

Mary Gauthier  
Between Daylight and Dark  
Lost Highway

*By Al Kaufman*

When Mary Gauthier (pronounced go-shay) sings of hobos, drug addicts, drunks, and people just struggling to get by, she speaks from experience. Abandoned by her mother, she was adopted into a strict Catholic household that she rebelled against strongly. She stole her parents' car at age 15 and never looked back. Her life consisted of lesbian bars, drinking, drugs, flopping on friends' couches, and jail. She spent her 18th birthday behind bars. She eventually straightened out her act and wrote her first song at age 35. Many of the songs from her five albums have drawn from her experiences, including those on the brilliant new *Between Daylight and Dark*. However, her new CD is her most mature to date. Gauthier has now spent more of her life sober than drunk and has a new sense of hope. So while many of her characters still live in the dark crevices of society, they see ways of escape, or at least are able to muster a smidgen of hope. Producer Joe Henry opted for a sparse, live feel for this CD, a big departure from the critically acclaimed, multi-layered *Mercy Now*. It works, giving *Daylight* a bluesy feel. While Gauthier's tired, cracked vocals, and country-tinged songs practically demand comparisons to Lucinda Williams, the Louisiana native is much more. Nobody since Johnny Cash has explored faith and violence as beautifully as she does on the opening track, "Snakebit." And "Between the Daylight and the Dark" recalls Leonard Cohen, both musically and lyrically. Williams, Cash, and Cohen are some pretty big names to toss around, but Gauthier is good enough to walk among them. Vulnerability has never been as courageous and beautiful as it is on "Soft Place to Land," which she co-wrote with Atlanta's Kristen Hall. And "Thanksgiving" captures a prison visitation scene as humanly as possible. She describes an old woman getting frisked before entering: "When they're done she wipes their touch off her dress, stands tall and heads in." Gauthier has already written a song about spending Christmas under a bridge. Perhaps before she's through she'll be able to put together a bumper holiday compilation. I'll be first in line for it.