

**“It don’t cost no money, if your pockets are empty, sunshine is free.”** It’s clear when speaking with singer-songwriter Monica Rizzio that she sees the bright side. Her new album, *Sunshine Is Free*, is all about doing just that: appreciating how the little things in life make it all worth it. A bonfire on a beach. A couple of days with the one you love. Simply doing...nothing.

“I approached this record entirely different than my first album,” Monica says. “Collaboration is really what connects these songs. I lived in Nashville in the early 2000s; it was at those iconic open mics at 12th & Porter, Douglas Corner and The Bluebird Cafe when I first heard songwriters like Mindy Smith, Hillary Lindsey, and Elizabeth Cook. I learned a lot about songwriting from these women, and I wanted to get back to Nashville to harness my creative spirit and start co-writing, something I have struggled with. Starting in October 2018, I would fly down to Nashville every few weeks for writing sessions. The only constant was me and my vision for the album, everything else was new.”

Monica returned to Nashville’s Skinny Elephant Recording to record *Sunshine Is Free* over a week in April, along with producer Michael Rinne (*Kelsey Waldon, Erin Rae, Caroline Spence*). The album includes a stacked lineup of guest musicians including Mindy Smith, Maya de Vitry, Joe Pisapia (*Guster*), Gwen Sebastian (*Miranda Lambert*), Will Kimbrough (*Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell*), Todd Lombardo, Spencer Cullum Jr. (*Miranda Lambert*), Danny Mitchell (*Miranda Lambert*) and Eamon McLoughlin (*Emmylou Harris, the Grand Ole Opry*) along with co-writers including Mindy Smith, Michael Rinne, Gwen Sebastian, Aaron Raitiere (*A Star Is Born, Lori McKenna, Anderson East*), Carl Anderson, Mark Erelli and Hayley Sabella.

Growing up about a hundred miles outside of Dallas, in a small town in East Texas, Monica did what many people do in rural Texas: she learned to sing gospel hymns in church and received an education in classic country music with exposure to greats like Willie Nelson, Buck Owens, Connie Francis and Dolly Parton. “Don’t Keep Me Up Waiting,” is a waltz inspired by years of spinning Willie Nelson’s *Red Headed Stranger* album over and over, the infectious pedal steel highlights this tribute to her musical idols.

“My first instrument was my voice, because it was the cheapest and everyone sang in church,” she says.

With a perspective equally influenced by her Texas roots and her Cape Cod home, Monica has emerged as one of the finest talents in the East Coast music scene. After a decade with Tripping Lily, a folk acoustic-pop band, to which she added fiddle and vocals, she’s now embarked on a solo career that draws on her East Texas rust upbringing for a countrified Americana sound.

She released her debut album, aptly named *Washashore Cowgirl*, in 2016; the collection is a testament to the relationships she has forged throughout the years with other artists, including appearances by Mark Erelli, Sierra Hull, Abbie Gardner & Molly Venter (*Red Molly*), Tim Chaisson (*The East Pointers*), Brittany Haas (*Hawktail*) Mark Erelli, and Laney Jones.

Where *Washashore Cowgirl* was Monica’s solo introduction, *Sunshine is Free* is her expansion -- after time spent on the road touring with *Washashore Cowgirl*, she realized it was time for her to start collaborating again.

“For the past ten years, I was very wary of collaborating with others, especially with songwriting,” she says. “I tried from time to time, but it always felt forced. The concept for *Sunshine is Free* was born from open road touring, the big skies, and the people I met. I knew that I needed to leave my kitchen table during the doldrums of a New England winter to write my next record, and enough time had passed for me to get back to that five-year town of Nashville.”

The resulting eleven tracks often focus on finding joy in simpler things; the title track, “Sunshine Is Free,” is an upbeat number, expanded by an infectious bass line and a rollicking banjo. The song practically begs to be a summer staple.

“Don’t they say the best things in life are free? Is it not enough to be happy with the simple things in life, like taking yourself to the movies and getting a big popcorn or building a fire on the beach,” she says.

Sticking with the simplicity-of-life theme on “Nothin’,” Monica and fellow hard-working co-writers Michael Rinne and Gwen Sebastian created a dreamy scenario where they romanticized the perfect day of doing nothing: no to-do lists, reading Hemingway and sipping on a glass of wine.

“The art of doing nothing is lost in our society today. We over-schedule ourselves, we have technology in the palm of our hands,” Monica says. “There was nothing ever pressing in East Texas, and as an adult I yearn for that feeling.”

The upbeat rocker “Story of My New Year” showcases Monica’s versatility as a singer and foreshadows the direction of *Sunshine is Free* -- as a new year rolls in, the future is boundless. “My Sweet Heart” is a love song guided by a desire to advise a younger self whose heart is aching. “When you are in the moment of pain, it feels like the heart is drowning, but there is a reason that the heart is the strongest and can love again,” she says.

One of Monica’s inspirations from her early Nashville open mic days was Mindy Smith; though the pair remained friends from afar over the years, they had never written together until they penned “While With You.” It’s a tried-and-true love song full of mesmerizing melodies, written in an East Nashville AirBnB. “Mindy added her timeless harmonies and left everyone in the studio speechless,” Monica says.

“The Shire,” features a Jerry Garcia-esque electric guitar and a dancing mandolin, capturing the ethos of The Berkshires in Western Massachusetts, where the song was written after a long weekend away.

“My husband and I escaped to a cabin way off the beaten path with no wifi, just an old turntable, a pen, and some paper...maybe some wine too,” she says. “He grew up in those hills, and this anthemic song captures every bit of his essence.”

Throughout the album’s eleven tracks, Monica also examines the silver lining of difficult situations. “Little Bit of Truth” centers around an eye-opening 30 days during *Washashore Cowgirl’s* album release tour, which found her reconciling the evangelical childhood lessons with the current beliefs she has developed from living in different places and traveling. “Through that tour, I learned a lot about who I am as a woman, where I came from and who I am becoming,” she says.

On “Sunday” she examines the intricacies of a relationship gone wrong -- not a typical relationship, but one that focuses on faith and how that has changed for her since she was a child. “When I was young we would go to church three times a week, and it was filled with songs and love, but the teachings also instilled a lot of irrational fear and judgemental behaviors in me,” she says. “It took me a long time to unravel this, and ‘Sunday’ is a testament to those changes.”

“Hard to Love” takes a look at the ways relationships -- and the people in them -- can make things challenging. It’s basically a play on the old adage, “men are from Mars,” and a woman is trying to bridge the gap from Venus.

Forever a lover of a perfect pop-country song, Monica had the foundations of a few of these genre-crossing songs in her songbook for years. One, about finding the perfect cowboy, is “The Real McCoy,” which focuses on “feeling like sunshine after dancing in the rain.”

Throughout *Sunshine Is Free*, it’s clear Monica has a keen ability to connect; her songs are often autobiographical, but delivered through a fictional approach that aids in creating a universal experience for the listener -- whether it’s expressed using her trademark sense of humor or with such striking honesty that the pain in her voice is tangible.

“Left with no choice to go my own way, out here looking for a little bit of truth,” she sings, and you can bet she’ll be happy to share the lessons she’s learned soon.