



INTERVIEW WITH...

# Amanda Shires

*'I just did my best to trust my instincts.'*

*Singer. Songwriter. Fiddle player. Language lover. Amanda Shires is a women with many facets and of many talents. 'Loving You', her collaboration album with the late Bobbie Nelson, should be on your wishlist by now. A most excellent opportunity for a chat.*





Photo Joshua Black Wilkes

*Amanda Shires: 'This is awesome. I haven't been to Belgium in a while, but I want to get back there.'*

*Julian De Backer: 'You've been here?'*

*Amanda: 'Yes! A few times, also with my husband Jason. Before COVID,*

*though.'*

*Julian: 'Well, we'd love to have you back, of course. Don't be a stranger. If you want to do a few shows.'*

*Amanda: 'I do want to.'*

*Julian: 'I've just listened to your new album, the collaboration project with miss Bobbie Nelson. It's really good.'*

*Amdanda: 'She was a beautiful person, and she was a wizard on the piano. So it was probably one of the easiest records anybody could ever make.'*

*Julian: 'Sadly, miss Nelson passed away last year, but if I'm not mistaken you guys had been planning to do something for a while before you actually started recording. That was something that was in the cards for a while, am I right?'*

*Amanda: 'Yes, we started accidentally making a record. I was going to put that song 'Always On My Mind' on my record 'Take It Like A Man'. And to do it right, it had to be Bobbie. So I went down to Texas and she said 'Yes' and after we recorded it, we were basically trading songs in the studio. Just playing back and forth songs we both knew and talking about maybe going shopping and what we were going to go eat for dinner. We decided we wanted to spend more time together playing music, so we had to be in a band. If we were going to travel, we'd need to have a record, so we set up some time and made a record.'*

*Julian: 'That's great. But you didn't really know her beforehand, before the idea of the album came together? Or were you guys familiar with each other?'*

*Amanda: 'Yeah, we were. We met through Mickey Raphael many years*

*ago, and also I'd seen her play for many years as a kid. But I consider our first meeting through Mickey, because um she remembered me then (laughs) They invited me on stage, and every time after they said 'You're going to join us on stage!' and I was like 'All right!'. We were friendly, and we liked to talk about improvisation. We both liked wearing black on stage, we talked about why we buy so much black and why dressing up is a good thing. Just two women out on the lonely old road.'*

*Julian: 'Was it easy? Because of course there's an age difference of almost 50 years between the two of you.'*

*Amanda: 'She's the most rock and roll person I've ever met. The entire family is, because they believe in things that I believe in the whole time. Even realizing that having kids and being in music was gonna wind up being a heartbreaker. In a time when you weren't really allowed to do that as a woman, she did it. She had to find a different way to keep music in her life, and then get her kids back. She had a strong sense of faith. Her center and her compass, beautiful things. She didn't really lead the life of a sheep.'*

*Julian: 'She did it her way.'*

*Amanda: 'But I like sheep! They're cosy.'*

*Julian: 'Of course, sheep are the best. I don't have sheep at home, but I do have a few chickens.'*

*Amanda: 'You do? I do too, how many do you have?'*

*Julian: 'I used to have four, but two sadly passed away, so now it's only two. I have a normal, regular chick and I have a silkie. You know, the smaller ones with the funky hairdo.'*

*Amanda: 'They're beautiful! There's this Italian photographer that's been taking professional portraits of chickens. Really good.'*

*Julian: 'I just love them. The fluffy hair, the big feet, they're so silly.'*

*Amanda: 'Yeah, yeah, they are, they're so silly.'*

*Julian: 'There's ten tracks on the album. Were they recorded in a few short sessions or were they recorded over the course of a few months?'*

*Amanda: 'After the first couple of days, we came back and did ten more days in the studio. I initially thought it was just two sessions, but then I went back and looked at the hard drives and there were quite a few. We went down to Texas to get Willie Nelson to sing on 'Summertime', after she'd passed away. I think the album sounds so cohesive because of a couple of things. We did feature her piano, and we did songs that we both knew. In the end, I chose the songs based on which ones followed her life story the best and I worked with my friend Lawrence Rothman on the production. I've been really proud of the work that Lawrence and I do in the studio when we get in there together. It seemed to have turned out nicely the past couple of records.'*

*Julian: 'Miss Nelson passed away in March of 2022, before the record was released. Was there ever any discussion about not releasing the album at all because it didn't feel right, or was the family on board?'*

*Amanda: 'The family was on board. For a while I didn't feel comfortable talking about it. Even opening the masters ... I'm not trying to not be tough, but it would just make me cry. Then it got to a point where ... (pause) I don't know, it just felt like honouring her felt okay. It felt good to tell her story. It all felt like the right thing to do. I don't want to say 'Time heals everything' because it doesn't, but sometimes it does a little bit. Something out there just felt like it was going to be all right. I don't*

*know how to explain that, because I'm not really a woo woo person. It just felt right.'*

*Julian: 'You were able to capture not only her spirit but also her talent and her genius in a sort of final thank you from her to us. Because it's so fully realized and she's so vibrant and so alive on the album, it's as if she's still here.'*

*Amanda: 'That means a lot, because it's scary. Am I doing it right without her here? In the end, I just did my best to trust my instincts and I reached out to her surviving son. I think she's up there somewhere, proud of it.'*

*Julian: 'You can compare it to Johnny Cash's 'American Recordings' ...'*

*Amanda: Oh, that's a high compliment.'*

*Julian: 'There were two volumes ...'*

*Amanda: 'Call me Rick Rubin then.'*

*Julian: 'You're Amanda Rubin.'*

*Amanda: 'Perfect.'*



Photo Joshua Black Wilkes

*Julian: 'There were also two volumes released after his passing. All six volumes were so well made and well produced. I think that's why it's comparable to what you did because it's as if she's still here.'*

*Amanda: 'Yeah, I think so too. When people, even her family, want to listen to her playing the piano they can pick it up and listen to it. My hair is better than Rick Rubin's, though. And so is my beard (laughs). I have a way better beard.'*

*Julian: 'True, true. I'm not a musician so I don't know how it is, but to me it seems like there's such a joy and such a pleasure in performing in the studio. There's the video of you two in the studio for the single. It seems like it was such a momentous occasion. Is recording as fun as it seems to be?'*

*Amanda: 'It was more fun! At the end of the session, she'd show up with a margarita for me. The fun we would have at dinner, occasionally drinking too much wine. We took the work seriously, but it was just so*

*fun to play with somebody that knew me and the tunes that we were playing inside and out. And also just to be like comrades I guess. There is so much that we had in common, it just made it real easy. She was easy to laugh with, easy to make jokes with.'*

*Julian: 'I don't want to assume anything, but sometimes the more established or the more experienced someone is, the harder it gets to get them out of their comfort zone. I've read stories about Sinatra in the end just saying 'I don't really care anymore, I just want to do the standard stuff, I'm not into experiments anymore' ... and then of course there are artists who, up until the very end, are doing new things like David Bowie and his excellent swansong of an album. I think there's a balance you need to strike between 'Do we want to get them off their chosen path and get them to do something new and exciting?' or 'Do we want to see them doing the same old thing they've done a million times before?'. It seems to me Bobbie was always game to do something new, to try to up the ante and change the scheme.'*

*Amanda: 'She was! Sometimes when you're an artist, your goal is to stretch out some. Sometimes when you're an entertainer you do that, but then you fall back into "entertaining" which is a whole other kind of art. I think about those two things a lot actually because there's some wonderful entertainers out there that can't sing but have really good showmanship. But I do think she was an artist in that way.'*

*Julian: 'Personal question for you. When you're writing one of your own songs, when you're in the songwriter modus, how do you approach a new song? How do you start, what's the first thing that comes to you? Is it the lyrics, is it the melody, is it a phrase, or something else?'*

*Amanda: 'I focus on the words all the time. I practice writing every day, four minutes to twenty sometimes if I'm lucky. Have you ever tried the Flowstate app?'*

*Julian: 'No, I haven't.'*



*Amanda: 'It all erases if you quit typing and sometimes it helps when you're trying to get fresher images or write through the junk that you have to write through to just get it out there. After your time limit, you can save it or find things in it. When I'm waiting, I'm always doing some kind of writing or observing. So for me, I don't really have a mode that I go into and I've seen people who have that, and that's really cool. Like my husband Jason, when he decides to make a record, he'll just sit down and write for six weeks. I kind of write all year long, and then I start feeling out themes and things I've been drawn to more. I'm in love with language. It's fascinating how word choice can shade things in a way. I just try to strive for accuracy of the grayer emotions, the in-between colours, but I don't know. That's what I do. I wouldn't know if it's the right way or the wrong way, but it's the way I do it. Sometimes you're just walking around and a whole melody or a whole song might come to you. Sing a little memo on your phone in the airplane and everybody looks at you like you're a goofball.'*

*Julian: "Take It Like A Man', your solo album from 2022, was impressive. In general, you could consider 'Amanda Shires' to be a country/folk artist, but said album is so much more. There are 70s pop melodies, there's some soul, there are a few alternative sounds, even some British influences. A very bold mix of everything you had done up to that point.'*

*Amanda: 'Thank you! I was really proud of how that turned out. Last Wednesday, I got out of the studio. I was in there for three weeks making the new one. We haven't decided on a release strategy. I haven't even really told my managers anything, except for that I needed three weeks in the studio. I'm giving it another week before I relisten to it, because I recorded a lot of songs. At the end of the week, I'll decide what to do, and make my idea of a plan. Maybe I'll present it to my team and then they can make the timelines. I just don't want anything else to influence the end result. I don't want somebody talking about what time the*

*bread's going to come out of the oven when you're still making it.'*



Photo Joshua Black Wilkes



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*Julian: 'There's a saying in Dutch, my native language ...'*

*Amanda: 'Oh my God, your native language is Dutch? Cool!'*

*Julian: 'There's a saying roughly translated as 'Don't sell the skin of the bear before you actually shot the bear'.*

*(Amanda laughs)*

*Julian: 'You should never assume you have something until you really have it.'*

*Amanda: 'I love that saying, that's awesome, that's really good. I like to read translated works. Have you ever read that book 'Independent People' by Halldór Laxness?'*

*Julian: 'No, I haven't, sorry.'*

*Amanda: 'It's about sheep (laughs) It's good if you like literary non-fiction. Just like how you describe the bear and the selling of the skin, that's not something we say at all. We're saying 'Don't pull the cart without the horse'. I'm fascinated by those little images and ideas that can twirl your mind but also to say (starts singing in Dutch!) I know the whole song, but I won't bore you with that. Language is pretty cool. (walking to her book closet) Got to find 'Independent People' to show you. What are you interested in? You might not like it at all.'*

*Julian: 'Bookwise, I'm mainly into non-fiction. Books about music and movies. That's my thing.'*

*Amanda: 'Well, then you'll definitely hate this one.'*

*Julian: 'No, I won't hate it. I try to keep an open mind.'*

*Amanda: 'I wonder if they have it in your native language.'*

*Julian (Googling): 'I'm pretty sure they do. So it's a novel, two volumes, and it says indeed it's a story of a sheep farmer and a struggle for independence. I'm going to put it on my 'to read'-list.'*

*Amanda: 'Well, if you don't like it, you can later tell me how much you didn't like it, and I'll buy it from you.'*

*Julian: 'Perhaps I'll love it, who knows. Final question because I don't want to take too much of your time.'*

*Amanda: 'I'm not talking to anybody else today, so this is okay.'*

*Julian: 'One never wants to assume too much, and take up too much of people's valuable time.'*

*Amanda: 'Right, totally.'*

*Julian: 'Your husband has a part in the new Scorsese movie, 'Killer of the Flower Moon'. Have you seen the rough cut already, or haven't you?'*

*Amanda: 'Yes.'*

*Julian: 'Can you tell me anything? Is it any good?'*

*Amanda: 'Over two hours long. It's really good. The opening scene is amazing. Scorsese has a way of opening his movies in a very strong way. You know how in 'Casino' where he blows up? It's not like that at all, it's just ... he has a way of almost inventing new ways or challenges to open a movie. I don't know, it just was really beautiful and wild.'*

*Julian: 'Miss Shires, I want to thank you for your time and I wish you the best of luck with your new album.'*

*Amanda: 'You're welcome.'*

***'Loving You' by Bobbie Nelson and Amanda Shires is out now on ATO Records.***

*Julian De Backer © 2023 for Keys and Chords*