

Yola's debut album *Walk Through Fire*, produced by Dan Auerbach, is a genre-bending release from one of the most powerful emerging British voices in music today. The singer/songwriter first came to the attention of Auerbach (The Black Keys) after a chain of people, starting with her manager, forwarded a video of her performing in Nashville that eventually found itself in Auerbach's inbox. Tastemaker media also saw promise in Yola's early recordings and live performances in Nashville—*NPR*, *Rolling Stone Country*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Paste*, and *Stereogum* all praised Yola, comparing her to a diverse range of artists from the Staples Singers to Dolly Parton.

After watching the video, Auerbach set up a call and they connected quickly. Auerbach says *"The moment I met Yola I was impressed. Her spirit fills the room, just like her voice...she has the ability to sing in a full roar or barely a whisper and that is a true gift. She made everyone in the studio an instant believer."*

*"We knew we loved the Everlys,"* Yola says. *"Soul, Americana, singer/songwriters. When Dan and I talked we thought we'd explore what we loved, really go there."*

Auerbach assembled a writing team that included Yola, longtime John Prine collaborator Pat McLaughlin, and the legendary Dan Penn ("Dark End of the Street," "Cry Like A Baby," "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man,"), among others, to write together over five days in Auerbach's Nashville studio. There was a fluidity to their collaboration, with loose boundaries that gave the assembled musicians a wide canvas.

Laughing, Yola recalls the writing process for the record, *"Pat with his eyes closed and his guitar out, was dousing in the cosmos... you start scribbling real quick, feeding on him in his astral place."*

Of the free-flowing process, she adds, *"Someone might be searching for something on guitar, or playing something on piano, or I might be humming, and someone else would say, 'Oh, what's that?' We came at the songs from all different places. In creativity, you want to create a bond, especially in co-writing. Part of collaborating is letting people in, getting to know them, and not getting overwhelmed. When you start to finesse the idea, you disappear into it"*

For a girl raised on the coast of Southwest England, where she did not fit in and life was hard, finding herself in the easy camaraderie of Dan Auerbach's studio was the realization of a childhood dream. Yola's mother's choice to raise her daughter in a small town outside of Bristol, where she could play outside, meant that Yola was "other" from the start. Between the isolation of being the only black family around, the family's poverty, and a turbulent home life, Yola needed refuge, which she found in her mother's record collection; among the albums she clung to was Aretha Franklin's *Young, Gifted & Black*.

Inspired by those records, at age four she told her mother, *"I'm going to write songs and sing'. I don't know how I knew that, but I did. Even then."*

She later discovered *Crosby, Stills & Nash* and the Band's *Music from Big Pink* as well as The Byrds' *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*. These iconic records shaped her writing and helped her find her own unique voice—equal parts Mississippi mud, honeyed sunshine, and midnight musk.

Even with such clear ambitions from an early age, though, Yola has lived a life of challenges: perhaps the first being her mother “banning” her making music in her teens.

Yola says, *“I used to pretend I was going to sleep over at school friends houses in Bristol then go out and do gigs. Kids normally do that so then can get high for the first time. My drug of choice has always been music.”*

She also was homeless for a time, sleeping in a bush when she ran out of money or friends to turn to.

Yola shares, *“I was 20-21 and two months behind on my rent in London, then my housemate had to move out. I was just waiting for a job to confirm. They took my deposit so I had nothing. As a kid you normally can go back home or to a friend. But none of my friends would take me in. At that time, lots of people claimed to care about me when I was helping them, but no one was willing to stand by me, when I was in need. I wound up on the street of east London. I begged for money, so I could call friend after friend. Eventually one friend from Somerset drove all the way to London, welcomed me into their home, and literally saved my life.”*

Growing up in poverty gave Yola the confidence to take risks and embark on her first musical adventures, such as singing live over tracks for deejays in the clubs of Bristol. She later joined Bugz in the Attic, became a featured member with Massive Attack, and performed at festivals all over the world.

Yola explains, *“I wouldn’t say I never fear being without, it’s stressful being vulnerable. I was raised on very little, on benefits as a young adult and on the other hand, I toured in some very privileged environments, so I’ve seen both sides which made me aware that life is made rich by the company you keep and the risks you take. Anyone can have tragedy, but it’s made far more bearable when you are truly loved.”*

At one festival in Australia she met James Brown, who emerged from his trailer in a white terry robe, slippers, and a headful of curlers to offer a declaration:

*“I saw you!”* he pronounced. *“You killed it! Soul is a thing, and you got it!”*

To record *Walk Through Fire*, Auerbach assembled some of the most iconic session musicians performing today: bassist Dave Rowe (Johnny Cash, Dwight Yoakam, Chrissie Hynde), keyboardist Bobby Wood (Elvis, Wilson Pickett, George Jones), drummer Gene Chrisman (Aretha Franklin, Dusty Springfield, Johnny Bush), steel player Russ Pahl (Don Williams, Leon Russell, Nikki Lane), and guitarist Billy Sanford (Roy Orbison, Waylon Jennings, Tammy Wynette). Guests also joined, including Vince Gill (whose tangled counter vocal is heard on “Keep Me Here”) and bluegrass icons Ronnie McCoury, Molly Tuttle, Stuart Duncan, and Charlie McCoy.

Reflecting on the recording experience Yola says, *“Here in Nashville, people have such high levels of experience, you let them be free and create.”*

From the opening cascade of notes of Wurlitzer on “Faraway Look” to the piano reckoning of “Love Is Light,” *Walk Through Fire* offers sincere tales of heartache and loves lost, forgotten, and broken.

Yola takes on paycheck-to-paycheck living on “Love All Night,” and the slow burn of healing via road trip on “Ride Out In The Country”. There is operatic drama on “Lonely The Night” and “It Ain’t Easier” offers steamy demi-church soul.

The steel-stained “Rock Me Gently” offers the solace needed when life has washed out and “Deep Blue Dream” provides guidance to make it through the night. Even the perky “Still Gone” finds a finger-popping exuberance in the aftermath, suggesting that in the fullness of time we’re all going to make it to where we need to be.

Title track “Walk Through Fire”, which traces a broken line from Laurel Canyon to Appalachia, sees Yola comfortable with her vulnerability. She says, *“There’s the ubiquitous image of the queen, head held high. But when that crown slips from your head, that’s not all your black femininity is. There’s a rebellion, a power in being vulnerable.”*

The song is inspired by a time when Yola was literally engulfed in flames in a house fire, and found a higher truth in the experience.

*“I was laughing my ass off while I was burning,”* she explains. *“The first part of my life had been pretty heinous. I was a few years into a good place, and I was thinking, ‘Even on fire, I wouldn’t trade my life now for what it was.’”*

Yola concludes, in what could be a mission statement for her life, *“To be vulnerable is terrifying but to walk through fire with a smile on your face is about as liberating as anything can be. In some ways, I was reborn in that fire.”*