

DIDI BENAMI

After finishing *American Idol*'s ninth season as a top-ten finalist, singer/songwriter Didi Benami stepped out of the spotlight and spent several years refining her craft and pushing into deeper emotional territory in her music. A near-lifelong singer who started songwriting as a teenager, the Tennessee-bred 27-year-old devoted those years to dreaming up songs that gracefully fuse folk, soul, and rock with an intimate emotionalism inspired by the likes of Joni Mitchell and Stevie Nicks. Infused with a powerful melancholy—and shaped by such struggles as Benami's troubled childhood and the tragic loss of her best friend—the resulting debut album *Reverie* merges ethereal alt-rock with pop-perfect melodies, hypnotic guitars, heady beats, and Benami's stunning vocal work.

"Throughout my life I've always turned to music to help me get from moment to moment, and so I try to write songs that will inspire or empower others that way," says Benami, whose gripping delivery of "Terrified" was ranked by E! Online as one of the top five Hollywood Week performances in *American Idol* history. Released independently and made in collaboration with Billy Mohler (a Grammy-nominated producer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist who's previously worked with artists like AWOLNATION, Kelly Clarkson, and Liz Phair), *Reverie* achieves that stirring spirit thanks both to Benami's poetic and boldly personal lyrics and a masterful voice that's at turns sweet and soulfully dusky.

Born in New York City but raised in Knoxville, Benami first began honing her vocal chops by singing at school events and in church choirs. At age 14, pained by the ongoing and damaging tension between her Israeli father and German-American mother, Benami moved in with her uncle and took on a minimum-wage day job to save up for college. Despite the upheaval, Benami persevered with her singing and took up guitar, eventually making her way to Belmont University (a renowned music school in Nashville).

At Belmont, Benami quickly developed a close friendship with a burgeoning songwriter named Rebecca Joy Lear. "I'd been writing poems a long time, but Rebecca motivated me to start writing songs as well," says Benami. The two soon became roommates and collaborators, but Lear's life ended in a car accident later that year. "When Rebecca passed away, it devastated me to the point where I felt like I couldn't move forward with my life," says Benami. "It took me a long time to get myself back together and figure out what to do next."

Eventually, Benami put college on hold and decamped to Los Angeles, where she threw herself back into making music and began teaming up with a host of songwriters and producers. In 2009, she auditioned for the ninth season of *American Idol*, and ultimately emerged as the tenth-place finalist. After making the rounds on the talk-show circuit—and appearing on *The Late Show With David Letterman*, *The Today Show*, and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*—Benami disconnected from the media frenzy and took time out to cultivate her songcraft. "When I first started writing, I was writing the songs that people expected of me because I'm a blonde country girl from Tennessee," she recalls. But after dedicating herself to discovering her songwriting voice—and exploring a scope of influences that includes The Beatles, Motown legends like Jimmy Ruffin and Marvin Gaye, Carole King, Mazzy Star, and modern-day singer/songwriters such as Sara Bareilles and Ingrid Michaelson—Benami found herself with a greater sense of purpose and a sharper vision for her music.

To help execute that vision, Benami joined forces with Billy Mohler and set to work on her debut album in 2013. Collaborating with fellow songwriters like Jamie Drake, Billy Mohler, Annaliese Schiersch and Jason Gaviati, Benami breathed *Reverie* to life by bravely confronting matters like Lear's death, her fractured relationship with her father, post-*Idol* disillusionment, and the painful dissolution of several friendships and romances in recent years. But while *Reverie* never shies away from plumbing the depths of loss and longing, Benami's songs endlessly radiate an infectious sense of hope. "My dream for this album is to somehow communicate the battle of both darkness and the light that exists inside, as well as outside ourselves," she notes.

Opening with the quietly haunting "Trouble," *Reverie* instantly sweeps up listeners in its lush and breezy yet undeniably intense take on guitar-driven alt-pop. Although the album offers its share of love songs (such as the sweetly playful "Heartstrings" and the swaying and sultry "Till I Find You"), at its core are tracks like "Lost at Sea" (a piano ballad whose stark arrangement showcases Benami's powerful voice and aching lyrics) and "Release Me" (a midtempo number whose moody guitar work and uneasy harmonies capture the darkly charged drama of her childhood). Also featuring such tracks as the self-empowerment anthem "Shine" and the post-breakup kissoff "Recover," *Reverie* closes out with "Hummingbird," a lilting and lovely piece that embodies the heart of the album for Benami. "Hummingbird" is about feeling lost and not knowing what's going to happen next, but finding strength and deciding to give it a shot anyway," she explains, pointing out that the song's initial inspiration was an actual hummingbird she saw struggling to fly.

With the release of *Reverie*—which she financed both out-of-pocket and with funding from a highly successful PledgeMusic campaign—Benami hopes to recognize and reflect on the darker moments of her past while moving forward into a brighter future. "One of my missions with my music in general is to keep Rebecca's spirit alive, to honor what she wanted to do and inspired me to do," she says. "At the same time I want my songs to help people deal with whatever they might be going through, and then take them to a new place where there's nothing holding them back from following their dreams."