

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION



Hite “*Light of a Strange Day*”

Lovely and unsettling. Brightly arranged and shot through with darkness. Rooted in folk yet still using the language of art rock and electronica. The artist **Hite** revels in these contradictions in her striking debut album *Light Of A Strange Day*.

Hite is someone we’ve met before: she is the singer, multi-instrumentalist, and producer Julia Easterlin, who collaborated with the famed Malian guitarist **Vieux Farka Toure** on their album *Touristes*.

The new moniker marks a new direction for Hite: as **Julia Easterlin**, she made her initial reputation by looping and layering her voice to create her music. On *Touristes*, she began to move away from what she calls “the looping artist pigeonhole.” This record, *Light Of A Strange Day*, she says, “is a natural progression, away from loops and into more flexible, expressive forms of storytelling.”

Like the music on the album, **Hite’s** lyrical storytelling also plays with contradiction. Songs like “Eliza Jane” and “Old Crow” sport titles that suggest old folk songs and could present themselves as trippy versions of old ballads about universal topics like love and loss. But in fact, both songs are taken from **Hite’s** own experience. “Eliza Jane” was written about the birth of her younger sister, Eliza. “My family used to sing that old song (the folk song “Eliza Jane”) to her when she was a baby,” **Hite** recalls. Her “Eliza Jane” is stormy and almost folksy, building gradually with a series of eerie sounds that hover around the song’s edges. As the opening track, it is a statement of intent – some of Hite’s songs may be quiet, but they are also disquieting. “The album is admittedly contemplative and dark,” she says; “I had a heavy year and this album is the direct result of those experiences.”

Perhaps nowhere is that better displayed than in “Old Crow,” based on a recurring dream she had several years ago, while living on a farm in North Carolina. “For about two weeks I dreamt of a crow landing on my bed and looking at me, trying to say something, and then diving under the sheets. I kept waking up and looking for a crow under my covers.” The image of a bird that speaks, or tries to, is an old trope in folk music – and usually the harbinger of bad luck or death. In this case, Hite says, “the crow and heartache are related. I was going through a difficult breakup and started thinking about that dream; it felt like a good place to start a song.” A timeless-sounding melody over a drone hints at American roots music; the ghostly strings and voices that appear and recede suggest some of **Hite’s** other musical heroes, art rockers like **Radiohead** and **Björk**.

Hite is New York-based, but she grew up in Georgia. “I grew up hearing a lot of southern Appalachian folk music,” she explains. “Maybe that doesn’t seem to fit with **Björk** and the rest of

the things I listen to, but when I open my mouth to sing, one of those two things comes out.” And in the process of arranging these songs, sometimes both of those styles share the same space. Which brings up the album’s other major storyline.

Working initially with the multi-instrumentalist and producer **Shahzad Ismaily (Lou Reed, Carla Kihlstedt, Marc Ribot, Sam Amidon, etc.)**, Hite began to flex her muscles as a producer and arranger. “I’d been in the studio with other producers before,” she says, “and I was always the only woman in the room. Without fully realizing it, I often conceded creative decisions to whatever guy was at the recording console.” But **Shahzad** encouraged her to trust her instincts – with the result that a lot of the songs on *Light Of A Strange Day* are first takes, and the arrangements were often done on the fly, a layer at a time.

This way of working required an unusual amount of flexibility not only from Hite, but from her team, which included producer/percussionist **Charlie Van Kirk**, and multi-instrumentalist/arranger **Christopher Marion**. Marion did all of the string arrangements, performing many of the parts himself, and on “Old Crow,” he played all of the instruments. **Van Kirk** added both live and programmed percussion to the album, as well as a bit of guitar. Still, **Hite** recalls, “throughout this project, Shahzad was very insistent that I play as many of the instruments as possible (including ‘playing’ the recording console), constantly reminding me of my own deep desire for women to be more visible in the industry as instrumentalists, producers and auteurs. This record is my first time playing bass, strings, piano, electric guitar, ukulele and harp on a recording. It’s also the first time I’ve taken on editing and production responsibilities for an album of my own.”

It was the ukulele – actually, a baritone ukulele – that spurred the creation of “Hattnaru.” That song is sung in a made-up language – the result of **Hite** having a ukulele melody that she loved but hating all the words she was coming up with. A similar process produced vastly different results in “Nocturne,” which again began with Hite playing chords on the ukulele. “I didn’t even know what the chords were; I just played shapes on the instrument over and over until words came out.” Softly sung vocals spin out over an almost Chopin-esque figure, tinged with melancholy and regret. An enigmatic string section may remind listeners of some **Radiohead** songs, and Hite acknowledges that she was “thinking of ‘How To Disappear Completely’ (from Radiohead’s *Kid A*), where the strings become a point of tension that you feel rather than hear.”

Tension is also the watchword for the song “Miss You,” which begins with a headlong rush of electronic sound and a vocal line that becomes gradually more distorted, before the song ends with a brief squall of feedback. It’s difficult, but it feels emotionally honest in the context of a song written during a period of intense anxiety for **Hite**.

Another surprising emotion drives the motoric, minimalist song “Lockstep.” **Hite** was inspired by a documentary on the author **J. D. Salinger**. “I never knew he was a soldier in World War II,” she explains. “The documentary talked about how it affected him as a person and a writer. I was fascinated by that, and felt a compassion for him that I didn’t expect to feel. That was one of the songs that just bubbled up all at once.” And in another bit of sonic contradiction, the song’s military imagery is offset by the gradual buildup of strings.

Of course, most art deals in contradiction of some sort, and one of the most intriguing forms of contradiction is the way one song can mean several things to different people. The closing track, "Try," built around a Southern Gospel-inspired piano part, seems like it might be about a woman's place in what is still often a man's world. But that wasn't Hite's intention: "First, I was thinking about socioeconomic justice, particularly for my generation, which is particularly burdened by student-loan debt. Then the second verse is about a failing relationship. Clearly though, it's open to interpretation because people who've heard it keep asking if it's about equality for women or feminism." The song features increasingly agitated strings, but then at the end of the track the texture clears, leaving only the calm, unruffled chords of Hite's piano. It's almost as if she's paused to take a breath, to prepare for whatever the next journey will be.

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