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In her debut full-length album, "Alight Beyond the Sea," Catholic singer-songwriter Jessica Gerhardt reflects big questions and uncovers meaning for when the answers don't come. (Tam Lontok)



by Stephanie Espinoza

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August 24, 2024

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In her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston wrote, "There are years that ask questions and years that answer." The post-2020 world seems to be a series of question-asking years, questions so big that they have created a pace of change that feels impossible to keep up with.

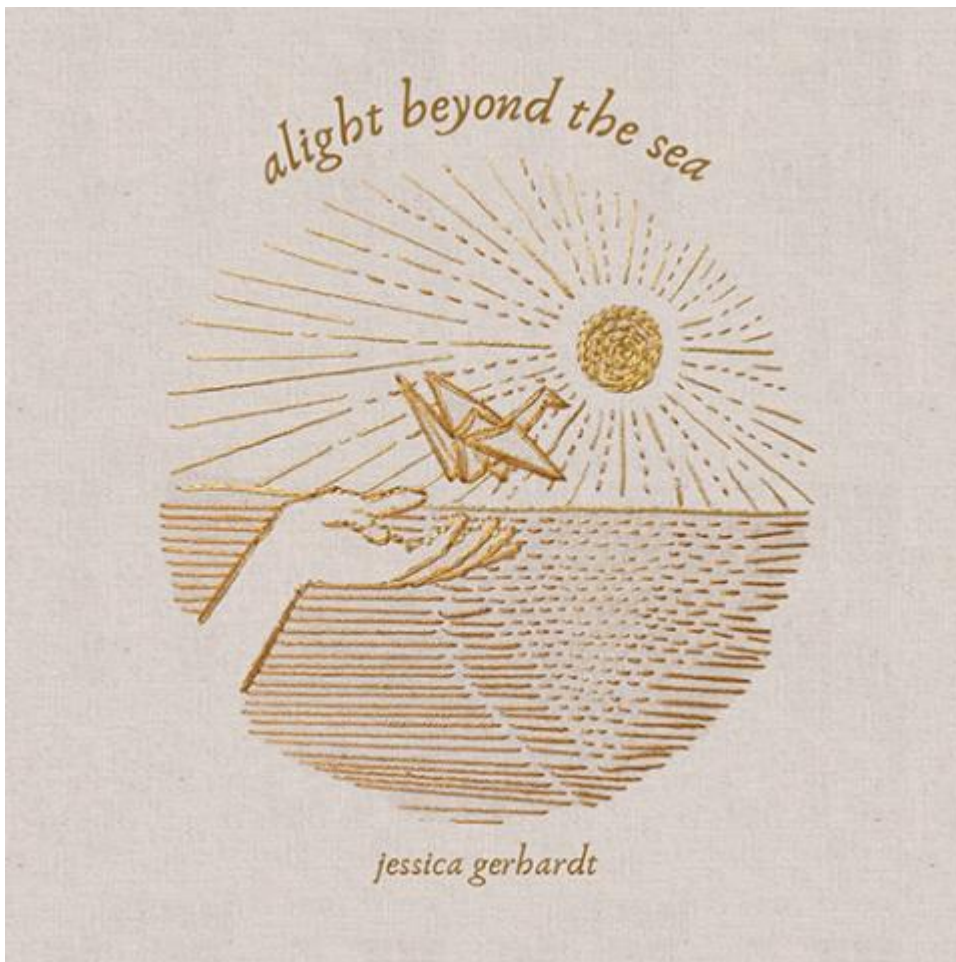
I am still surprised at how much that global, external shifting has led to impactful — even destabilizing — personal change and an onslaught of uncertainty about what life might look like moving forward. Between drastic career transitions out of Catholic ministry, a handful of new addresses, a waning spiritual practice, evolving personal relationships, and an emerging desire to change my hair color with the seasons, my life is in flux like never before.

In her debut full-length album, "[Alight Beyond the Sea](#)," Jessica Gerhardt reflects my internal state. The record readily settles into the questions and even uncovers a meaning for when the answers don't quite show themselves. The Los Angeles native singer-songwriter recently used an [Instagram post](#) to document the difference the last five years have made in her life, especially in how she lives as an artist. The same winds of change usher us into the opening track ("[Meant to Stay](#)") of the album as well, with chimes gently drawing me away from the desk overlooking the hills behind my neighborhood and into a new space, maybe one where the air is salty and the waves roar. And that space is full of questions: "Am I standing in my own way?" "Am I meant to stay?" "Do I throw my dreams away?"

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On tracks like "[Impatience](#)," "[Make Me Grow](#)," and "[Eyelash to Eyelash](#)," Gerhardt dives headfirst into the seas of despair. Here she navigates to some beautiful, grief-stricken and deeply longing language describing the visceral realities of the grief that pushes down on the weary soul. But even more so, she openly and honestly confronts her own shortcomings, listing them out as plainly as the week's grocery store needs. She holds the mirror up to herself and bravely sets out to say the quiet part out loud — that it's not easy to "beat my breast and own my sins" or confront my deepest mistrusts and fears, but this is what it takes to evolve alongside the questions.

It's not all despair, though. There is joy when the questions lead to something resembling answers, and Gerhardt wears it well. On "[Clarity](#)" she marries moments of hope to a bright, ukulele-driven melody that feels like it should be belted out on a coastal drive with the windows down. On "[Sighing Dove](#)," a gentle piano moment swells like a wave as she greets castaway fears and answered prayers like old friends. And even on tracks like "[Psalm 139](#)" or "[Suscipe](#)" that aren't as up-tempo, she lays claim to a steadfast surrender to the "grace of the gray," choosing peace in the questions and finding God along the way. (It's also worth mentioning that joy is evident in Gerhardt's decision to [embroider the album art](#) and an additional piece for each track, which, subsequently, also brought me immense joy.)



Jessica Gerhardt personally embroidered the album's cover art, as well as a unique embroidery for each individual track. (Tam Lontok)

But the emotional core of the record, as I experienced it, comes mid-record in the form of the song "[Paper Crane](#)." On this track, Gerhardt's voice sounds as clear and strong as ever, but there is a deeper sense of power here. There is an unsettling

earnestness as she sings, "Oh how my heart just wants a place to fall." In it I can almost hear myself, though it's a desire that is easy to quiet down when I don't care to sit in discomfort. There's a part of me that wonders if she meant to put these out into the world, bare as they make me feel. But it is evident she made no mistake, as her voice resonates almost like a battle cry for when the questions feel too big, heavy, or exhausting:

Oh you know how my heart is free
like a living crane set out for the sea.
I'm in your hands,
a sustaining wind,
and I'm carried on,
you are guiding me

In your hands
I'm in your hands
in your hands
in your hands

The last five years have certainly raised questions for me, so it is not out of the realm of possibility to hope that the next five will be the ones that finally reveal some answers. And, if not, I can echo the mantra Gerhardt sings on the [final ethereal track](#), where the vocals are layered in such a way that it's as though her past, present and future selves are all chiming in to give us some assurance by praying out words attributed to the great mystic Julian of Norwich: all shall be well.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 13-26, 2024** print issue under the headline: 'Alight Beyond the Sea' is an album for years that ask questions.