Art Center with renowned guitarist and producer, Bo Ramsey, her accompanist and frequent collaborator. In addition to his Grammy-winning guitar skills, Bo is a highly respected producer and songwriter, and an inductee of both the Iowa Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (http://www.iowarocknroll.com) and the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame (http://cibs.org/events-programs/iowa-blues-hall-of-fame). Two of Ramsey’s sons, Alex and Benson Ramsey, are in the band The Pines (http://thepinesmusic.com), which played in the first joint-offering from the Grinnell Arts Council and the Center for Prairie Studies, back in January of 2017 (https://rootstalk.grinnell.edu/index.php/article/pines-concert). Ramsey is also a long-time friend and collaborator with Pieta Brown’s father, Greg Brown (https://gregbrownmusic.org), another colossal Iowa music talent. Greg Brown is known for his hybrid style of blues, folk, and rock, and for songs like “Iowa Waltz.” Greg Brown’s wife—Pieta’s stepmother—is the singer-songwriter Iris DeMent (https://www.irisdement.com).

“I grew up in Iowa,” Brown told the crowd. She described childhood memories of living in a remote, rural home somewhere outside Iowa City, a “shack, really.” She said she had driven around in recent years looking for that house, but couldn’t find it again.

That image of driving blue highways looking for a remembered home, a lost home, stuck with me. It’s an image that matches Brown’s dreamy, memory-scape sound. She said that her father often took them out on “this sort of southern Iowa circuit,” and she recounted the excitement of reaching a giant firework stand each time they’d cross the Missouri border.

Pieta Brown’s childhood, she told us, was full of music. She was often surrounded by family members playing various instruments*—*her grandmother on the pump organ for one*—*in spontaneous jams. But judging from her remarks throughout the night, being rooted in song means more to Brown than having a musical pedigree or serving as a link to Iowa music royalty. It means a lifelong appreciation for other musicians, and feeling a sense of musical kinship that is woven into her life as a songwriter and performer. Throughout the evening, Brown referred to her work in music, and to life on the tour-road, as one rich with collaboration, and full of admiration for other artists.

This appreciation and admiration was evident on stage with Bo Ramsey. Though it was Brown’s name on the ticket, she wanted us to realize that we were fortunate to be there with Ramsey, whom she described as a guitarist with “a unique gift.” Brown’s humility and gratitude cohered into a kind of formality, which Ramsey shared. This formality carried into their dress and stage presence, which had a sort of country-hip mystique, but also seemed old school polite—a “thank you for having us tonight, ma’am” kind of respectfulness. Their mutual attitude was, to me, one of sincere tribute, to both the night and the work. Brown and Ramsey created an intimate musical space. They were prepared, but also improvisational. Ramsey, in his signature cowboy hat and quiet demeanor, played from a selection of guitars to beautifully crystallize the sense of yearning and tenderness at the heart of Brown’s songs, and he complemented Brown’s acoustic strumming with expressive notes and tremolos. I could see the two actively listening to one another, for one another, and I did in fact feel fortunate to be there.

“I don’t mind this old world,” Brown said, smiling. The comment instantly reminded me of the Lucinda Williams song “Sweet Old World”—a song that, incidentally, Ramsey has played with Williams. But then during a mischievous pause, before Brown got about as politically pointed as she would all evening, she said: “It’s easy to mind it a little bit these days”—some laughter of agreement from the crowd—“but deep down, I don’t really mind it.”

While most of Brown’s set list dug into her own solo roots*—*which go back eight albums to her self-titled release in 2002*—*she also played several songs from her March, 2017 album, *Postcards* (https://lnk.to/postcards). For *Postcards*, Brown had invited long-distance collaborations with other musicians, people she admired and sought to work with despite being miles away. Viewing music “as a collaborative pleasure,” she said that each song on the album had been co-written across the miles through musical correspondence, or “musical postcards.” Postcard collaborators include Calexico (http://www.casadecalexico.com), Mason Jennings (http://masonjennings.com), The Pines, and Mark Knopfler (of Dire Straits fame; http://www.markknopfler.com), among others.

In performing “Street Tracker,” the song she collaborated on with Knopfler for *Postcards*, Brown even sought to collaborate with the audience. She pulled us into participation, not in a raucous call and response, but into soft echo after each verse. When she prompted, “I don’t want to,” we sang back, “don’t want to go home.” And we didn’t.