

From Russia with love

Iris DeMent brings her songs, storytelling chops to The Kate, June 10

6/10/16

By Lisa Reisman
lisareisman27@gmail.com

OLD SAYBROOK » Like most of us, acclaimed folk singer-songwriter Iris DeMent, who will appear at The Kate on Friday, June 10, had never heard of the dissident Stalin-era poet Anna Akhmatova.

Of course, she wasn't much of a poetry buff.

"I had poetry anxiety," she said in a telephone interview from her home in Iowa City in her soft southern lilt.

"I was comfortable with songs. I grew up in the [Pentecostal] church. I was soaked in those hymns. But there was something about poetry — the teachers presented it with so many rules. I can remember my heart gripping. I felt so intimidated with it."

Until, that is, someone loaned her an anthology of Russian poetry a few years back and she casually flipped it open. At which time, "a curious sensation swept over her," according to her website.

Akhmatova, an aristocrat turned Russian rebel, composed poems that gave voice to the everyday atrocities of the Stalinist regime, becoming a symbol of Soviet resistance and, even now, a household name in Russia on a par with, say, Robert Frost.

But the 55-year-old didn't know any of that when she read that random poem. "I immediately heard melody in the work," she said. "It felt as if somebody walked in the room and said to me, 'Set that to music.'"

The result: "The Trackless Woods," a hauntingly gorgeous album that is unlike anything the Arkansas native has produced beginning with her 1992 debut, "Infamous Angel," lauded by Rolling Stone as "an essential album of the 1990s."

A series of records followed, further establishing the youngest of 14 children as "one of the finest singer-songwriters in America," according to The Guardian, and earned her multiple Grammy nominations, as well as collaborations with such celebrated figures as John Prine, Steve Earle and Emmy Lou Harris. "Sing the Delta," released in 2012, had Rolling Stone hailing "the artisanal songs of love and doubt wear[ing] their home-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Songstress Iris DeMent.

liness proudly" and The Boston Globe praising the collection as "a work of rare, unvarnished grace and power."

Meanwhile, DeMent had divorced, remarried, and moved from Nashville to Iowa City where she and her husband, the singer-songwriter Greg Brown, live with their adopted Siberia-born daughter.

"She was 6 when we adopted her and there was a whole culture that she left behind," DeMent said. "So always in the back of my mind, I had this sense of wanting to figure out how to link her two worlds, Russian and American."

Gradually it dawned on DeMent that Akhmatova, whose poetry is still taught in Russian schools, was the link DeMent was seeking for her daughter.

There was also that melody that the poems evoked — a "hymn-like quality," she said,

"which is something I really identify with. My first music was hymns and old gospel songs."

No surprise, then, that, in the translation of poem to song, many of the tracks on "The Trackless Woods" take a distinctly old-time country turn. "From An Airplane" rollicks with a honky-tonk beat, while "Listening to Singing" could be a traditional standard sung from a creaky porch in a sleepy southern town.

Then there's "Not with Deserters," which progresses from a stark pairing of piano and voice to rich harmonies layered over a slide guitar.

That's by design. "If you listen to her poems, you can hear all that sorrow and that burden in them," said DeMent, "but there's always a transcendence somehow, a sense of victory over all that inhumanity that she was liv-

ing with every day of her life."

In the end, as NPR music critic Ken Tucker put it, DeMent "has created an album that continues ... her lifelong dedication to finding ways to express the difficulties, the moral complexity and the exultation of day-to-day existence."

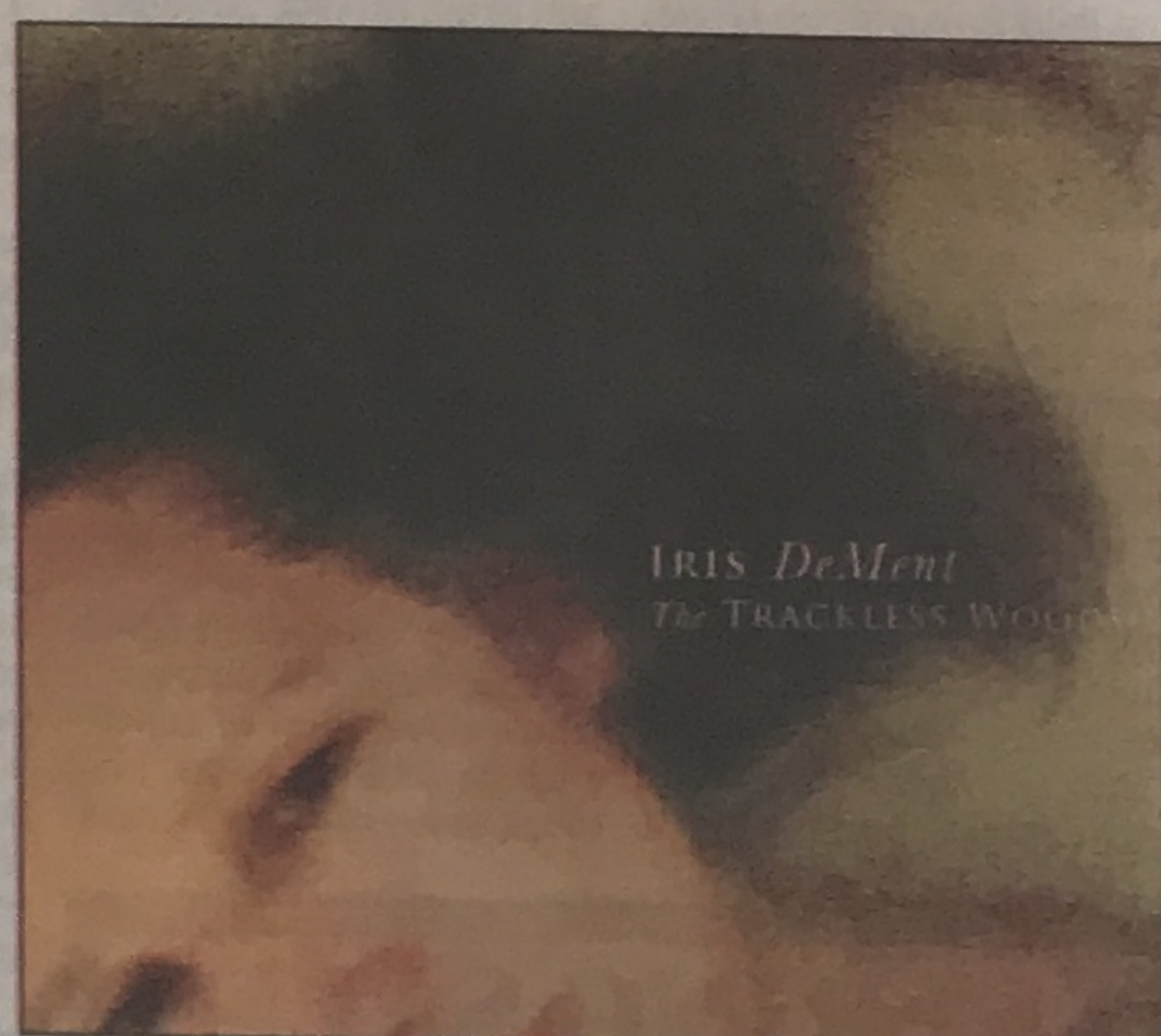
Composing the songs to "The Trackless Woods" has also, it seems, conquered her poetry anxiety.

"Now that the door is opened, why not put more poems to song?" she asked. "Why not make them more accessible? It's pure joy."

Iris DeMent will perform at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center at 8 p.m. on Friday, June 10, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook. For tickets and information, visit www.katharinehepburntheater.org or call 877-503-1286.



PHOTO BY PIETA BROWN



ALBUM COVER

Many of the songs are based on a Russian poet not generally known in the U.S.