Sam Amidon’s third album for Nonesuch, *The Following Mountain*, is ostensibly his first of self-penned songs. But in his decade-long career as a recording artist, the singer and multi-instrumentalist has always managed to create work that’s utterly original, even when, on previous discs, he was digging through the sounds and stories of traditional American music from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Though he cultivates the appearance of a folk singer with his shaggy hair, flannel shirts and jeans, Amidon operates more like a freewheeling jazz improviser. He uses traditional material as a point of departure for his own melodic explorations; he reassembles time-worn lyrics into evocative new cut-and-pasted texts. On *The Following Mountain*, his affinity for the more experimental side of jazz, which he has admired as a fan since he was a teenager, explicitly informs these new pieces, several of which have their roots in an epic jam that Amidon and his long-time collaborator, the multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaily, organized at a Brooklyn recording studio last spring.

Accepting invitations to that session, much to Amidon’s delight, were the legendary percussionist Milford Graves, acclaimed for his work in the 1960’s with free jazz greats Albert Ayler, Sonny Sharrock and Paul Bley, among others; fellow percussionist Juma Sultan, perhaps best known for accompanying Jimi Hendrix in the studio and on stage at the Woodstock Festival; and the young saxophonist Sam Gendel of the Los Angeles-based meditative jazz collective Inga. A distillation of that jam, sculpted into 12 intense minutes, serves as the culmination of *The Following Mountain*. Called “April,” the track represents the cacophonous start of the creative journey Amidon began in 2016 -- a “wander through the imagination,” as he calls it –while also serving as the dramatic final statement on this innovatively assembled album.

“After making *Lily-O*, I was very aware that I had come to an end of a process in terms of material,” Amidon explains, referencing the 2014 album of reworked folk songs he recorded at the Icelandic studio of engineer Valgeir Sigurosson in collaboration with guitarist Bill Frisell. “It was a moment to take stock of what was around if you took that away. That’s what drove this record. I really intentionally started from zero. The way I made those other records was by doing my own guitar parts, melodies and compositions, and then adding in the folk songs. This time I sort of tricked myself into thinking I was making a folk-songs record -- then I just never added any folk songs. I started from the same place, but instead of finding a melody I would hum my own melody. This was the first time I wrote all the music this way, and eventually I had a whole record.”

Key to the process of shaping *The Following Mountain* was British producer Leo Abrahams, a protégé of Brian Eno, whose approach to record-making matches Amidon’s unique collagist sensibility. At a London studio last summer, Abrahams helped Amidon build the entire album from the ground up. They isolated and reconfigured sounds culled from the springtime jam Amidon and Ismaily had put together to use as its foundation. Says Amidon, “The last track, ‘April,” is like the forest, and all the other tracks are the details of flowers you might find there. You’ve fallen into some crazy thicket but all the elements of the last track are the elements that I’ve used to make the other songs.”

Abrahams eagerly plunged right into that thicket: “Leo would listen to Milford’s drums, for example, and hear an opportunity in there. He finds a rhythm and asks ‘Do you have anything for this?’ and all of a sudden a song is growing. He would say, ‘Here is a sound, what can we do with it to make it interesting?’ That’s very good for an artist. Leo was very freeing that way. “ He also guided Amidon toward the digital corollary to Amidon’s compositional cutting and pasting. “There’s a lot of saxophone from Sam Gendel, but it’s me taking a snippet and playing it on an Ableton pad. I don’t interact with that world at all but Leo has a very tactile way of dealing with all that stuff. So I hope that helps to retain a sense of spontaneity.”

Spontaneity is indeed at the heart of *The Following Mountain*. There is a rhythmic pulse that subtly courses through the album: gently at times (on a track like the pastoral “Juma Mountain”), more aggressively at others (the instrumental “Trouble In Mind,” the dissonant “Ghosts”). That rhythm, Amidon would say, is evidence of the irregular heartbeat, very much a human one, that reverberated through the wood-paneled room in Brooklyn where the album began. Recalling the feel of that session, Amidon says, “I came with Shahzad to Brooklyn the night before to set up. We were up all night, listening to Jimi Hendrix mostly, and had only slept about an hour when Milford came in and I was vey nervous. He has a very intense personality and bearing. He’s like Muhammad Ali; he has this pugilistic quality. He started warming up, asking ‘can I get some drum sounds?,’ and it was the loudest drumming you could ever hear, for 45 minutes. And then he said, ‘Okay. I think I’m ready, I just needed to feel the room out.’ Amazing. He was full of stories, intense yet deeply open-minded. The first improvisation we did was more conventional - -a scratchy, crazy, improv thing, and after that he came in and said, ‘I checked you out on YouTube, man. We don’t always have to be playing the free jazz thing. I’ll play anything.’ So I started in with acoustic fingerpicking. And he was ready for it to be anything. I do believe in Milford’s idea, the whole premise of his music, that it’s based on the heartbeat. Metronomic time is restrictive for him. His way of playing the drums is like the ocean in the sense that it swells, there are little details in there like patterns of waves, but there is also just this propulsive force. Nothing can get in its way even if it wanted to. “

Amidon’s lyrics, too, are pulled from deep within, not so much crafted as conjured: “It was very unconscious, writing down phrases, grabbing things. I did that over time. I had a book full of sentences and I collaged them together. Some of them were mine, some of them were from old books, some of them were from folk songs, a little mangled Proust, a line from a Manny Farber film -- things that intrigued me. All of the songs have a logic to me that I wouldn’t necessarily talk about. ‘Fortune’ came from some personal things and from a letter a friend had sent, someone from North Carolina who is tied into the field-recording people I have studied from. A lot of ‘Warren’ is from an old shape-note song, but I added phrases from an old Chinese poem about a lamp running low that seemed to fit in. I tried to get to the sentiment of the song, a feeling of darkness in the winter, the feeling of things deteriorating. The lyrics to ‘Blackbird’ are from a folk song. All of the lyrics felt good to sing; whether they make sense to other people is less important, I guess. To me they are just elusive narratives and people can make up their own stories.”

There’s often been a compellingly plaintive quality to Amidon’s voice and to his arrangements, the sense of an old soul harbored within a rangy young man’s frame. Amidon released his first album, *But This Chicken Proved False-Hearted*, in 2007, a homemade effort produced by Amidon and Thomas Bartlett, his childhood friend from Brattleboro, Vermont. He subsequently released two albums, *All Is Well* and *I See the Sign*, on Sigursson’s Bedroom Community label. Both featured orchestrations from another New England native and frequent collaborator Nico Muhly. Amidon joined the Nonesuch roster in 2013, with the release of *Bright Sunny South*, recorded in London, where Amidon now resides with his wife, the singer-songwriter Beth Orton. However, Amidon’s connection to Nonesuch goes back much further; his parents, members of the famed Bread and Puppet Theatre, were also part of the Vermont-based Word of Mouth Chorus, which released *Rivers of Delight: American Folk Hymns from the Sacred Harp Tradition* on Nonesuch in the seventies. Amidon grew up listening to folk, shape-note and old-time music, and as a boy he was an accomplished “Irish trad” fiddle player.

It may seem like some form of rebellion for Amidon to champion free jazz as he grew older, but that ultimately helped Amidon embrace his own musical roots: “In my life, I grew up in the nourishing folk universe of Vermont, singing with my folks and playing Irish fiddle tunes and all that stuff. I loved Irish fiddle playing, which was very ornate and highly technical. The American fiddle music sounded scratchy – I liked the really ornate Irish stuff. I didn’t understand old-time music, but my parents sang it so it was always in the background. The really huge moment for me was when I heard free jazz – Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Marc Ribot, downtown NY stuff. At the same time, I heard the field recordings of Alan Lomax and the recordings of Harry Smith, the early American stuff, and for the first time ever I was able to appreciate it - -through the prism of free jazz. Through free jazz, I learned to appreciate these raw, primitive, intense sounds, and then all of a sudden the American fiddle playing, the singing style, seemed raw and deep and intense – instead of just incompetent, as my snobbish ten year-old self had been approaching it.”

In a sense, *The Following Mountain* is the culmination of Amidon's exploration of the connections between improvisation, song form and the Appalachian sound - the fulfillment of what he initially came to NYC to find. Part of this was reaching out to Graves and Sultan in the same way he had learned fiddle tunes and songs from older folk musicians.  “We had this day of bringing in wise elders. Milford was so intense and Juma was so gentle. There was a sense of lineage that links to my experience with folk music. In the 1920’s, fifteen year-old fiddlers would learn their tunes from the oldest players in their villages, or old guys passing through.  You have to look beyond your immediate generational sphere to see what other people have to say.”

“This is what I came to New York for,” Amidon says, finally. “But I wasn’t ready back then. So *The Following Mountain* is deeply personal in that way.  This was like my dream. There is a sound, a raw sound, that is the sound of America to me, whether it’s from Albert Ayler or Doc Boggs.”

- Michael Hill