

LEAN YEAR



ABOUT THIS RECORD

Lean Year is the debut, self-titled record by Richmond, Virginia based singer Emilie Rex and filmmaker/musician Rick Alverson. What for Rex was a departure from the structured life of academia toward the uncertain contours of a creative field, for Alverson was a return to form. Having released 5 albums with his previous band Spokane, Alverson took a 10-year hiatus from music to write and direct feature films. These departures and approaches bring a transience and listlessness to the album, like a walk interrupted by both curiosity and caution.

Equally informed by the minimalist folk music of Elizabeth Cotton, Karen Dalton, and Fred Neil; the tenuous, ambient, and orchestral works of Harold Budd, Brian Eno, and John Cale; the quietly pointed but tender songs of Nina Simone and Bessie Smith; and the baroque pop subversions of Love and The Left Banke—the inspirations for Lean Year are as varied as Rex and Alverson's biographies. Their childhoods—framed respectively by New-Age ideology and antiquated Catholic Catechism; anarchist Montessori and cold, cloistered ice arenas; the chaotic, upheaval of divorce and the strange, obligatory qualities of life-long marriage—provide footing on uneven ground for the record's dream-like, oblique observations. In the wake of these dynamic histories, the two leaned on music as a kind of secular spirituality.

Rex and Alverson co-wrote the album over the course of a year at their home in Richmond, VA and recorded it in three sessions at the home studio of Chicago musician/engineer Erik Hall (In Tall Buildings, NOMO), who also performs on the record. Alverson and Hall co-produced the album's ten tracks, drawing on both Hall's and Elliot Bergman's (NOMO) arsenal of instruments. For Hall and Rex, this project was a reunion of sorts, the two having met as undergraduates in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan over a decade before. Hall's extensive vocabulary—ranging from jazz and pop to rock and afrobeat—informs his contributions to the record.

The album often employs visual art as touchstones for the album's narrative content: from Duchamp's *The Large Glass* in "Her Body in the Sky"; the photographs of Gregory Crewdson on "Earner"; the films of Elem Klimov in "Come & See," and Alejandro Jodorowsky on "Holy Mountain," pitting them against the pair's cloudy biographies. The songs hint, both formally and lyrically at the dysfunctions of contemporary dialogue—the missteps, accidents, and deep-seated patterns that are either embraced, discarded, or broken in an attempt to build a common place in the world. Within this seemingly quiet and universal palate, each new track is a small, knowing departure from the last, a gradation in identity and form. The album's opener "Come & See" is at once a refutation of lives lived ("the old room feels like an ulcer") and a desire for newer ones. On "Watch Me," Alverson's bare telecaster is reminiscent of his previous band, marking the slow passage of time like an electric echo of Loren Mazzacane Connors. "Waterloo Suns" conjures some of the sarcasm of Eno's "Baby's on Fire," slowed to half speed, as Rex's narrator struggles to recall a famous Kinks song.

Rex's voice cuts a deep path through the record. The hushed monotony and deceptively smooth bass lines of "Her Body in the Sky" and "Sonja Henie" (a hazy retelling of the ice skating, silent-era, movie star's death on an airplane between continents) set her vocals against a bed of Rhodes and tape-warped echoplex. Bergman's baritone saxophone and clarinet parts further color the foggy, intimacy of the record, and Chihstuan Yang and Matt Ulery's sprawling strings recall Phil Ochs' haunting orchestrals in *Pleasures of the Harbor*. Unlike the confrontational, skeptical affronts of Alverson's films, this is a music of grace. It is also a porous one—standing in stark relief to the rigid hierarchies and prescribed ascendancies common to universities and professional life. It is a sharp so-long to places we cannot fit and a gentle foot into those we don't yet know.

TRACK LIST

01	Come and See	3:40
02	Her Body In The Sky	3:44
03	Earner	3:25
04	Holy Mountain	2:53
05	Watch Me	3:39
06	Sonja Henie	4:42
07	Waterloo Suns	4:04
08	The Louder Voice	3:30
09	Figs	2:33
10	Nines	1:18

ADDITIONAL INFO

Rick Alverson's films [*Entertainment* (2015) and the cult-drama *The Comedy* (2012)] have premiered at Sundance, Locarno, Rotterdam and the Film Society of Lincoln Center among others venues and festivals worldwide. Rex left academia and her position as Indiana University's Assistant Director of Sustainability in 2014 to focus on music and pursue resilience writing and analysis as a consultant. This is her first record.



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