

# SERENA RYDER

UTOPIA (2017)

Just for the record, you could easily be staring a Serena Ryder triple album in the face right now.

It might have taken four-and-a-half years for this celebrated Toronto singer/songwriter to gift us with a follow-up to 2012's expectation-defying critical and commercial hit, *Harmony*, but a lack of new material was definitely not the hold-up.

No, just as she did for the last record, the prolific Ryder amassed something like 65 or 70 songs during the run-up to her star-solidifying new platter, *Utopia*. The challenge wasn't coming up with new material; the challenge was whittling it all down to fit an album-sized package. Ryder was so flush with good stuff heading into *Utopia*, in fact, that she briefly toyed with releasing her own equivalent of the Clash's *Sandinista!* or George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass* – a triple LP composed of songs that she envisioned divided amongst moods of “light,” “dark” and the “grey” area in between.

In the end, she chose to compress the full spectrum of emotions into a more manageable, but no less ambitious package that wouldn't necessarily require booking a day off work to properly absorb in one sitting. But you've been warned: there is definitely more to come.

“I still have all those songs and, to me, they're all good and they're all good for a record so I don't know,” she laughs. “I might have three more records.”

Hey, why turn it off when it comes easily? Some people need plans and deadlines and discipline to get anything done, some people just do what they do naturally and effortlessly. Serena Ryder does what she does naturally and effortlessly, and has done what she does naturally and effortlessly since she was a young girl. This girl was performing by the age of eight, cut her first record at 16 and could boast of being a major-label artist with a gold-selling album, 2006's *If Your Memory Serves You Well* and a gold-selling single, the lingeringly knee-weakening “Weak in the Knees,” all before she'd even turned 25. And yet it took a debilitating bout with depression and artistic self-doubt brought on by her premature pigeonholing as just another “sensitive Canadian folk chick with an acoustic guitar” for her to finally let it all come out *truly* naturally and effortlessly on *Harmony*, the album where Ryder found her voice and discovered that the best formula for her success is ... no formula at all.

You can still hear the results of the “letting go” that allowed *Harmony* – a genre-oblivious sleeper hit that went on to notch platinum sales in Ryder's native Canada – to happen living and breathing on the radio to this day, since that record's signature single, “Stompa” (triple-

platinum and counting north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel), and its anthemic follow-up, “What I Wouldn’t Do,” haven’t left the airwaves since.

Now you can hear the further results of Ryder’s ongoing liberation from what she described in 2012 as a burdensome “idea of who I thought I was” on *Utopia*, which extrapolates upon its predecessor’s “anything goes” template with even more confidence and joy.

*Utopia*’s sassy soul-pop romp and lead single “Got Your Number”, hatched spontaneously during an exploratory early writing session that found Ryder once again casting aside her guitar and “just goofing around on the drums, just kind of rapping and rhyming and singing weird jazzy stuff” in search of new musical avenues to explore, is but a tantalizing taste of the surprises Serena Ryder has to offer on her new record.

There’s low-slung, electro-groovy sexiness orbiting the sweet spot between Prince and Of Montreal on “Electric Love” and “Me and You”; Winehouse-esque R&B with a swaggering hip-hop cadence on “Firewater” and “Killing Time”; smolderingly futuristic downtempo balladry cooked up with Weeknd producer Doc McKinney on “Wild and Free”; a couple of pulse-quickenings attempts at epic, Arcade Fire-worthy arena fodder (“Because who wouldn’t want that, really?” shrugs Ryder) on “Hands” and “Ice Age”; and, for those who’ve been along for the ride since her folky 1999 indie debut *Falling Out*, a couple of stirring ballads in the classic, confessional Ryder mould in the form of “Sanctuary” and the sweet-natured love song “It’s No Mistake”. And then there’s that voice. Heard Serena Ryder sing lately? She should register that instrument as a weapon. It’s nuts.

There was no grand design to *Utopia*. A loose theme derived from the First Nations parable of the *Two Wolves* – which states that we all have two wolves inside us, one light and one dark, that fight for dominance as they are fed in either direction – applied itself in hindsight, as Ryder saw those two sides of her own personality playing out in the song writing and wondered what would happen “if you fed both wolves instead of just one of them, so that neither of them are hungry?”

“I found in a lot of the songs there was that dynamic when I looked back,” she says. “So many people, when they put out a record, it’s all dark or it’s all light and happy. But on this record there’s a lot of juxtaposition of both those things – the light and the dark. I was wondering what if you married the two. I wanted to write an album that had some sense of balance. But I have no fucking idea if it happened.”

Find thematic threads where you will, then. *Utopia* is a collection of winning songs written on the fly in Los Angeles, London, Nashville, Los Angeles and Toronto with such friendly collaborators as Simon Wilcox, Thomas “Tawgs” Salter, John Grant, Todd Clark and Derek Furnham with one goal in mind- to enjoy the moments that make up the process of creating music.

“A lot of the songs on this record are basically just experimentation and me hanging out with friends and having a good time and just kind of writing in that way,” says Ryder, who still considers herself a student of her peers. “When I go into a writing session, I’m there with these awesome, talented people I just assume that everybody else knows 10 billion times more than I do. I just start ranting and raving and running around and making weird noises and eventually looking for a melody because I have no knowledge of any sort of theory – I don’t know the names of any of the chords that I play, I never learned any of that.

“Most of the time, I really feel like I have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve been doing this since I was straight out of high school – touring, writing, performing – and I still feel like I’m brand-spankin’ new. I don’t know what kind of songs I’m going to write or what kind of record I’m going to put out. I don’t have a set-in-stone identity when it comes to being a musician. It’s a mystery, even to me; a good one. It’s nice to be able to live within that mystery.”  
*Utopia* to be released Spring 2017.

#### Awards:

2014 JUNO Awards for Songwriter of The Year and Artist of The Year

2014 MuchMusic Video Award for Rock/Alternative Video of The Year (“Stompa”)

2014 Canadian Film Award for Original Song (“It’s No Mistake”) featured in the film, Right Kind Of Wrong

2013 Adult Alternative Album of The Year

2010 Video of The Year (“Little Bit of Red”)

2009 Adult Alternative Album of The Year (Is It O.K.)

2008 New Artist of The Year

#### Certifications:

Single “*Stompa*” - 3x Platinum

Single “What I Wouldn’t Do” - Platinum

Single “Weak In The Knees” - Gold

Single “Got Your Number” - Gold

Album *Is it O.K.* (2009) - Gold

Album *If Your Memory Serves You Well* (2007) – Gold

Album *Harmony* (2012) – 2x Platinum

#### Highlights:

Shared the Pan Am stage with Kanye West and Pitbull

Late Night TV performance on Jay Leno

Original song "Sing Sing" was the soundtrack for Music Monday, special event to highlight music education in Canada which saw nearly two million Canadian schoolchildren singing the song in class

Performed the Canadian National Anthem at the 2014 NBA All Star Game

"Stompa" was featured on an episode of Grey's Anatomy

Performed on CBC TV's "Quietest Concert Ever" on the Ocean Floor which took place during low tide at Fundy National Park in New Brunswick Canada