

SUMMER 2006 a women in music compendium

wears the trousers

*thea
gilmore*
on making her marx

plus: lisa germano, juana molina,

the dresden dolls, the cardigans, joan as police woman, psapp,

broadcast & lots more

wears the trousers magazine

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Just when you thought that summer had pretty much gone and shoved its head under a blanket of cloud for another ten months, here's something that will hopefully warm your hearts and minds – the very sorrily delayed, so-called 'summer' issue of *Wears The Trousers*. Yay!



We haven't just been twiddling our collective thumbs, in case you were wondering. This issue comes with a distinctly British flavour as we went undercover to seek out interviews with some of the UK's brightest songwriting talent. There's so much out there! Singer-songwriter showcases are springing up all over the country and the sheer volume of activity at grass roots level is astonishing. A quick scan through the London listings papers shows that the scene is thriving at a rate perhaps not seen since the big ol' folk club boom of the mid-Sixties. Of course, those rare little diamonds will insist on sitting in amongst the rough, but you're in the best place to get your heels pointed in the general direction of rightness.

As you've probably noticed, our cover star this issue is the fantastic Thea Gilmore, who, to my mind at least, is one of our all-time greatest homegrown talents. With her seventh album, *Harpo's Ghost*, just out to rave reviews (again) and her first baby due in November, 2006 is turning out to be a landmark year for her. Somehow I doubt she's going to take it any easier next year so you can reasonably expect her to be back within our pages in the not too distant future!

The Brit remit doesn't stop at singer-songwriters, however, and we've tucked in a few of our favourite bands, including Psapp, Tender Trap and the always brilliant Broadcast. Elsewhere in the issue, we go truly international with interviews from Canada (Emily Haines), Argentina (Juana Molina) and Sweden (The Cardigans), as well as a clutch of US folk we just couldn't say no to – Lisa Germano, The Dresden Dolls, Joan As Police Woman and more.

Hope you enjoy it.
We'll try not to be quite so tardy next time.

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contents

interviews

- 04 the cardigans
 - 07 emily haines
 - 08 rainer maria
 - 10 the dresden dolls
 - 14 inara george
 - 16 joan as police woman
 - 19 mia doi todd
 - 22 tender trap
 - 24 psapp
 - 26 lisa germano
 - 30 juana molina
 - 32 the puppini sisters
 - 36 broadcast
 - 41 lou rhodes
 - 42 thea gilmore
 - 48 nerina pallot
 - 50 astrid williamson
 - 54 amy wadge
 - 57 stephanie kirkham
-

features

- 13 can men be feminists?
 - 34 so long sleater-kinney
 - 60 a buyer's guide to aimee mann
-

reviews

- 63 new albums
- 84 reissues
- 86 imports
- 88 film & DVD
- 90 live



lisa germano
page 26

WELLS LIKE TEEN SPART

Ah, the fickle world of fashion. Back in 1998, when wearing a button-up cardie down the local shops was likely to get a man pelted with Werthers Originals and cries of 'grandpa', Swedish band The Cardigans were riding a wave of critical acclaim and hurtling down a US interstate in an open-top convertible with one mother of a death wish and scant regard for the safety of others. OK, so that last bit didn't really happen but that was a good video, and, more importantly, a damn good song. And the public agreed, giving the band their longest run of hit singles to date and catapulting them to the levels of international success that their opinion-splitting, faux-cutesy 1996 single *Lovefool* had previously hinted at.

Fast forward to 2006, however, and things couldn't be more different. The garment is back in a big way while The Cardigans themselves can hardly get arrested. *Super Extra Gravity*, their latest opus, peaked a whopping seventy places below *Gran Turismo's* #8 high on the UK album charts, despite an equally killer single in the shape of *I Need Some Fine Wine & You, You Need To Be Nicer* and a dazzling array of moody, petulant tunes full of surprises and curious twists. What the hell is wrong with people's ears?

Oh well, consider the UK a write-off for now, but with the long-delayed North American release of *Super Extra Gravity* just around the corner, there's a chance that this neat little album might just find the international audience it deserves. In honour of this, **ROBBIE DE SANTOS** caught up with singer Nina Persson for a brief chat whilst on a recent promo trip to the UK where the band right heartily rocked the crowd at V2006 with a slick and stylish performance. American readers, this one's for you!

You've been playing lots of festivals this summer – including one in Moscow and one in Serbia. You've even got one coming up in Belarus! Is it exciting going to places slightly off the beaten tourpath? How do you think the crowds will compare to Europe and America?

We've been several times to nearly everywhere, but not to the former Yugoslavia or Russia, so it's great! It's still a little shaky and always such a hassle. Twice we've planned to go to Russia but it hasn't worked out. There are visas and the equipment might not get in – it's a gamble, but it's always beautiful to play that kind of place because the people who arrange the festivals and all the people trying to get a scene going are so determined and working so hard and it feels great to take part in them.

You finally came back to play headline dates in Britain earlier this year. Did you enjoy being back?

Yeah, it was about time really. I think we could have with the last album [*2003's Long Gone Before Daylight*] as well. It's frustrating to have had such commercial success on a major label, then just because we are not selling the same amounts [*people in the UK*] think we're gone. And judging by our website activity, we're not! We've played for such a long time that we've got a fanbase who'll come anyway. The British market is very novelty based, that's what it seems like to me. I feel bad for those bands that get hyped. It doesn't really annoy me, because I know by now that's how the industry works, but it's frustrating in a way. We feel like we've come such a long way and it hasn't worked commercially for us for some reason. I guess we haven't made any compromises at all, so it's a conscious choice we've made as well. But of course, as a musician, in your heart you always

believe you're the best band in space. So we think that everybody else is fucking stupid! You have to think like that to be able to work like we do.

I saw you at T In The Park in 2003 and you didn't play Lovefool and you made fun of the guitar sound in My Favourite Game. Do you still feel like that about the old stuff?

No, I don't actually anymore. I made fun of that guitar sound – it is quite fucking annoying, isn't it? – but it works! I like music when it's sort of verging on being irritating. But these days to play *Lovefool* would be like playing a cover. It's actually ten years old and we've made so much music after it. It would make such a break in the set, it would be awkward. And actually we've made experiments almost to see if people would miss it and people don't, you see. People notice it's not there, but they don't really miss it. So I think everybody's happy this way.

You've described Super Extra Gravity as an "obnoxious teenager". After thirteen years together, do you think the band has finally hit puberty?

[laughs] Yeah, I guess so! Thirteen years... that's when you're at your height of your obnoxious puberty, right?

Do you feel obnoxious now?

Kind of, I don't know what it is. I'm afraid it's some sort of late thirties crisis, the last glances of youth, you know.

So do you feel like you were looking to the future and the past for this album? It does seem to hark back to the harder-edged sounds of Gran Turismo whilst keeping the more sensitive songwriting of Long Gone Before Daylight firmly in place.

Hmm, I don't really know. I mean, I think we were looking back in one way



because we made the decision to go back to our old producer [Tore Johansson]. It's not really like we left him, we made one record without him and then we went back. I think it's that we realised he does contribute a lot of essential things. We listened to the old stuff and realised he's quite inventive, so that's a big part of what we've got.

One new aspect is that, four or five years ago, we actually learnt to play our instruments. We discovered rehearsing! We used to think rehearsing was for pussies, but now we've actually realised it can make a huge difference. I think one part of where we are moving to is that we are sort of using our skill to play more than we dared to before. We used to be much more production based and now we've become a little simpler because we're a lot more confident now that things sound fine when we just play, you know.

Three of the boys became new fathers during the making of the album. That must have really affected the way you worked!

We obviously had to be a tiny bit more structured in working. I mean, the last record we made we spent about nine months on the bottle, working totally at random, any time at a whim. But

this time we worked 9am to 6pm, twelve days in a row, then a week off, then we did another twelve days. We were very structured like that. The amazing thing about it was that, because people had responsibilities at home, once we got into the studio we went berserk! The inspiration just came immediately instead of sitting, semi-drunk, getting frustrated just waiting for it. This time we could actually work at 9am after a pot of coffee, it was sparkling. And it's quite nice, because when you're younger you think everything just dies when you start a family and things.

And I'm one of the ones who doesn't have children yet, so I'm the one who does things that the other guys wouldn't. But, on the other hand, they are kind of funnier people because they have

that other responsibility. They learn to appreciate it a whole lot more.

Is the tour bus a giant kindergarten then?

No, they just come and visit once in a while, and I don't blame them for not wanting to. I would never go on someone else's tour. It really sucks if it's not your own. So they're at home.

You starred in your first film recently playing a Finnish tango dancer in God Willing [just out on DVD in Sweden with English subtitles, hooray!]. I haven't seen it yet but apparently you sing a bit in Finnish – was that a strange experience?

You know, I don't even speak Finnish at all! I don't understand a word of it – it's a really strange language! But I've always been sort of fascinated by music sung in

such a safe, small, lovely concept. There was nothing to lose and I had a great time. And if something similar came up, I might take it. I'm not an actress and there are so many much better ones out there. But I had fun!

Do you think the band's individual projects have helped you stay together?

For us it really was a good thing. Everything that we've done outside the band – side projects, babies, university, movies – it's important because you should never feel stuck or that you're doing it because everybody is expecting you to. If you are, then it's not going to be good at all. It's a terrible cliché but our band is a marriage that really benefits from cheating; it keeps us impressed with each other. When one of us goes away and does something that's really fantastic we're like 'whoa! come back, we want you here!'

After six albums together, is there anything The Cardigans still want to achieve? Are you already thinking of another album, or do you have other goals that you want to pursue first?

We've got some dates coming up in South America and that's amazing, places we want to go. I'm really excited. I think it's a big enough goal in itself to just continue and make sure that

there's always a point to us making records. I never ever wanna continue just because we have a record deal. I want to make more records that make sense, in a way.

The fun thing is that when you start to tour a record like we did in March, you notice immediately how you start to develop because you are taking the previous record to a new inbetween land. Recently, we started to touch on the subject of what we wanted to do. We were listening to some music and we were like 'I wanna go in this direction!...'I'm not saying what but I'm really excited! ■

Super Extra Gravity is released in North America through Nettwerk Records on September 19th.



words that don't mean anything. I'm a huge fan of the Cocteau Twins and I love the way [Liz Fraser] just made up languages. So, for me, it was the same sort of appeal. It's a great challenge to sing something and the words just become sounds.

Even so, I knew what the song I did was about and I knew what I was saying. I had a lot of coaching from Finnish singers and radio presenters on how to pronounce things.

Could you see yourself taking a bigger part in a film at some point in the future?

Maybe, you know; at least now I have a CV. I don't think I did an amazing performance. My part in that film is not based on amazing acting, I was just a made-up imaginary creature. One of my best friends was the director so it was



words by ANDRZEJ LUKOWSKI
photo by CANDACE MAYER

“It’s hard to say whether it was a brutal time for everyone,” ponders Metric’s Emily Haines, “but for me, I just remember hearing way too much Craig David everywhere.”

The beanpole frontwoman is reflecting on her time spent living in London. In its original incarnation, Metric was a pair of Canadian exiles – singer-keyboardist Haines and guitarist James Shaw – living in New York. But in 2000, after two fairly miserable years loitering in the Big Apple, Chrysalis Records saw the commercial potential of the duo’s steely synth-rock and flew them over to the UK so as to turn them into huge stars. Naturally, the major label screwed up miserably, and Shaw and Haines retreated to Brooklyn to lick their wounds (and pen a mildly bitter song called *London Half Life*).

A full answer to the question ‘what happened next?’ would probably be extremely tedious; better Haines’ own pithy assessment: “We just kept doing what we had always been doing and more people started listening.”

In Canada, Metric (now a Toronto-based quartet) are big. Really big. To get an idea of how huge they are, try this simple exercise: imagine your favourite Canadian band – unless you’ve been hiding out somewhere weird for the past two years, there should be several serious contenders. Now, check the name you’ve come up with isn’t ‘Nickelback’. If it is, *Wears The Trousers* recommends primal

scream therapy and/or an exorcism. Otherwise, imagine that band, only twice as popular. Then double it. Times two. Well dear reader, Metric are even more popular than that. Er, approximately.

Quite why isn’t immediately clear. Certainly a big plus has been Haines’ involvement with the revered Broken Social Scene collective. Friends for over a decade with many of BSS’s myriad members (in particular Stars vocalist Amy Millan), she’s had ringside seats to the Canadian indie renaissance. “It’s a genuinely great time for Canadian music,” she enthuses. “Unlike artificially hyped scenes, what you’re hearing out of Canada now is the result of many years of love and work from a whole community of lifelong friends. It’s amazing that [*Broken Social Scene*] have all kept our childhood friendships alive for so long and that people appreciate the sound of all of us crawling on top of each other in a room. The value of those people in my life is immeasurable.”

Which doesn’t alter the fact that, listen to either of Metric’s albums, 2003’s *Old World Underground, Where Are You Now?*, or this year’s *Live It Out* (released in Canada last October) and it’s hard to fight back the urge to shrug. There’s a clutch of killer tunes (the former set’s *Dead Disco* and *Combat Baby*, the latter’s *Too Little Too Late* and *Poster Of A Girl*), but there’s something rather anaemic about both efforts, with their strained vocals, wishy-

washy production and keyboards set firmly to ‘wobble’. Certainly there’s nothing that’s a patch on Broken Social Scene’s Haines-starring *Anthems For A 17 Year Old Girl*.

See Metric live, though, and for a fraction of a second the band is drowned out by the sound of jaws hitting the floor. They’re phenomenal, anchored by a super-tight rhythm section and Shaw’s girder-like riffs. All of which is comprehensively overshadowed by Haines: a lanky raygun, blasting the audience with feral synths and snarling vocals, you wonder what the hell she was playing at in the studio. Whirling like a microskirted dervish, she manages to simultaneously combine unquenchable cool with the unhinged appearance of a drunk at a wedding.

It’s not an unattractive look, and certainly her religious devotion to the miniskirt (combined with what a more downmarket publication than *Wears The Trousers* might describe as ‘nice pins’) has raised the band’s profile immeasurably in the US underground press. Chart Attack magazine even put an endearingly dishevelled Haines on its front cover under the heading Sexiest Canadian Musician. “Magazines love to manufacture meaning, it cracks me up. Everyone should remember not to take them too seriously. Guys always wear pants. Why wear them so religiously?” she ripostes, not unreasonably.

In fact, the next time we see Emily Haines she may cut a very different figure. Perhaps encouraged by her old mucker Amy Millan, whose *Honey From The Tombs* album was released earlier this year, Haines has a solo record due out in the autumn. “The album is called *Knives Don’t Have Your Back*,” she says, “and it’s a collection of cinematic piano compositions recorded over the past four years. Metric will not be taking a hiatus. Since we were kids Amy and I have always been avid songwriters, and both our albums are long overdue.”

Having been rejected here once already, taken the best part of a decade to break Canada, and with a solo album to deal with, it’s hard to imagine Metric are going to find time to ram *Live It Out* down the UK’s collective throat. But this is a band on a roll, and it can only be a matter of time before they finally harness their live energy into studio potency. Fate willing, the name Emily Haines will be remembered on these shores long after Craig David has bo’d his last selecta. ■

Metric’s Live It Out is available now on Drowned In Sound Recordings. Knives Don’t Have Your Back is released in the US on September 26th through Last Gang Records, with a UK release yet to be finalised.

finding the beauty in miniature disasters

Caithlin De Marrais' nimble physique alludes to her past as a classically trained dancer. Slim and sprite-like with a wavy red bob, she speaks at length of the DIY scene of the early Nineties American Midwest from which her band sprang, along with others like The Promise Ring and Joan Of Arc, from playing shows in their basement to opening for Sleater-Kinney on their very first tour. She and bandmate Kyle Fischer first met at a poetry workshop whilst attending the University of Wisconsin; she was studying poetry and planned to be a writer, he had just dissolved his band Ezra Pound and happened to be studying German literature. Rainer Maria Rilke was the intersection that united them, and so fittingly Rainer Maria was the moniker they assumed for themselves. Caithlin had only been playing bass for three months at the time and vocal duties were split between her and Fischer, with William Kuehn joining them on drums. Neither Caithlin nor Kyle's musical backgrounds (dance and drums, respectively) really lent themselves to singing, so the band consequently developed their own distinctive sound – boy-girl vocal interplay, half-sung, half-shrieked, always exuberant and always, of course, poetically inclined.

The term 'emo' was thrown around in those first few years, long before emo morphed from an indie sub-genre to a commercial radio monster that eclipsed the music it most wanted to pay tribute to. But where emo gets by on being flagrantly 'sincere' or 'heartfelt', Rainer Maria are simply earnest and discerning, and never more so than with their fifth album *Catastrophe Keeps Us Together*,

their first studio release since 2003's *Long Knives Drawn*, and their first with new label Grunion Records. The record marks a new evolution in the band's ten-year plus history. A large part of any poetry is not always what's said, but what isn't said, and that's where Rainer Maria consistently manage to trump other bands they've shared a stage with. There is nothing contrived in what they have to say, or indeed in how they say it.

In the beginning, their sound was raw and the verses were tied up in heady metaphors. The balancing act of Kyle and Caithlin's vocals, especially on early fan faves like *Tin Foil* or *Artificial Light*, created a dizzying, euphoric effect, tangling the listener in abstract lyrics – "the skyline is two gazes long", "your chest is a cage for my letters" and "why is this technology an anathema to me?", for example. Speaking briefly of other poetically inclined artists, Van Morrison and Joni Mitchell come up, and Caithlin recalls that producer Mark Haynes once described them as being "like folk music with loud drums".

Now based in Brooklyn, Marrais claims that the band have been moving away from those original folk sensibilities, which, coupled with their punk DIY ethic, made them so distinct. So whilst their early work might leave the listener careening, *Catastrophe...* sits them down with a firm hand on their shoulder. The approach is more direct and concentrated, and quite a step away from the dual nature of those first few albums. At the forefront of the band this time is little bass-wielding Caithlin, handling vocals on her own, navigating us through the single theme articulated in the album title, threading all of the songs together.

Humanistic rather than artistic urges take over on this album. Caithlin says she has grown more confident with age, moving away from her misanthropic tendencies, and instead of keeping listeners at a distance by hiding her meaning in metaphors, speaks of wanting to pull listeners close and whisper in their ear. Over the years, her voice has ripened from a chirpy girlish croon into a honeyed instrument that crests climactically over words like "You were strong and clever / and I didn't know any better" in stand-out number *Burn*. There are still traces of the prolific Rainer Maria-type treatment on verses from *I'll Make You Mine*, where Caithlin sweetly inquires with the utmost elation: "Can you name all the bones in my body / can you make all the tones in my head / what you couldn't find in books / and you've broken every spine / is that I'll make, I'll make you mine."

Inspired by recurring nightmares of the world ending and the moon falling out of orbit, *Catastrophe Keeps Us Together* is an ode to the awe, terror, confusion and, ultimately, the epiphanies that disaster inspires. On the surface level, the album is about endings, be it the end of civilization or the end of a relationship. Rainer Maria's core fanbase of indie veterans may be surprised at the new direction they've taken and the restraints they've placed on poetic license, but with each new album comes a new influx of fans who might've still been weening themselves off of 'The Lion King' soundtrack at the time of the band's conception, anxious to emote and identify with the wisdom of Rainer Maria. ■

.....
Catastrophe Keeps Us Together is available on import now.



Agents provocateurs

words by ANDRZEJ LUKOWSKI
photo by FRANCOIS BERTHIER



It's ninety minutes before the doors for tonight's gig open and already there's a ten-metre queue of fans outside. Not an unusual thing in itself; this is the Birmingham Academy, used to playing host to emo acts for whom the average fourteen year old would cheerily disembowel their best mate to get a half inch closer to. But this isn't an emo crowd, being both older and odder, favouring a uniform of stripy jumpers, stripy stockings and an infeasible number of bowler hats. They're here to see Bostonian duo The Dresden Dolls, cult cabaret rockers, and, apparently, saviours of the bowler hat industry. Were the waiting crowds to be let in right now, however, they'd probably be a bit disappointed. Pre-gig, Dresden Dolls singer, songwriter and pianist Amanda Palmer is sans stockings and suspenders; both she and fellow Doll, drummer Brian Viglione, are bowler-free and their trademark whiteface mime make-up is nowhere to be seen. Sporting a battered ensemble of old t-shirt, trousers and boots, the rangy Palmer looks more like a mechanic than somebody who proclaims her stock in trade to be 'Brechtian punk cabaret'. An inexpensive dye-job aside, the only unusual looking feature is her eyebrows, which for some reason or other she draws on with Maybelline and look bloody odd. Certainly too weird for the waiting hordes to have tried to copy. Speaking in low, earnest tones, she ponders the wannabe Amandas that flock to every Dresden Dolls gig.

"Well that's was definitely never a plan, oh god no. In fact people have been telling us for years that we should sell stuff like hats at our shows. But Brian and I... well although it's sort of flattering on one level to see them painting their faces and dressing up like us, in another way we feel they're missing the point, because it's not, it's really not about a look or a style for us, it's about the ability to be a freak. The sorts of fans that look like the hardcore fans don't necessarily fit to the mould that we expected."

This might sound a touch ungrateful, but in truth there are probably few artists who appreciate their fans as much as Amanda Palmer. "I do," she nods vigorously, "increasingly more so actually, because I take a lot of solace in the fact that people connect with the music, even on days I don't connect with it, it sort of keeps me afloat sometimes."

With their evil mime chic, an eponymous debut album of harsh, antsy piano rock, and the underground hits *Girl Anachronism* (a thrillingly ugly, near industrial two-minute rant) and *Coin Operated Boy* (an enjoyably kitsch paean to

sex toys), Palmer and Viglione would have the makings of a cult act even if they had a rigorous policy of vigorously beating all fans with sharpened sticks. But one peek at their official website shows a band that offers almost unparalleled access: the Dolls invite people to send them items to be signed, to submit art, poetry, photographs, music, to get in touch if you'd like to do performance art at a Dresden Dolls gig. Infamously, Palmer keeps an online diary, an eyebrow-raising stew of neuroses, paranoia and insecurity, the likes of which you probably wouldn't be overjoyed for your parents to have access to, let alone thousands of fans. It's understandable why one might think Palmer has invited people to reach in and grab a piece of her identity for themselves.

"I think...it's all about how you communicate things," she says slowly. "With the diary, one thing I try really hard not to do is to use it as...well first of all to use it as a weapon, which it really could be, and second of all to use it as a kind of dumping ground for frustration and venting. As long as people remain in touch with the fact that I'm always questioning why I'm even communicating something and that I always remain self-critical and open-minded about the process itself then it can't be misinterpreted, because I'm sort of the first to criticise myself before anybody else, and with that you basically disarm your worst critics, because they stop having ammo to use against you."

Er, okay. So in other words her diary's a bit like the bit in '8 Mile' when Eminem wins by doing a rap about how rubbish he is? "Exactly!" she grins.

From a non-cult perspective, i.e. are the tunes actually any good, The Dresden Dolls' debut is a pretty qualified success. It has some good songs, but behind the compelling aesthetic, it's really a tad ropey: the angst is non-specific, contrived even, and while Palmer's coarse rasp of a voice and pneumatic piano ensures the band has an identity, it's frequently not a very strong one.

It's a tad drab next to this year's sophomore effort, *Yes, Virginia*. Largely shorn of the guitars that occasionally embellished its predecessor, it's the product of Palmer refining the Dolls' core values and coming out with all guns blazing. The piano is cranked up to eleven and frequently battered to within an inch of its life; Viglione bombards his kit with a power and precision that would prompt the average fighter pilot to hang his head in shame. Musically, it's a big, boisterous, larger-than-life knees-up, like something Andrew Lloyd Webber might come up

with after a night on angel dust and Stella. Which would count for very little if she was still croaking away despondently about something or other, but it's a very different Palmer who dominates this album. Her voice still isn't pretty, but it is far more potent, a full-blooded, confident roar that nimbly rips through songs that – from the self-explanatory venom of *Backstabber*, through the delicate domestic abuse ballad *Delilah* and hymnal closer *Sing* – aren't afraid to wear their hearts on their sleeves.

"That's not imagined," nods Palmer, "as a performer I have a lot more confidence. We recorded this record after being on the road for fucking three years, and that first record after barely touring at all. So my piano playing is a lot more confident, my vocals are a lot more confident, I'm used to getting up in front of a crowd of 1000 people, whereas that first record was utter paranoia and self-consciousness."

Of course, making the songs more accessible only serves to beckon fans further in to Palmer-land. But it also invites criticism. The likes of *Backstabber* and *Delilah* appear to be nakedly critical of individuals – in the latter, Palmer informs her abused protagonist "You're an unrescuable schizo / Or else you're on the rag" – though the singer is evasive about this. "They're fictional Frankensteins," she says. "I mean, it's not like I have an actual friend called Delilah. She's sort of like a confabulation of people, and myself for that matter. I think songs are like dreams in a way. They say every character in a dream is actually yourself, or an aspect of yourself, and I think you could say the same about being a songwriter."

Most provocative of all is *Sex Changes*, the propulsive, giddy romp that opens both the album itself and the band's live shows. It's infused with such kinetic gusto that first time around you don't necessarily notice the lyrics. Second time around lines like "You get your choice of an aesthetic / We'll need to chop your clock off (tick tick tick tick tick tick) / It might not be what you expected / There is no money back once you've been ripped off!" leave an odd taste in the mouth. Seemingly a salvo of scorn against transsexuals, there's no obligation for Palmer to adopt a positive stance on the issue, but it seems an oddly pointed attack from somebody who proclaims herself friend to the freak. She shakes her head in concern.

"Oh. Uh. No. In fact I got an email about that, some somewhat perturbed fanmail. I think as a certain brand of feminist it can be really incriminating when you come forth with a view that actually seems

very conservative on paper, but y'know, I think that people actually should be held responsible for their actions, I think that people really should be educated before they make their decisions, I think that people really should have to think through the consequences of their actions, and there's a lot on confusion around the entire issue.

That song initially came out of a relationship I had with somebody that was going through a sex change*, it was inspired by that. I'm by no means anti-anything like that. But it certainly did bring up questions about how final those decisions were. And also the song is like a triple entendre, it's about sex and virginity and abortion, the lyrics are deliberately mixed metaphors and they work very well together.

"I mean you can take a weird stance on anything like that – I'm definitely very pro-choice but I'm also anti-stupid. Like I know plenty of girls who are just having terrible dumb sex, and rape is the same way, I mean it's this terrible fucking thing but also it can be this terrible weapon used by women, how do you negotiate that? And that's all wrapped up in the song, that's wrapped up in a lot of the songs. It was a passing relationship. But it was educational to say the least. But it was definitely a look into a very strange experience that must feel very overwhelming."

Superficially more controversial still is *Mrs O*, which features Palmer singing "There's no hell and no Hiroshima... no Hitler and no holocaust". It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realise she's playing a part, a deluded school teacher lecturing the Virginia of the album's title. For those not versed in the more arcane elements of US culture, *Yes, Virginia* is a reference to an editorial in the September 21, 1897 edition of the *New York Sun* in which a precocious brat's inquiry into the subject of Father Christmas was met with a long-winded reply that concluded "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus".

"The original American letter," muses Palmer, "it's sort of like, it would be

in the same room of a museum as the Norman Rockwell paintings; it's like this very schmaltzy, feel-good yet somehow acceptably salt-of-the earth message that

gets reprinted in newspapers all over America every Christmas and everyone reads it, and it's this really emotional thing and it's really sentimental, almost overly sentimental. And yet like a good Norman Rockwell painting you fucking hate to love it, but you look at it and it hits you in that spot where you don't want to be hit. That's sort of the way I feel about the letter, but you know I like taking that little chunk of the letter completely out of context, because you know, in the context of the band it's much darker."

Indeed it is, a pithy fantasist dialogue that kicks Western expansionism and cultural hand-washing into check without a sniff of the word 'Iraq'. Palmer does, however, concede that were a pre-teen to badger her about the non-existence of Saint Nick, she'd probably "say the same thing as the *New York Sun*. Only shorter".

There are a lot of reasons why some music fans might be wary of Amanda Palmer. Intentional or not (and let's be honest: it's intentional), there's something intrinsically cultish and hermetically sealed about The Dresden Dolls. Force of will and sheer quality of music is slowly breaking that seal, but, truth be told, a 30-year-old Bostonian who paints her face white and sings liter-ate, oompah-oompah songs about abortions is always going to scare the crap out of some people. But not as many as you might think; the Dolls' recent UK tour was a sell out success, and not everyone was wearing a silly hat. And although thinking too much about the rationale behind letting fans read her diaries might engender all sorts of conspiracy theories, it seems that we're actually getting off quite lightly.

"That's a very deliberately public diary. In that bag," Palmer grins, prodding the canvas carryall *WTT's* dictaphone is propped on with a booted foot, "is my private diary. And nobody reads that. That's where I write about the shit that's REALLY pissing me off." ■



*For the record, *WTT's* tabloid-style probing didn't reveal which direction said change was going in.

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Yes, Virginia is out now on Roadrunner Records. The new single *Backstabber* is released this month. The Dolls return to the UK in November for a pair of special shows at *The Roundhouse* in Camden Town.

Much to our bemusement, some people find it hard to understand how a man could be the driving force behind *Wears The Trousers'* femme-friendly ethos. JO HARRISON asks why and explores a wider, very modern phenomenon.

Is it possible for a man to be a feminist? Should men be feminists? And if so, do they get to keep their trousers? Such questions are the tip of the iceberg where this subject is concerned and there are no definitive answers, so let's start closest to home. Is a man who is interested in redressing the balance of gender representation in the music press (or indeed any aspect of our culture) really a feminist, and what does the term imply? My own personal take on the subject is that men can and should be feminists, but that has much to do with my own take on feminism as a cause, a movement or, maybe more aptly, a belief system. By this I am not advocating that to be a feminist is to live under quasi-religious doctrine, but simply that it should affect the way in which people conduct their lives.

To me, feminism is a banner for humanity, acceptance, diversity and inclusion. In the past, there have been situations where militant action was required to make our society and politics more fair and tolerant. It seems unthinkable now that women were excluded from such basic rights as voting, owning property and being educated to the same standard as men, but they were very real prohibitions that had to be opposed. Despite the many advances, these inequalities have their relevance even today and the sacrifices made cannot be taken for granted. Today, the issues that need tackling are primarily rooted in misconceptions of gender and sexual stereotypes, lingering patriarchal attitudes and insidious institutional sexism than in denying basic rights. But whilst we cannot ignore the fact that these attitudes can be the root of violence and injustice that vindicate angry protest and demand for change, there's a Catch-22. Being militaristic can alienate many people from a cause, for want of a better term, especially when the aims involve the changing of minds and more subtle shifts of perception than a petition or forceful political protest can realistically achieve.

It is unfortunate that the stereotype of the hairy, ball-busting feminist woman still prevails. I was once asked by a man if I had become a feminist as a joke, implying that I was being deliberately exasperating. Both my slack-jawed, dumbfounded silence and

the irony of the question were sadly lost on him. With this 2D perception of the lady feminist in mind, it's interesting to note that the stereotypical blueprint of a man with similar principles is either a liar trying to score someone with more overt compassion, gentleness and femininity than is 'correct' for a man to exude. He is the polar opposite to his dungaree-wearing sister; his balls have been busted and he's either surrendered his trousers or had them cruelly pinched! Thankfully, most people are far more complex and difficult to pigeonhole.

So what can feminism mean for men who are disgusted by misogyny and believe that something should be done about it? Can they really be feminists? Well, without being too academic about it, the very term lets men in on a technicality. If one subscribes to the notion that femininity and masculinity are not dependent on anatomy,



then for men to be excluded it would need to be called 'womanism' (side-stepping the tricky subject of gender reassignment). Also, one of feminism's chief goals of the 20th century was to secure for women the right to be included in all areas of professional, political and cultural life. To exclude men from feminism seems almost perverse, since any support for change is valuable regardless of the campaigner's chromosomes. There's a great episode of *Friends* where Ross and Rachel are interviewing nannies. Ross is incredulous that one of the applicants is a man, saying "that's like a woman wanting to be a...". "A woman wanting to be a what?" Rachel quizzes him fiercely as he struggles to dig himself out of a very large hole. "King," he replies meekly. And feminists are supposed to have no sense of humour!

In researching this article, most people I spoke to agreed that male feminism is

a difficult subject, mainly due to ideas of representation and self-interest. It's difficult enough to convince some women that feminism is a valid concept to invest in, since it might undermine their femininity and post-feminist licence to raunch it up without a care in the world. So what's in it for a guy who claims to be a feminist? Why would a man demand equal pay and realistic maternity rights for women when it might encroach on his own income and work pressures? Why would a straight man express the idea that women should not be treated as sexual objects in the media if it meant that there were less bare-breasted lovelies on the cover of *Nuts* in the newsagents? And why would a gay man care one way or the other? Does a man who professes to be a feminist prove how secure he is in his masculinity? That's an attractive way of looking at it, but doesn't that devalue femininity somewhat? –

that a man has enough testosterone to spare that he can dabble in 'women's business'. Or is he just in touch with his 'feminine side', the opposite of the female feminist who's ground her girlish side to dust and is busy smoking a cigar and waxing her 'tache'?

And we're back to stereotypes again. Perhaps it's best to consider that people don't necessarily have 'sides', or at least not just two strictly opposed ones, and that it is such black and white thinking that leads to conflict. It's true that constant trawling through the grey areas of life can lead to indecision and what some might describe as wishy-washy liberalism, but there needs to be a balance. The under-representation of women in the music industry is just one issue that needs to be addressed. Others are the commodification of women's bodies in the media, violent pornography, rape and prejudices against single mums etc. A music magazine in the context of such matters may seem frivolous, but things must change across the board. If nothing else, the existence of such a publication opens up debate, which is always a good thing.

One response to my questions simply read "women should know their place", and that's right. Women *should* recognise that their place in the world is equal to that of men, and having men with feminist tendencies who acknowledge this fact as common sense only makes change seem more possible. So everyone please don their trousers/skirt/jodhpurs (or whatever your garment of choice), doff a jaunty-angled cap and join *Wears The Trousers* in saluting the possibility of the male feminist! ■



STANDING UP, BEING COUNTED

words by LORIA NEAR
photo by AUTUMN DE WILDE

It's no secret that I love going to gigs; I spend most of my expendable income on tickets, plan vacations around tours and have a wardrobe thick with cotton concert t-shirts. When Idlewild toured the US last autumn, I was giddy and thrilled at the prospect of going after waiting years for them to return. I bought tickets to several shows, plotted out a road trip and took the necessary time off work. Of course, we had to get to the venues early – I didn't want to miss a beat – and that's how I discovered and was stunned by Inara George.

Prior to the tour, I had barely heard of Inara; all I knew was that she'd sung backup on several tracks on Idlewild's *Warnings/Promises* album and that she was from Los Angeles. In doing some research, I was surprised to find out that her father was the celebrated Little Feat guitarist Lowell George who died of a heart attack in 1979, that she'd studied literature and theatre and that she'd earned her indie stripes in college rock quintet Merrick. Although her music is strikingly more acoustic driven and sparse than anything Roddy Woomble and co. had put out, the two acts somehow gelled perfectly. It wasn't just the music either; after her set I found Inara manning her own merch table, sweetly conversing with anyone who wished to strike up a conversation.

Inara's debut solo album *All Rise* was issued throughout the US in January 2005 but is only now receiving a European release via the nice people at Loose Music (home to The Handsome Family and Mary Lou Lord). In honour of this fine occasion, she agreed to an interview and after exchanging several emails, we got down to business.

It wouldn't be right to start off without commenting on how approachable and genuinely friendly she is, so I did. "Well thank you for that," came her reply. "I suppose I always try to engage with people, especially when they've taken the time to come up to me and say something complimentary. However, I've been known to be terrible with names, which gets me into a lot of trouble!"

For someone who grew up with celebrity, one might assume she could be quite the opposite. But Inara plays down her rich musical heritage, as if she hasn't really considered it. "I'm sure it all has something to do with who I am. It's a hard thing to define. Nature or nurture? I don't know really."

Being surrounded by so much music throughout her life, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion that Inara would end up connected to it somehow as a career. It took a while though, as she explains: "Once I understood that this was what I wanted to do, I don't think anything could make me stop doing it. Although I've been confused about it in the past. It's a very strange thing to want

to do with your life. Ultimately, I'm better at it than anything else I've done, except maybe for waiting tables. I got pretty good at that."

No silver spoon for her, Inara's paid her dues. But how did she get involved with Idlewild in the first place? "The producer of that record, Tony Hoffer, is an old friend of mine and he called me into sing."

It was the beginning of a beautiful thing. In fact, Idlewild guitarist Rod Jones and Inara forged such a close friendship that he accompanied her on her recent UK tour and they even have an album in the works with the title *George Is Jones*. And Inara hasn't just worked with Idlewild; she counts her godfather Jackson Browne and Van Dyke Parks among her musical cohorts... quite a list of talented individuals! "Every collaboration works differently," she explains. "It's kind of like how every friendship has different dynamics. With *All Rise*, Mike Andrews was a very big part of the writing process for most of those songs. I would start the songs and he would help me finish them. I write primarily on the guitar, but for my next solo record I've written a piano song, which is a first for me."

Yes, you read that right; a second solo album was in production before *All Rise* was even out in the UK, so why have the Brits had to wait so long to hear it? "It's my first record and it takes a lot more time to figure out all the details of these kinds of things. It's just the way things go sometimes."

But does she still feel the same way about the album and the songs as she did when she first recorded it way back in 2004? "I can't lie," she admits. "There are some songs on that record that I don't identify with as much as I used to. But I think that's normal and I think that usually happens soon after you start playing a lot of live shows. It's to be expected, and I'm always anxious to move ahead – it makes playing the older stuff more fun."

And move ahead she does, at a great rate of knots too. As well as the next solo album and the *George Is Jones* project, Inara's teamed up with indie rock icon Greg Kurstin to create a new collaborative album, *The Bird & The Bee*. How does she manage it, that's an overwhelming workload! "I'm a pretty organised individual; I keep it together pretty well. But the records aren't out yet so I am bracing myself. To be honest, it's all very exciting – to be able to play different music with different people all the time."

We chat a little about the music she loved as a kid and one name keeps cropping up – Prince. "I suppose he was my first real love in terms of music. I used to listen to his records alone in my room, lip-syncing, dancing etc. I just find what he does so joyful and he is undeniably talented. I don't like to bandy this word around a lot but he's a genius."

That I first met Inara at the First Avenue in Minneapolis where portions of the movie *Purple Rain* were filmed strikes me as rather poetic. "We almost played *Purple Rain* that night," she exclaims before admitting "but I was a little too shy."

When asked if she listens to other music whilst working on new material, she says she does but that it's all over the place stylistically. She recommends Eleni Mandell ("amazing lyrics"), Mt Egypt ("Travis Graves is dreamy!") and the new Mike Andrews album ("beautiful"). When I mention that I'd noticed that Jack Black had picked Inara's cover of Joe Jackson's *Fools In Love* for his celebrity iTunes playlist, she seems pleased. "That's very sweet of him. He is an amazingly gifted musician; he can sing his ass off!"

The aforementioned cover is just one of several standout tracks on *All Rise*, and we return to the topic with gusto. I mention how much I love the artwork. "I'm so glad you feel the same way," she replies. "The artist's name is Geoff McFetridge. I pretty much just let him go with whatever he wanted. We had a conversation about what I had in mind, but then he just took it to another planet as far as I'm concerned. If someone is really great at what they do, I think it's so amazing to see what they come up with."

Many of the songs from *All Rise* have appeared in a number of US TV shows. I wondered whether she has any control over what is used and when, and if not, how she feels about it. "I have complete control," she writes. "I have to say that it's an amazing way to get your music heard and pay the bills. Behind every television show there is someone who is creating that show. I try not to be judgemental towards anyone who is being creative in whatever medium."

Speaking of being judgmental, I ask whether she reads her own press; is she the kind of artist who chooses to stay as far removed as possible from it, or the type who is continually fascinated by how others see their music or performances? "I'm definitely curious about it. But I try not to put too much stock in it, and most importantly, I try to have a sense of humour about it all."

Even with all these different projects, there's something so distinctive about Inara's sound. I wonder if she's ever wanted to tear it up, go crazy, play a Clash cover and smash up her guitar, just for the fun of it. "Sure, I love that kind of stuff, but as much as I have fantasised about sounding different than myself, and maybe even think I might be sounding different, my voice has a certain quality that is difficult to change."

"Maybe I should just start smoking," she jokes. ■

arrested development

It was late last summer whilst living in Montréal when ANGELINA ADSTMILL first wrapped an ear around the eponymous EP from talented trio Joan As Police Woman, fronted by the inimitable Joan Wasser. One year later, she and Joan found themselves surrounded by the glow of an unusually sunny afternoon in London (not the Ontarian one) tasked with the incredibly taxing job of talking about their most favourite things. Nice work if you can get it, eh? But first, some background...

Like a diamond dodecahedron, Joan Wasser is a jewel of many faces. A multi-instrumentalist by the age of eight, she went on to assume full mastery of the violin, playing with the Boston University Symphony Orchestra before trading in a life of recitals for something rawer. She spent a short while playing alongside indie rock heroine Mary Timony (Helium, Autoclave) in one of her formative bands Hot Trix and in other local outfits, most notably The Dambuilders in which she broadened her musical palette and further developed her dramatic playing style on the violin.

After several albums and some modest success on the indie circuit, the band split in October 1997, just a few months after Joan's former bandmate and close friend Jeff Buckley drowned in a Memphis river. In the wake of this tragedy, Wasser formed Black Beetle alongside former Buckley stalwarts, Michael Tighe and Parker Kindred of Those Bastard Souls, though the project was short-lived. Ever since, Joan's musical talents, both vocal and otherwise, have been in constant demand and her résumé to date includes live performances and studio work with everyone from Lou Reed, Dave Gahan and Elton John to fellow songstresses Tanya Donnelly, Juliana Hatfield, Nina Persson and Sheryl Crow, all adding strings of

kudos to the bow of her impressive career. Already a favourite of BBC 6Music due to her gorgeous reinterpretation of David Bowie's Orwell-inspired *Sweet Thing* (issued for the first time on CD as the B-side of the band's new single *Eternal Flame*), Joan shares with the rock chameleon a strong sense of characterisation and exploring different personalities. In fact, you've probably never heard anything quite like her.

Joan As Police Woman make music that's accessible yet instinctively magical, dripping with sophisticated nuance. Listening to that first EP last summer, the first image to flood my senses was of a darkened room, an almost subterranean space illuminated note by quavering note as if each were a flicker of a scrappy neon light. Vocals hummed, purred and quickly swelled free of that prison's brittle confines and as the songs racked up the intensity-o-meter, Wasser demolished the slimy walls of that dank, grim habitat, unveiling a vista of a primeval landscape. Here, I found the sounds of cool, rushing streams galore and loves so fresh that mankind hasn't yet had a chance to name them, let alone clutter them with modern contrivances.

For an artist who writes "life" under 'influences', Joan has foregone the naïve idealism of youth and has emerged with an album that's fully formed, wistful yet hopeful, tainted yet pure. Why buy a packet of seeds when you can have *Real Life*, a giant blooming bunch of flowers? As Joan herself sings on the recent single *The Ride*, "starting now, the wait is over."

Early reviews of the album have been unanimously superlative, and Joan's astonishing voice has been privy to most of the praise, with several commentators comparing her melodious sounds to the legendary queens of torch song melodrama, people like Dusty Springfield and Nina

Simone. "Probably the most emotional instrument that exists is the voice," she enthuses. "I spent a long time expressing myself through violin, which is also one of the more expressive instruments. And that was really great, but then it was sort of like I needed more and that's kind of why I started singing."

Indeed, while Joan's musical background may be more notable for her instrumental contributions than her vocal prowess, it appears to me that the ease with which her bow glides over the strings has translated to her vocal skills, using her voice as much as the instrumentation in order to build a variety of moods. I wondered whether Joan had ever considered that her singing style might perhaps be an unconscious imitation of her string-based experiences. "I don't know," she shrugs. "I mean, I can't say, because I've never thought about trying to imitate the violin. It probably happens naturally because I'm so used to that instrument and working with it. But what I'm trying to get across in the song is the source of the emotion, so I hope that it evokes it as much as possible."

Listening to *Real Life*, it's plainly apparent that the girl done good; there's certainly no shortage of emotion running through the album's ten-strong clutch of songs. Though it's a considerably more chilled out affair than the earlier EP, it's all the more cohesive for it, allowing the music to not only service and carry the narrative but also to encapsulate an almost indescribable feeling, one that imparts great knowledge in a single instant. "That's cool," she beams. "One of my first influences in writing that I really connected with and loved were those Hemingway vignettes, like *In Our Time*."

Like Hemingway, Joan's lyrics are not wholly unlike those of a talented news reporter. They still adhere to certain



constructs, of course, in that they repeat and serve a collective purpose, but they pack plenty in the punch department. Unlike some of her more verbose and flowery peers, Joan is positively economical. But even though she might use just six words in a lyric, you can be damn sure that they're the right six words for what she wants to convey.

Delve a little deeper into her words and you'll find a sweetly profound sense of introspection, as if Joan had come to the realisation that what she perhaps had seen and wanted to gravitate towards in others was something that she'd possessed all along – talent, confidence, that voice! But perhaps I'm reading too much into such things. "The thing is," she says, "for me, that's what's great about making music and making music that is open in that way; I sort of count on the listener to make it their own. I have my own experiences and I try to get the feeling across, but I try not to force an interpretation."

Instincts, then, are what drive this lady's muse. But does she always trust them? "You know, it never really sounds true if it doesn't come from the instinctive part of you," she admits. "If I ever try to write something like someone else, it never sounds like that other person. I'll think of it, like, 'Oh, I want to have this sort of feeling'. But if I ever told someone I tried to write a Bob Dylan song, they would say, 'whoa Joan! That doesn't sound anything like it.'"

"You know, a lot of my friends listen to music in a certain way that I realise I don't. I just listen to it most of the time as a big whole. I mean, I notice the guitar sound, or that they used an oboe at the end, or whatever, but I don't notice all that much. I guess it's more the general overriding feeling. Like, I really loved Al Green recordings, but I didn't go back and listen to it and be like, 'okay, the strings came in right at this part of the song to highlight whatever; you know? I just sort of trusted myself to remember, inherently, somewhere within me, where things would... should happen.'"

Having self-imposed a sabbatical with regard to her own recording ambitions for so long – most recently as a member of Rufus Wainwright and Antony & The Johnsons' touring party, lending her multi-instrumental skills to these two exponents of the new New York cabaret scene – I wonder whether Joan is comfortable and ready to step out of the shadows and into the limelight? "Just changing my focus from being an instrumentalist who plays with other people to being the songwriter and singing, I really had to learn what I

thought about myself. I know that sounds silly, but previously I had spent a lot of time expressing my opinion – I'm an extrovert and have no problem talking to anyone and telling them what I feel. But then as soon as I started writing songs and singing, I realised I really didn't know what I thought and I didn't know what I wanted to say, so I didn't know, really, anything! So, I started a process of learning who I was, which was really terrifying at times, but eventually an extremely rewarding process."

I suggest that *Real Life* is quite aptly named as a psychological journey of self-discovery. "Yeah, it's about looking inside and realising that, like you said, the qualities you're attracted to in other people are usually things that you want to expand in yourself in some way, or that you feel are in you."

Certainly, there's a delightful sense of educated blind abandon that runs throughout the album. Joan may have experienced the vicarious thrills and disappointments of working alongside so many artists (Antony returns the favour on *Real Life's* fantastic *I Defy*), but she still exudes an innocent willingness to surrender herself to her own musical fate. "That's so great!" she beams. "That's perfect. I'm gonna use that now, 'educated blind abandon'. That's totally what it is, yeah!"

Real Life is one of those modern classic-sounding albums that will, inevitably, be hailed as instantly timeless. Joan As Police Woman have sidestepped the knowing wink of postmodernism, bringing fresh life to familiar scenarios through virtue of their vision alone, as if Wasser were viewing an old world through new eyes. She laughs appreciatively. "I don't know how to wink. I'm glad I don't. There's no time for winking!"

It leads to nervous twitches y'know. She laughs again. "That's right! That's right!"

Although forging ahead with her own career, Joan still finds time to lend her skills to other projects, including Hal Wilner's new sea shanties (also known as 'chanteys', depending on who you ask) project, *Rogue's Gallery*. "Hal puts together these amazing projects. He's put together these sea shanties, old sea songs, not only from England, Ireland and New England, but also from the West Indies and Africa. There were six sessions: London, Dublin, Seattle, San Francisco, LA and New York. I was the musical director for the New York sessions, which meant I got to choose the band and got a lot of the performers to come in; Antony, Joseph Arthur, Rufus, Mark Anthony, Teddy Thompson, White Magic, No Matter and myself. A lot of people were involved and we'd just sort of make it up right there. It was really fun."

Was there any kind of musical democracy when handing out the songs? "Hal sent me 156 songs and he did a lot of choosing, like, 'one of these four for this person' and then the performer also listens and says, 'I want to do this' or 'I'd rather do this'. The band didn't know a lot of the songs beforehand, so we just had to make it happen which was fun. The people I got to play are amazing; Jim White from the Dirty Three playing drums and Ed Pastorini, all these just amazing New York people that you don't really know about. Just extraordinary musicians. Rainy [*Orteca, Joan As Police Woman's* bassist] played guitar in the band because she's just this insane guitar player, so it was really fun."

Recording is usually a laborious process so such efficiency for what is essentially an improvisational concept album must have been rather liberating. "Exactly!" she nods. "I mean, one day we did eight songs."

I suggest that it often takes eight days to do – at which point she knowingly joins in with – "one song!" before continuing, "no, it's true. It's really thrilling and you've worked for sixteen hours and you don't even know what's happened. You've lost total ability to rationalise time and food intake."

She leans in, almost whispering, as if she's about to impart some top insider secret, "I think that it's sorta being paid for by Johnny Depp".

You mean Hollywood's super-cool maverick actor has invested more than a few rock 'n' roll affectations into his role as *Pirates Of The Caribbean's* dry-witted reprobate Captain Jack Sparrow? "I think so. I mean, I don't totally understand it, but it's cool that he's a supporter of nutty musical projects."

Well, be it sane or otherwise, Joan's involvement is quality assurance enough for me. For now though, she's due back on the deck to prepare for the evening's show (during which a cover of *What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor* was, sadly, not forthcoming) while I head home to port.

In a letter home to his father, Hemingway once wrote "I'm trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across – not to just depict life – or criticise it – but to actually make it alive." The music of Joan Wasser and her two compatriots positively seethes with the exact same spirit, a desire to transcend the usual listening experience and bring you something of substance, something you can treasure. Get a living, breathing real life. Buy this record. ■

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Real Life is out now on Reveal Records.
Rogue's Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs & Chanteys featuring Jolie Holland, Lucinda Williams and more is out now on Anti-.



Mia Doi Todd is an enigma. Her music consistently resists all attempts to pigeonhole it into any particular genre, instead flirting with them all, from folk to jazz to rock to reggae. Anyone who hoped that she would settle down and become more predictable with time will be sorely disappointed by *La Ninja: Amor & Other Dreams of Manzanita*. Rather, some of the music industry's more interesting members have stepped forward and offered Mia's multifaceted music even more faces. Add to this Mia's haunting cover of *Norwegian Wood* and a few new songs that are beautiful enough to rival anything on her previous albums, and you have a very interesting record indeed. CLARE BYRNE was lucky enough to have the chance to find out a little bit more about this intriguing lady during a sunny morning chat.

Your music touches on many genres and you could be compared with a wealth of different artists. Who are your main influences?

My main influences are Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, the Beatles, Nick Drake, Nina Simone, Alice Coltrane, Sinéad O'Connor, Prince, Fela Kuti...those are the main ones. When I was 13, I started listening to the Beatles, and

then when I was about 15 to Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen. I think Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen's worldviews really shaped mine. Joni Mitchell is my greatest influence.

Metaphor and poetic imagery seem to be utterly crucial to your lyrics, as they are to Joni Mitchell's. Is poetry an important influence for you as well as music?

Not really. I'm not a big poetry reader or writer. There's something about singing it and the incantation – that's what it's about for me. I don't write poetry. Although I recently wrote a guitar song and I knew the words should be in Spanish but I don't really speak Spanish, so I had the poems that a Cuban friend of mine had written and sent to me and I was able to set one of those to music. That's the first time I've taken a poem and translated it into a song, so that was fun. It worked – it was a miracle!

Your songs, particularly the lyrics, often have a rawness and honesty that's completely disarming. Do you write mostly from personal experience or does fiction play an important role?

So far I've only written from personal experience. I have started to see the advantage of fiction as I've exhausted a lot of my own

personal experience in my song-writing and I'm not as interested in myself as I used to be [laughs]. But I do think that that's the most honest place to start. I've realised that a lot of my songs are way more honest than a lot of songs tend to be, and I get into subject matter that one usually stays away from [laughs]. My songs often deal with insecurity or feelings of self-hatred...a lot of songs do I guess but I really cut to the quick on that one. Usually people try to create positive images of themselves...!

You are obviously keenly aware of the power of art, of music and of words – for instance, I'm thinking of this lyric "by gunpoint and by penpoint the west was claimed" – and you have written songs that are extremely political. Is this a conscious intention, or is it just symptomatic of the various aspects of your life touching your music?

Both. I think these days living in the modern world it's so hard not to be affected by these large political situations that are going on around us. So it does affect my personal life, but I have written songs with a political conscious. For the past few albums, I've tried to have one political song per album. It's like Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems & A Song of Despair*. I try to have one song on the album that is more literally political – or that is how it has happened, I haven't intentionally focused on that. I haven't been a really political artist. Most of my songs are love songs; I haven't been a protest singer. But I'm realising more and more that that is an important role that I can and should play. And I have to a certain extent, like touring...you get the opportunity to have contact with a pretty large number of people, who are often on the young side. Indie rock crowds, some are political but a lot are indifferent. A lot of people our age have just been so alienated by politics that it has turned to disinterest – so in my role as a bard and travelling musician I do feel it's important to spread the word on how I feel about things. So many things in the world are becoming homogenised that even if I don't have a political song, even being myself and not Britney Spears or something that's being amplified so loud...to have an independent voice is very important right now. So, even if it's not a political song, even if it's dealing with sensitivity...the modern world is so insensitive, and peoples' sensitivity is decreasing. I definitely often feel like a social worker. I had to deal with that a lot last year as I was coming to the realisation that I was no longer doing it for myself. I used to feel the need to perform, for some reason. But then that personal reason was no longer present, and touring stopped being fun for a while because I



couldn't figure out what it was for. And now I'm starting to get the bug again and realise what it is or could be.

I read that you spent a year in Japan studying Butoh dance – do you perform it at all? Is it completely separate from your music?

I sometimes perform it. It has taken a backseat to my music. I tried for a long time to keep them separate, just for my own personal sake, to understand dance. And I train with a group here in LA called BodyWeather Laboratory, some years more than others. I have been in some group performances with them. And also I've done five solo dance performances over ten years. It's quite an obscure esoteric thing, although in the international dance scene Butoh has had a large impact. It started in Tokyo in the 1960s when all the student protest movements were going on around the world. This street theatre took place, and it was a reaction against Americanisation and the American occupation. In the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, culture was so threatened in Japan. So Butoh wanted to call upon the inner darkness of mankind, of indigenous Japanese culture. They started

these weird dance performance happenings. In the 1960s those kind of happenings were happening everywhere, so it was part of an international movement but Butoh carried on as a dance form. I studied with Min Tanaka and Kazuo Ohno, among others; Min Tanaka started something from Butoh called BodyWeather. That year I lived in Japan, most of it was spent in Tokyo but for the summer I did his summer program. He started a farm in 1986, an organic dance commune farm. I studied there; you dance five hours a day and work in the fields four or five hours a day. That was the first time I'd really grown the food that I ate and it was a really formative experience. Actually I just spent a couple of weeks at Green Gulch Farm – it's a Zen Buddhist monastery just north of San Francisco, and it's also farming. That's something I want to get into for my life. I'm planning to quit the city and grow the food for my family and my neighbours. That doesn't have to do with Butoh but it's a whole worldview. Hopefully in the next five years I'll do that.

You have obviously been exposed to a wealth of different cultures – from the cosmopolitanism

of LA to the fact that your mother was Japanese and you have lived in Japan. It is hard not to align that with the genre-defying music that you make. What role do you think culture plays in your music?

Being someone of mixed ethnicity...for me it has really made race an issue in my life from when I was really young. Looking different from your family really sets you apart and makes you search for your cultural identity. So that led me to be very interested in Japanese things. My cousins, who are full-blooded Japanese, are maybe more American than I am and it's not so important to them to understand their Japaneseness. But for me it was really important. In college I was an East Asian studies major. I went to Japan a bunch of times and I do think I'm very Japanese in parts of my personality and my aesthetic. But my mom said...well, my dad's Irish, and I also have this Irish side...the bard and the singer. So that also has an influence. I've been to Ireland a few times. I really love Japanese music, and there's a lot of space in it. It's very slow oftentimes, much slower than most music, and that space, which is also in the visual arts, and just the general aesthetic of

the negative space being as important as the positive space...I try to find that balance in music. One strange thing is that there are so few Asians in pop music, and indie music is just about completely white, so I have felt some issues with not identifying completely or it not identifying with me, and not being a part of that exactly. So in retrospect, after having been in the music business for like ten years, I can see things that I was subject to. And I think being a bit different from other people who would get into music sets you off on a different course. So I explored Ravi Shankar and Japanese music and things that I felt maybe I could identify with.

Your voice is incredibly strong and unusual; what formal vocal training have you had?

My next-door neighbour when I was a teenager was an opera teacher. So he gave me lessons once a week singing in the classic, operatic, Italian method of voice training. That is what shaped my voice. At a certain point I decided to find my own voice, because I don't really have the strength that you need for opera. So it was good to break from that. And I also sang in choirs all through high school and college, and it was good to break from that also, because solo singing is very different. So when I was like 19 or 20 I really started to find my own voice.

How did you discover that music was what you wanted to do?

It was accidental. It was kind of inevitable that I would become an artist because my dad is a sculptor and I grew up around art and artists. I tried to stay away from it; I didn't major in it in college. Although now I wish I had been a music major in college...it would have been so much more useful! I went to an all girls school for high school, I didn't know any boys. We started going to this all ages indie rock club in LA called Jabberjaw and I met this guy in a band and I started going out with him [laughs]. And that's what got me into music – I started writing songs and then their label put out my first album in 1997. It just happened quite accidentally. But if it hadn't been that it might have been something else. I wanted to be an actress at one point. But I felt that there would be no roles for someone who was like me...kind of in between. Now with Halle Berry winning the Oscar...the climate has changed. But ten years ago, if you didn't fall into some specific category racially, there was not a place for you. But that is changing and that's awesome.

You've been affiliated with quite a few different record labels over the years – you created your own label to record your third album, then following that you recorded The Golden State with Sony/Columbia and

then Manzanita and La Ninja are both with Plug Research. Was the major label thing a positive or negative experience for you?

It was both negative and positive. In total, it was definitely positive. I learned a lot from it. Working with Mitchell Froom, this really experienced producer, I learned so much about the decision making that needs to happen constantly in producing a record. Now, on the other hand, working with people who had much more experience and were so much older than myself, I don't feel like I was given full respect. If I had been a man I might have gotten more respect...if I had been any other thing, or maybe had a different personality than I do. I didn't feel like I was working with my peers, so that was not necessarily positive. I did not have big expectations from it. I was very glad to be among the stars, to be among the great constellations...to be on the same record label that Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen had been on. It was good also financially, it helped me continue with music, whereas if other things had happened I might have had to quit and do something else. It gave me a lot of validation with my family, which was important. And Sony is a Japanese company, you know [laughs]. It was important for me to get that validation as an artist in order to make a real commitment to it, and now I'm too far gone to go back. And in my family's eyes it's all good.

What inspired you to put together your new remix album?

Well, I write songs usually and complete the song before ever thinking of recording it. I might even play it live 100 times before recording it, and probably sing it 100 more times. So there are an infinite number of ways that any one song can be performed. So to record it in just one small way is so limiting. If you get it just right and feel great about it that's wonderful, but in making the remix album I was looking forward to working with a lot of people I've been wanting to work with, but also to give that idea that a song can be so many ways. Plug Research, the label that it's on, started as a dance and electronica label. Now with me they've been branching out. So when I decided to give them *Manzanita*, the album before the remix album, it was almost already in mind that we would make a remix album. It was a fun project to work on with my friends and see what would come up.

Were you surprised by any of the interpretations of your songs for La Ninja?

They all sound so natural. I think the one that was most a surprise, because I didn't ask him to do it, he just made it and presented it to me, was the Flying Lotus *My Room Is White*. It's the most dancey and it's so great. I've always wanted to make dance music but I

haven't really managed to, but he managed to make this gorgeous thing.

Where does the title 'La Ninja' come from?

It's many things. 'Manzanita' could be 'little girl of Manzanar', which was one of the internment camps. And the landscape that I drew for the cover of *La Ninja* [she pronounces it *niña, neen-ya*], that is out in the desert. My family weren't actually at Manzanar, they were at another camp called Tule Lake, but there's a reference to California and Manzanar. A ninja is a Japanese fighter. But *niña* means 'girl' in Spanish. California's really a meeting place of many different cultures, so *La Ninja* is a reference to many things. I feel as if I was taking a little Manga character, as if I were Princess Mononoke or something like that [laughs]. Doing these remixes is something to do with that.

Is there anyone else out there that you would like to work with?

Ooh, a lot of people. I'd like to work with Prefuse 73, we've been talking about it for a long time. His music's really interesting, especially the Savath and Savalas stuff. I wrote one of the songs for his *Surrounded By Silence* album, the one that Kazu from Blonde Redhead sings, because she would only do it if it was already written. That was a strange project. So I have worked with him a little bit but not in the way that would have been obvious. Who else? Prince! Prince is here in LA [laughs]. I like Kruder and Dorfmeister, I don't know what they're doing these days but I used to want to work with them.

So what's next for you?

I've been working on new songs. I've also been working on instrumental music, more improvisational...almost like ragga, but very simple and not virtuosic. I've been working with a percussionist. I bought a harmonium recently, so I've been playing that...and a tin whistle! I should have an album next year, maybe in the fall, but I don't have a label or any idea about the music business. At new years, I was ready to give it up, but I've come back around. I've really burnt out on unappreciative audiences. I did so much touring last year...and I did a tour opening for Dungen. I love their music and I felt like it was a good match, but in retrospect maybe it wasn't ideal because they're a really psychedelic rock band and I was opening for them acoustic, and people were so excited to see them. They talked a lot when I was playing and I just felt very alienated. That was a time when I really had the realisation of how white indie rock is, and I felt very alienated from the audiences. So it's easy to get really discouraged, but I imagine I will continue to make music. I can't help it! ■



Love it or hate it, the term 'twee' has stuck like pastel-coloured candyfloss to the sweet tooth of a generation, a sugar rush of indiepop served best by the likes of cult record label Sarah Records. Contrary to popular belief and despite the term's slightly condescending connotations of twirly girls in gossamer dresses, the first wave of twee bands was almost exclusively male, with one notable exception.

Since the tender age of twenty when she formed the band Talulah Gosh, Oxford resident Amelia Fletcher has been at the forefront of twee, metamorphosing through a succession of identities – Talulah Gosh begetting Heavenly begetting Marine Research begetting Tender Trap – depending on which of her accomplices played alongside her. One such accomplice is her partner Rob Pursey, the original bassist for Talulah Gosh who left the fold early on, only to return in 1997 as Amelia shifted into the Marine Research phase of her career following the

suicide of her younger brother (and Heavenly drummer) Mathew.

It was at this point that John Stanley also came to Amelia's side and, following the departure of keyboardist Cathy Rogers and guitarist Peter Momtchiloff, the trio released their first album under the Tender Trap moniker in 2002 through the UK's Fortuna Pop! label. Though these recordings were miles removed from the notion of twee pop engendered by the NME's now legendary C-86 compilation, the tag has stuck fast, though the band don't seem to mind it as much as the genre's widely hailed figureheads Belle & Sebastian.

Two kids and a demanding job as a high-flying economist may have waylaid Amelia for longer than her fans might have hoped, but following 2005's *Language Lessons EP*, Tender Trap returned in June with new album *6 Billion People*. **RUSSELL BARKER** caught up with Amelia and Rob to talk primates, meddling kitties and ravenous larvae.

Tender Trap is now five years old. How does it differ from the previous bands you've been in, which had fairly similar line-ups?

Amelia: It's more like a slow loris than a cheeky chimpanzee.

Rob: Yeah, it doesn't get out much.

A: Apparently, slow lorises are very wise, and better than the average monkey at hanging upside down by their tails! Tender Trap is definitely a more flexible beastie than our previous bands. Oh, and we always play our gigs hanging upside down.

Where did you get the name from?

A: I think it came from half-memories of both the Frank Sinatra song *Love Is A Tender Trap* and also a song by Even As We Speak, which also refers to a "tender trap". It was actually a particularly confusing choice of name when we were on K Records, because K also had Tiger Trap and Tender Forever. At one stage, I had a strong impulse to start another band called Tiger Forever, just for the sake of completeness.

Was it a conscious decision to make the new album fuller sounding than before?

R: We wanted live drums again – and we didn't want to record the album at home. The first album (which was nearly all recorded at home) was the work of three people who had never produced a record before, but thought that if they spent several months in a room with a mixing desk it might turn out brilliant. They were wrong, because actually it sounded a bit thin. It was nice having a producer [Moat Studios' Toby Hrycek-Robinson] on this new album.

A: The main problem with the first album was that we recorded it in my parents' basement with the help of their large cat Wokingham [now sadly deceased]. We would get really great mixes up on the board, go for a cup of tea, and when we came back Wokey would have twiddled all the knobs and destroyed everything. This time no cats were involved.

Which songs are you most proud of on the album?

R: *I Would Die For You* started out as a nice normal romantic song. But then I started to wonder what sort of love song you'd get if the person singing knew or suspected that their partner was a murderer – someone completely heartless and callous. I hoped that the song could send a bit of a shiver up your spine, the way a good horror film does. So that's the one I'm proudest of.

A: I like *Applecore* because it is completely

daft and makes me laugh. I don't think anyone else would ever have written that song! The concept of the song is that a boy has to choose between two girls, and the fun is in the way the two girls are represented. It's up to you to guess which is me out of "Annie Hall or Amélie", "Coke or Smoothie" and "B or C cup".

6 Billion People also makes me laugh, because of the conceit of the song – the idea is that there are six billion people out there but I can't find the right one for me. The suggested tips for finding a perfect partner are quite serious though. Next time I am looking for one, I intend to use them all! In fact, I've already used quite a lot of them in the past...

I also like the lyrics in *Ampersand*, because of the way that each half-verse describes the same argument occurring, but each time in a different place and a different season. I like the pictures that come into my head when I sing the song – chilly winter days in Brixton, spring mornings spent in Snowdonia, those lazy summer after-noon at the beach and bike rides through autumn leaves. And I like the way these bucolic images are set up against a very prosaic argument – viz that marriage is so completely irrelevant and un-necessary for love and commitment.

That's probably more than you were expecting in answer to this question. I will shut up now!

Nice to see mention of 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar' in Fahrenheit 451. Who's the proud owner of that excellent book?

R: Our daughter Dora owns that book. We are reading very widely in the 2–3 age range at the moment. We've also made up a lot of silly songs for her and her little sister Ivy. If we do record another album, the chances are it will be full of childish references, silly rhymes and very easy to sing melodies. Pretty much the same as we've been doing for the last twenty years, in fact.

A: Slightly embarrassingly though, I wrote that line before buying the book! I remembered the book really clearly from when I was a kid and it just seemed to fit well.

I wanted to get even more book references into that song, but somehow I only got in two (the other one being 'Fahrenheit 451').

Actually that is another song I am proud of. I find the lyrics moving... but that is probably just me! It's about how it is possible to get so caught up in the bright colours of books that real life seems pale

that make me grin from the beginning to the end of their shows. I wish they played more often!

R: They were our favourite band when we were starting to write Tender Trap songs and I think we were very influenced by them. Maybe we were less embarrassed about having long words in our lyrics thanks to them, and we were definitely less inhibited when it came to programmed drums and things. Claudia is a star in her own right and having her play live with us was the highlight of my year.



There's been a bunch of shows at the Institute of Contemporary Arts mooted to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of C-86. Which of your contemporaries would you like to see there and will you be playing?

R: We might still be too repellent to the music industry to be invited!

A: We are actually still trying to find out about these shows, but I'm beginning to think they might be mythical. What I would like to do is to take Dora to see Talulah Gosh, 'cos she is a bit of a fan (*Bringing Up Baby* is her favourite). But that is not really going to be possible. In terms of con-temporaries, I would be keen to see The Shop Assistants, The Vaselines, Beat Happening and The Pastels. It could also be fun to see Primal Scream – but only if forced to abandon their Rolling Stones-alike bollocks and return to

and uninteresting in comparison. And not worth living.

Do you feel any kinship with The Magnetic Fields? I see you've played shows with them and their drummer Claudia Gonson plays on the new album.

A: Magnetic Fields rule! When I sang on the first 6ths album [*a Magnetic Fields side project*], around ten years ago, I only really liked one of their songs, *100,000 Fireflies*. But they have just got better and better since then. They're one of those bands

being twee. Come on Bobby, you know you want to really! ■

6 Billion People is reviewed on page #. If you like what you hear, try delving into Amelia's impressive back catalogue. All four Heavenly albums are well worth your time; try their 1992 album Le Jardin De Heavenly for starters (if only to hear So Little Deserve). Tender Trap's debut album Film Molecules (2002) and the Talulah Gosh retrospective Backwash (1996) are also highly recommended!

ONE LUMP OR TWO?

When it comes to embracing lovable eccentrics, there's precious little room for doubt that Britons do it best; inexplicably then, we've been a bit slow to recognise the unequivocal genius of Psapp, a London-based duo consisting of big kids Galia Durant and Carim Clasmann. Hailing from a musical Neverland of an ilk you've never heard before, Psapp's irresistible blend of juvenilia – two parts cutesy to one part coy – has been gleefully welcomed by American hipsters and couch potatoes alike. Giving Imogen Heap and Goldfrapp a run for their televisual bankability, Psapp have been busting out their ramshackle charm all over the place and amassing quite a following. Isn't it time you caught the tail of the kite and fell in love with them too? ALAN PEDDER flies straight on 'til morning to meet the clamorous, cat-mad pair...



I heard a rumour that some of the songs on the album feature the sound of Galia's bum being paddled with a hairbrush. Where's the parental advisory sticker?!

Galia: It's actually drum brushes on my bottom, sorry to be pedantic but...er...I like being pedantic. I was fully clothed when the performance occurred, it's perfectly above board.

Carim: Yes, after lots of experimentation we realised the sonic properties of Gal's bum which sounds very good with classic drum brushes and also good with a large cardboard tube – to be featured on the third album.

What other body parts came in handy?

G: Well, I have to admit my bottom is the most popular body part, for audio purposes. The others that we've used are either very normal or too disgusting to mention.

C: I got a nice percussion sound for a song called *New Rubbers* by hitting my legs very hard and discovered the next day that I had made two massive purple bruises.

I saw you play at the Pukkelpop festival in Belgium earlier this month. Genius! But what happened to that amazing snake-like instrument you used to have at shows?

G: Ahhh, dear old Snakey. To my horror, on the last US show of our tour in New York, a lady shouted out that she wanted Snakey and Carim gave her up with no resistance. It was a sad moment but the new owner has promised to send pictures of Snakey reposing in her new home. I think customs officials must be rather bemused when they look in the Psapp luggage. There's a broken mechanical chicken with all her parts out, rattles, tills, glove puppets, balls of wool, pipecleaners, biscuit tins, planks of wood and bits of moped. I think if we were trying to smuggle drugs, it would all be rather suspicious. Or maybe it's all a double bluff...hmmm...

C: Oh yes, Snakey. She did this amazing breathing sound, slightly asthmatic, but I hope she'll be looked after well. But there will be new sound-generating friends in the future.

So much is made of all the unusual instruments and sounds you use; do you wonder whether people sometimes overlook the strong songwriting behind the scenes? When did you first begin writing songs and have any of those early ones survived?

G: You're very nice, thanks. The sounds we incorporate and often even use as a starting point began to feature more and more

strongly as Carim and I got to know each other and felt more and more comfortable revealing the true depths of our respective odd instrument collections. I have a huge collection of half broken toy keyboards, old Casios and things I've picked up from jumble sales.

And Carim also has an impressive array of stuff, a whole studio for starters. Gradually, we found a way of working together that incorporated all the things we were interested in – songwriting, lots of melodies going on simultaneously, making our own sounds and creating our own instruments out of anything that takes our fancy. Ironically, the earliest known survivor is probably a song called *Cosy In The Rocket*, which is on a TV show now [you'll know it if you watch *Grey's Anatomy* – it's the theme tune].



I also wonder whether people sometimes underestimate Galia's voice, which I think is pretty incredible. How did you discover and develop it?

G: Why thank you...my brother Owen and I wrote music as kids constantly. From when I was eight, we had a band called GO and I still have recordings of me shoving my brother out of the way and trying to hog the microphone. I was always trying to sing on everything. We also used to make radio plays.

It's sweetly ironic and old-fashioned that you've managed to achieve so much success through the media of TV without actually owning or watching one! How will you know when you've really made it if you can't hear one of your songs playing in the East-Enders caff?

G: I have to say I would find that quite exciting. I would probably go round my

mum's to watch that. Apparently we've already had a song in the pub in Coronation Street, which oddly really impressed my dad who doesn't have a telly either.

Do you think that too many bands take themselves seriously? Who would you most like to spend a fun-filled evening with?

G: I think a lot of artists are naturally quite exuberant and fun but have to conceal that part of themselves to perform serious songs, often about just one theme. I love the fact that life is a mixture of gorgeously bittersweet moments and slapstick inelegant amusement all happening at the same time. So although we like to write about serious subjects, we tend to combine these with stories about accidents and embarrassments, just like our lives to try and make something that is honest and from the heart.

My ideal companion for a fun-filled evening would probably be Ivor Cutler, if he wasn't dead. If I have to choose someone living, I think I would go for Robert Wyatt. If he was grumpy I could still play with his beard.

What you were like as a schoolkid?

G: I wasn't unusually naughty as a child. I was very demanding of attention and very LOUD though, and apparently I was completely exhausting to spend time with.

When I saw you at Pukkelpop, you played a cute cover of 'The Aristocats' theme tune, Everybody Wants To Be A Cat. Will you be releasing it?

G: We've recorded it for a compilation. We were watching 'The Aristocats' in Carim's room the other day and we got so excited listening to it that we broke the sofa jumping on it – that seemed like a valid reason to cover it.

You describe your home/studio as being like an Aladdin's cave. What should be the first thing we rub should we come to visit?

G: The cat!

What would be your three wishes?

G: To acquire and learn the harp, to use our piano more and to never run out of milk.

Finally, it's advice time! Complete this sentence: don't leave home without...

G: A good black ink pen. Preferably two, one .7 and one .5 thickness. And a good sketchpad, wirebound. Everything else will sort itself out. ■

The Only Thing I Ever Wanted is out now on Domino Records.

Ask anyone who has listened to a Lisa Germano album in full what they thought of it and one word is likely to crop up more often than any other, and that word is 'intense'. It's an appropriate adjective, of that there is no doubt, but one that's often misconstrued and given a negative spin. Intense doesn't have to mean depressing; we're just so used to being bombarded by music with all the levity of a helium balloon and lyrics that rarely dip beneath face value – it's so familiar and safe.

With her new album *In The Maybe World*, Lisa Germano is trying to open our eyes to the realms of possibility, mapping out the line that separates self-absorption from self-mocking and gleefully hopping from side to side. It's not a new concept – she's been doing it to a lesser degree for the last fifteen years – but this time she's aided by weightier things. Much of *In The Maybe World* revolves around a core topic of death (and, as a consequence, also life), and it's this external inevitability that gives even her most indecipherable moments a bit more gravitas, allowing her to be intensely funny, intensely charming, intensely sad, intensely hopeful and even intensely intense in moderation.

Whether or not people will notice the subtler, more playful touches is a matter of debate; most will probably take a cursory listen and dismiss the album as too impenetrable, too depressing, too much effort. Others will fall in love. ALAN PEDDER is profoundly afflicted with the latter opinion and was thrilled to get the chance to call up Lisa at her home in California for a chat.

You're often painted darkly and a lot of people don't seem to pick up on the sweetly humorous side to your music. Does being so misunderstood like that concern you?

Well, people should always come to their own conclusions. I don't wanna stop anybody from feeling what they feel, but it is unfortunate for me because I really do have a sense of humour about it all. I don't know, I guess sometimes it's like a soap opera where things are so tragic that they're actually funny. And that can help you distance stuff, but you have to feel them first before you can go ahead and laugh at them. I guess people will think what they think.

I suppose you might have gotten used to it after fifteen years.

Yeah, well actually it gets worse, I sometimes feel that people think I'm just getting darker and darker.

Oh dear, really? Well, this record might change things.

I hope so.

Even though so many of the songs are preoccupied with death, I find it more comforting than bleak...

That's good because I realised that I do write songs to comfort myself, and when I feel that they're doing that, then they might comfort someone else. I just put them out there and see what happens.

So you're feeling like you're in a pretty good place right now, huh?

Sure...I'm lucky to be alive and healthy when people are having a hard time in the world with the war in Iraq and everything. I have nothing to complain about.

Your last album came out just before the war kicked off and I remember reading that you were really worrying about it at that time – how do you feel three years down the line?

It's horrible, evil; there's a lot of evil goings on with all people, not just in America or Iraq. It's just so unnecessary. Sometimes when I write music, even if I may be having a hard time personally, I think that there's a comfort that everybody needs in the air. This week my car got stolen – it's ok, it's not evil like the war, but it's still someone coming into my place – and that's how these people must feel in the war zone. If you never know whether you're gonna be bombed, how can you move forward at all? You try to find beauty in every day but it's hard not to feel guilty when you're happy. Of course, then you read Zen books and realise that you have to feel this way, because people need the strength of people who are happy to really feel things and to define happiness on a sad day.

So by allowing yourself to be happy, you're unconsciously helping the world?

Yeah, I really do believe that. You just have to keep on trying.

I love how the last words on the new album are "when you wake up, it'll be ok"...was that intentional, to leave things off on a reassuring footing?

It wasn't at first, but then at one point we were thinking of changing the sequence and I kinda noticed that. Then it was like, "oh no, this how I wanna end this record, absolutely!"...when you wake up, you're more aware of things in the moment. Like, you can get down if things aren't going your own way, but there's a kind of unconscious Zen thing that says you'll be ok when you're finally enlightened. It doesn't mean you're

not going to be sad, you're just not gonna be so narcissistic or self-loathing.

Along the lines of endings and beginnings, it's curious that the album opens with what sounds like a closing note, an ending before a brief interlude of silence. Does that have a special significance?

It was actually a mistake. I don't usually do anything intentionally – call it arty – it happens and then you make the decision to use it. It wasn't like I said, "I want the beginning of this to do that", more like "whoa, there you go, that's the start of the record". I thought of changing the opening and putting *Except For The Ghosts* first. Anyway, it wasn't that deliberate.

Speaking of *Except For The Ghosts*, what moved you to write a song in honour of Jeff Buckley?

I wrote it about him around ten years ago. My first version of it was too funereal, really dark, but I liked the end – the "except for the ghosts" part – so when I was sending Michael Gira some stuff, I just sent him the little snippet at the end. He's really cool and very insightful, and he said to me, "I know this is part of a song because I can just tell, it's just part of a song and I'd really like to hear the rest, Lisa". And I was like, "no, you really don't wanna hear the song". Anyway, he insisted on hearing it and then in the process he said, "as you're sending it to me, why don't you try and write it over". So I did, because basically I did still like the words, I just didn't like my version of it. Now I really like it – it's not just about Jeff any more. I did just write it literally about my imagination of what he might have been feeling as he was dying. He was so sweet and I liked him very much and, y'know, some people thought he committed suicide, some people thought otherwise, and we don't really know, we have no idea. I was thinking that maybe when you're drowning in yourself – or drowning in whatever – maybe if you can wave and accept it then you can look at a better side of something. When I sing this song, I see Jeff waving to me. It's kind of weird, but at least now I don't think that it's such a sad song.

Back to what you were just saying about Michael...how are you finding your new label home? It must be nice to know that he has so much faith in you.

Yeah, I don't know if I would have put this record out otherwise. He was a really big impetus and helped me to think. There was a point when I had the music but I was kinda confused about why anybody would



want to listen to it. I don't understand the moment sometimes so it really helped me. He felt the songs were valid and emotional and that they should be out in the world. That helped me to see them differently and finish the album.

The album seems to be in the same sonic territory as the last one, Lullaby For Liquid Pig, though the songs are clearly coming at things from a different perspective. Was that simply because they were both recorded under similar conditions?

Yeah, they were both recorded in exactly the same way because I don't have any money and I can't afford to go into a studio and do it. I would just finish work at the bookstore, come home and work on my songs; it's like you have paint and you have paper and there isn't much variety. I've got what I've got, although I do agree with you that this record is a bit more uplifting. But it's the lyrics and the music, not the sound. The sound is the same, really. I didn't have as much time for opening things up. On *Lullaby For Liquid Pig*, we spent more time in ProTools to open it up. Things like adding, say, a bassline on something or a drum part – all of a sudden it would open the whole song up and it would sound so much bigger. Some of the new songs that we tried to open up, for me, didn't work as well. It took away some of the charm that was working. That really discouraged me and I thought I would just have to record this stuff all over again and I had no more money. Then I realised that the songs kinda existed in their own little world, separate from *Lullaby...*, so we didn't need to do that much to them.

Tell me more about the artwork. Francesca Sundsten's paintings are just incredible – really beautiful on first glance and then you realise that there's something more sinister about them. How were you introduced to her painting?

I think it's perfect; it's exactly what the record is about. It's really sad but not... really creepy but not. In *The Maybe World* is all about possibilities and dealing with them – stuff that might sting but could also be beautiful. Did you think those birds might actually be trying to help that

bunny? I don't know, but it doesn't look scared to me. What if that bunny knows he is dying and he's offering himself, or what if he's not dead and they're just gonna eat him alive – you don't know! My cats used to bring me dead birds all the time from the roof and sometimes they'd bring them down into the apartment; I'd be playing piano and all of a sudden a bird would come back from the dead, like they'd only stunned it, then jump up and fly around. There would be this big drama and then the cats would kill it and it would upset me so much, but they really thought they were doing something good for me, bringing me this offering. So I started



looking at it that way, that maybe because it's an offering I can't see it like a death. They were just trying to remind me to appreciate my life by bringing me a dead bird. I didn't wanna have a sad cover for the album. That's another way in which Young God is just so amazing because I wasn't coming up with any ideas. Then Michael sent me Francesca's artwork and it was just so perfect. I don't know her at all but she's a good friend of Michael's so she was amazing to let us use it.

People who have been following your music for years will know about your cat Miamo-Tutti, and in the sleevenotes for the new

album you write that Golden Cities was actually written by him as he was dying of cancer. Sounds like there's kind of a sweet story there, care to elaborate?

It really was kind of sweet. That's what I mean about how I don't find the idea of death so sad on this record. When Miamo-Tutti died, my neighbour actually called the management of my building and said "when is she gonna quit fucking crying" – I thought that was the rudest thing I had ever heard!

Wow, what a dick!

Yeah, it was very sad, but really magical too. When he was dying, I would go see him in the hospital every day and hold him, and these words, these songs just came to me...so I know that he was giving them to me and trying to make me feel less worried. Cats do that anyway. Cats are like saviours of your psyche. But anyway, I came home and wrote the song and it became more than just a sad song...

So it was like he channelled the words?

Definitely. He brought me the melodies or whatever, because he was going through what he was going through. It's a joke that he wrote it, of course. I believe this stuff only a little bit. I would like to believe this stuff, this magic stuff, but I don't know that I really do.

Let's talk about some of the other songs on the new album. Red Thread deals with confrontation in quite a refreshing way, opening doors and making life interesting. You once said that you're fairly quick to anger, have you

mellowed out at all?

No, unfortunately! I kinda thought I had in the writing of the lyrics on this record – not the actual making of it because it took fucking years – but no, my anger is bad; it's a bad thing. I get therapy and I know something's going on but I don't know what it is. All you can do is keep working with it. It's like I can be fine one moment and then in a second it goes kinda weird, but I know it's telling me something. Anger is just as much a vehicle for communication as anything. That song is about total anger towards a person and his anger towards me, but trying to make it sweet because it's so scary!

I love the ending of the song; it's a familiar scenario, wanting to tell someone you love them but being blocked by anger.

Well, it was a real conversation. We were fighting a lot and he just went "go to hell" and I went "fuck you" and hung up...then I thought, oh my god, that is a song right there. It's a drag that I can't have it on the radio here – they like it but you can't say the 'f' word.

How about In The Land Of Fairies, can you tell me more about that?

I wrote that a long time ago, actually. But when this record started coming together and I realised there was some sort of a theme – about feeling dead or dying, things ending or being accepted – I went back and looked at that song. I wasn't even gonna put it on the record, but I sent it to Michael and he really liked it. What it says to me now is that when you're so narcissistic and focused on yourself, that's why you feel dead, because you're not going out into the world. I remember at the time I was really depressed and kinda wondering why, why I was feeling really kinda pathetic. So I was trying to mock myself because wondering gets you nowhere. I was trying to be real positive at the time and I was writing songs about angels and fairies, being around positive energies. Then with this song it was like, "fairies? I don't even like them" – all these things we try to make us feel better are actually making us feel dead, it's ridiculous. It's mocking that feeling instead of saying "oh poor you" and sympathising with it. It's like what you said when you started the interview...about how I wish people understood my music because it isn't really about feeling sorry for me, it's about mocking how we feel. When people don't get that, then they don't really understand the music, so I guess it does bug me sometimes.

Wire is a beautiful song too, though I find the meaning a bit oblique. Can you shed some light on what it's about for me?

It's about not wanting to be dead! Sometimes when people are communicating – if you wanna take it literally, through the wires, through TV, through email, through whatever – they're not really communicating. It seems like the times when I really do communicate is when I'm feeling some of the scary stuff, or when people are really trying in their feeling or they are crying about it. It's just so sweet that that's when I feel connected to them. Just the fact that they're trying is so endearing. That's also what *Red Thread* is about. It's about feeling compassion for

the vulnerable things like fire and passion and death and blood. I wanna feel stuff, I don't wanna not be alive!

Funny you should mention that! I was gonna ask...I read that after the last album, your fans were so worried about your state of mind that they sent you all manner of self-help books and bibles...

Oh, I know the guy that wrote that. He said that about *Lullaby...*, but they actually sent me bibles and stuff years ago after *Geek The Girl*, and I think that was because I have a song that says that if you don't believe in a god then you have to believe in yourself. People misunderstood that to feel sorry for me so, yeah, in general, people don't send me stuff like that. People will say something like "I'm worried about you" and I wish they wouldn't. These records aren't just about me, they aren't about you feeling sorry for me. If I was just putting records out about 'poor me', oh, what a pathetic person! I would feel sorry for that person too and send them self-help books. But that's not what I'm doing at all. I don't relate to it at all that they feel sorry for me. But it's ok to not; it's just fine. There's a lot of stuff out there to relate to.

You said you intended Lullaby For Liquid Pig to be an album that people should listen to alone...would you say the same about the new record?

I think this is a little more open than that one, but still...

It's not exactly dinner party music?

Yeah, or even to play at a store! It is atmospheric, but I think that it really speaks to one person, that you're listening to it within your own experience. I think that's one reason why my music doesn't sell a lot, because it doesn't speak to a lot of people at the same time. I don't mind, y'know; the letters I get from people when it does affect them are really touching. But I still think it would be fun to write something more poppy. I'm not against doing that, it's just not what comes out!

You wouldn't be worried about a Liz Phair-style backlash?

No, I think you should just do what you want to do, and you should only put records out when you know that they're done and they're realised. People will either like them or dislike them...I mean, one of the funniest reviews I got for *Lullaby For Liquid Pig* was from a guy who hated it so much that he wrote, "whatever you do, do not buy this record". I thought that was so funny, that it must have touched him in some way for him to feel such anger about

it. If Liz Phair felt comfortable to put her album out then I'm sure she knew that some people weren't gonna like it.

Do you think you'll always make music?

I don't know. I really wanna give something to the world and I think when I finally get a record done I do feel that I'm giving something. But you have to be so self-focused all the time to do this and there's a side of me that would like to teach or work at a volunteer place for abused people...I don't know. I mean, if I could make a living doing this and feel that I am actually offering something, then of course I would wanna keep doing it. It's kinda weird.

Do you think that perhaps we're living in too much of a 'yes' world?

A 'yes' world? Why would you think that? I think there's a lot of 'no' going on...

Yeah? But don't you think that people are becoming way too desperate to be famous, to be liked?

[laughs] Yeah. It's really weird when people are obviously doing things to be liked, but I think, deep down, if they were getting therapy – and I don't mean they should – but if they were really stripping away what was going on, they'd find that they were saying 'no' to themselves. Things like "no, you're not cool", "you're not good enough", "you better do stuff other people do so that you can be a part of this world", and that's saying 'no', that's not saying 'yes'. It's about stripping it away to find out what is really going on here. Nothing that's going on really meets the eye, I don't think, and that drives some people crazy!

Here's a final thought then...it's been fifteen years since you released your first album – what's the overriding thought when you look back at what you've achieved?

To be honest, I don't find it a conceited thing, but I really feel that my records are worthy of being there, I really do. I am not surprised in any way, shape or form that I'm not popular, y'know, but I do think that I sincerely really wanted to reach people who might be going through stuff, things I could help them to go through if they listen to these records. I think there is a place for them, and they are all different – they all deal with different things. I really wish that more people could hear them if it could help them, that I could reach a bigger audience – not a huge audience, but a bigger one. There are millions of people in therapy, y'know, in AA or all sorts of things. I just think there's a place for them. I'll keep my fingers crossed. ■



THRALL OF THE WILD

*Should you be of the opinion that Argentina's best musical export to date was the inspiration for *Evita*, please, stop reading now. The term 'world music' may be practically impenetrable but that's no excuse for ignorance. Still here? Then the chances are that you'll have heard of Juana Molina, the bold sonic sculptress from Buenos Aires. Don't let the fact that she sings exclusively in Spanish put you off; her recently released fourth album *Son* is a delicate bear hug of beauty that literally teems with the sounds of nature. Ten years since she abandoned a hugely successful career as a comic actress for music, Juana's decision to follow her heart continues to reward all parties. ADAM SMITH caught up with her by digital carrier pigeon.*

Nice cat impression on La Verdad!

Thanks! When I started to do that I didn't mean to miaow, but suddenly what I was doing reminded me of the duet of cats in Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* [the child and the spells] and I decided to go further.

I love the fact that the title of the album simply means 'sound', but were you worried that people would misinterpret it as 'child'?

'Son' actually means 'pleasant sound' and also 'are'. Things are. Yes, I was worried, because it's totally different than the real meaning. I almost didn't call it that because of it. I neither feel nor want to call a record 'my son'. It's too serious.

Even so, some artists refer to their songs as 'children'. Do you have a similar term of affection for them?

I have to admit I had the feeling of being the mother of *Segundo*. But it was only because once I made the record, it made the path and opened the doors on its own. So it was like having a child; I took care of it and then it grew up and had a career... and many children.

You've named such influences as Bartok, Ravel, Stravinsky, The Beatles and King Crimson, as well as poets like José Hernández, in the past. Are these just general touchstones or does each album benefit from specific individual sources of inspiration? What were your key inspirations for Son?

I've named Schubert, Bach and Debussy as well - they are definitely general touchstones. I still listen to these records pretty often and discover new artists from the past. *Son* is mostly inspired by the randomness of nature. The songs of birds and frogs, the movement of fireflies. How things happen at the same time without noticing one another. The fact that you can never tell where a leaf will fall or when a cricket will shut up.

The field recordings certainly do add character! Did you collect most of the sounds in and around your home?

Yes, all the sounds are those that were there while I was recording and listening to the songs. Some of them slipped in the microphone when I was doing vocals, so I decided to make them part of the record for everybody, but there's also a lot of home sounds in *Segundo*. More quiet, though.

These new songs seem to use repetition more than you have done in the past. Is that something you've deliberately strived to avoid on your previous records?

When I was a young shy girl, I used to play on the guitar the same two, three or four

chords forever...weeks, months. I used to get hypnotised by my own playing. But something, someone, THE LAW said a song had to have a verse, a chorus and a bridge. So I started to write 'regular' songs. Little by little, when I started to get more confidence in my writing, I abandoned that legal form and came back to the repetitions I used to love so much.

In some ways I think Son is your most approachable work but also your most experimental in terms of the way in which the songs have been composed. Do you agree?

Hmmm...I have a special love for *Segundo*. I think a lot of the ideas were sketched there (e.g. *Misterio Uruguayo*). But I have to say it was more low-fi than this one. Even though I used exactly the same tools to make it and the same instruments, I just learned how to record better and everything's more settled down.

Do you see yourself forging further into the realms of avant garde as your career progresses? Do you get dissatisfied by the limitations of traditional song forms?

I don't really think about what I'm doing or where I'm going. I just feel more confident. I still believe in the beauty of a traditional song. It's just that they are rare. I maybe do what I do because I can set myself free, I can abandon myself and feel transported more than just singing a song.

You've had a pretty unique career path already. Do you foresee any other drastic changes in direction? For example, I was thinking recently how easily your music might lend itself to remixing as there's so much detail to pick out and work with. Is a remix album something you would consider? You could show Madonna a thing or two about confessions on a dancefloor!

Ha ha! Thank you. I was recently figuring out if I am lazy or a hard worker. I find it overwhelming to do more than one thing at a time. I don't know if I can't do it because my brain is too small or if it is because I need to work a lot on what I do.

Would you ever consider recording an English language album just to see how it went down?

I would feel so unprotected. I wouldn't know how I was saying things, who I was talking like. English is a borrowed language to be able to communicate, that's all.

Seeing as you grew up listening mostly to foreign music, is it gratifying to make other people try harder for a change? A musician's revenge!

Ha ha!!!

I read in an old interview that you get scared by glowing reviews and I wondered how you can even leave the house these days since you're so showered in praise! Have you stopped reading your reviews? What is it that worries you?

I was very worried because when I recorded *Segundo* and *Tres Cosas*, no one was talking about me at all. I was completely unknown. I made those records without anyone's opinion. Then I had to make a new record without disappointing all those people. I don't read everything, I just oversee the mood of some critics. Well...some of them are so nice that I eat them! I get fed for a while.

In the US and UK at least it seems that people aren't generally very receptive to singing actors (or acting singers for that matter!) and the ones who do succeed almost always do so by taking the commercial pop route. Why is that do you think?

Probably because it's easier to succeed doing something everyone can listen to and understand quickly. But success was not what I was looking for. I abandoned an amazing career to do what I love the most. It took ten years to get here, and this is not the furthest you can go!

Do you think that people's initial resistance to your music made you even more determined to succeed?

It maybe made me stronger, but not more stubborn. I didn't mean to win. No, it was a matter of living or dying. I had to do it because I would have died of sadness if not.

You've said in the past that "mistakes are my best friends...that's how you open up new ways, new worlds." Is that a philosophy you still adhere to?

Yes.

So what's the best mistake you ever made?

To leave my TV show.

Random question finale...describe the most beautiful thing you've ever seen.

I was in a terrace with some friends. It was a sunset the night of a full moon. The moon rose, giant and orange. The sky was completely clean, except for a tiny little cloud. The moon became whiter and hid behind it and the cloud became pink with a silver edge. Then the sky got darker - that shiny electric blue colour just before it goes black - and all of a sudden there was a little thunderbolt inside the cloud. It sounds totally impossible, like a Hollywood film, but I saw it.

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Son is out now on Domino Records.

When it comes to Oscar night, the award for best original song is often one of the most dispiriting events in what is already a fairly facile and gruelling ritual. When used properly, music has an unrivalled power when it comes to adding greater depth to a visual – why assault one sense when you can batter two? – so why the Academy voters insist on picking almost consistently the blandest, least interesting examples is something of a mystery, one that almost certainly includes no small amount of pressure and cajoling by record execs. How else can you explain past winners like Phil Collins ('Tarzan', 1999), Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston ('The Prince Of Egypt', 1998) or this year's artless entry *It's Hard Out Here For A Pimp* by Three 6 Mafia from the film 'Hustle & Flow'? The latter's triumph was especially criminal when Emmylou Harris' exquisitely moving *A Love That Will Never Grow Old* from the 'Brokeback Mountain' soundtrack wasn't even nominated.

One of the sorriest decisions in recent years came in 2003. Whilst it was inevitable that the final instalment of the 'Lord Of The Rings' trilogy would sweep the board, Annie Lennox's theme song *Into The West* was notable only for being terrifically dull and contrived, faux-evocative fluff. With its close harmony singing, 1940s-style – you know, back when a note was a note and needless warbling was a no-no – Benoit Charest's theme song *Belleville Rendez-vous* would have been far worthier. Taken from the charmingly oddball French animation 'Les Triplettes de Belleville', it was an absolute delight – different, fresh and brought to life in ecstatic fashion on stage and triumphantly stealing the show outright.

It may not have charmed the voters but when Italian jazz student Marcella Puppini sat down to watch the film in September 2004, she was mesmerised by the music and the faded glamour of the ramshackle but talented titular sisters – Violette, Blanche and Rose – named after the colours of the French flag. The indomitable spirit of this washed-up trio of cabaret dames inspired her to start a group of her own in the style of The Andrews Sisters, with all the costumes, swingin' rhythms and sexy dance moves of the bygone era included – enter the Puppini Sisters!

Together with her fellow Trinity College of Music students Kate Mullins and Stephanie O'Brien, Marcella started listening to classics from the 1940s, rearranging and revamping old hits such as *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* and *Mr Sandman*. But the 'sisters' were soon to discover that performing modern classics 1940s style could be just as much fun. "Kate Bush was

the first modern artist we covered", explains Kate. "It actually came about through a lie. We had wanted to play at a London cabaret club night called Duckie for some time and Marcella's husband told the organisers that we do a great version of *Wuthering Heights*. Well, we didn't at the time and – since we got the gig – we had about two weeks to arrange and choreograph the whole song!"

Needless to say, their startlingly unique version went down well with the (predominantly gay) crowd and the Puppinis have since gone on to cover a variety of hits on their debut album *Betcha Bottom Dollar*, including Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive* and Blondie's *Heart Of Glass*. Even The Smiths' *Panic* has been made over, much to the annoyance of some po-faced Morrissey fans! It's all done deftly with tongues planted firmly in cheeks

but it's the authenticity that truly impresses. Part of this is undoubtedly due to the genius idea of getting *Belleville Rendez-vous* composer Charest to sit in as producer, and the Puppini Sisters readily admit that working with one of their original inspirations was a truly memorable experience: "I love his treatment of the music," says Kate. "It's so acoustic and really old school. It was a dream come true.

He brought all kinds of weird instruments to the album – musical saws, dying buglers, whistling solos. He has really managed to create exactly what we wanted. He's a genius really."

Since forming their act two years ago, the Puppini Sisters have enjoyed a fairly whirlwind career and can now count the likes of Kelly Osbourne and Kate Moss as fans. Their quirky, fun-loving approach and transfixing stage presence so impressed a major label talent scout that he practically handed them a deal worth £1 million on the spot: "We were really chuffed that it all happened so quickly. The A&R guy from Universal came along to a night at the Trinity College of Music last September looking for acts with commercial suitability. We weren't even going to perform but only agreed to it at the last minute. He saw us and snatched us up!"

Despite this ever so fortuitous encounter, the down-to-earth Puppinis have still had to slog their guts out in the run-up to fame: "Oh, we have done all of it!

Dragged our PA to venues and every-thing," laughs Kate. As she attests, however, they couldn't have done it without the help of Marcella's car, lovingly nicknamed 'Colette'.

words by ANJA MCCLOSKEY

FOR



"We would never trade her in for something more luxurious, even if we could. She has done us such good service over the past years. We've grown to see her rather like a pet!"

And, despite performing to large crowds at numerous festivals, the Puppini continue to entertain the small but hip London crowds that supported them from the very beginning, regularly appearing at the gloriously kitsch Bethnal Green Working Men's Club and East London's black-box bar Bistrottheque. "That's where our roots are and that's where we've built up a very trendy following," says Kate. "It's very important to us to keep that audience. And, as weird as it may sound, the Bethnal Green Working Men's Club is actually a very up and coming venue, so for us it's definitely worthwhile." Incidentally, it's also the home of the Whoopee Club, one of London's finest alternative cabaret ventures and a regular collaborator with the Puppini: "We have done bits and bobs in the past with them. We're actually doing our first big national tour in October/November and would really love to take some of the

Whoopee acts along, maybe some dancers and a magician. We want it to be more like a show rather than just a gig."

Indeed, the Puppini themselves have always been a show rather than just a band. Their choreography is synchronised to perfection and the moves effortlessly incorporated into the music, much like their 1940s idols: "The Andrews Sisters have always been a great inspiration to us," explains Kate. "They were so tight and just knew what they were doing." But choreographing all the songs did not come easy: "Well, let's just remember that we are singers. It's taken us quite a long time to get everything tight. Since none of us had a rehearsal space, we even used to go down to this café we knew with huge mirrors so that we could get practice."

Luckily, they opted not to incorporate any moves from Marcella's days as a pole dancer at London's lesbian Candy Bar: "We regularly perform at London's Shadow Lounge, and there is a pole there. We've tried it, but there are a lot of injuries that result from those kinds of moves so we tend not to use it!"

Incidentally, Marcella's CV also includes a top-notch fashion degree and two years' work experience with legendary designer Vivienne Westwood, who has given the girls her enviable seal of approval: "She had a big influence on our look and had her hands on sewing our costumes," beams Kate. "It has been hard to achieve a uniform look, because we are all different shapes and sizes. But she definitely helped us to get a bit of a modern twist on our image."

There's no doubt that the Puppini Sisters have a good sense of timing with their act.

Vintage chic is all the rage, and people are flocking to retro clubs in London's vibrant, revived East End for a dose of the old school. Of this the Puppini are acutely aware but they're adamant that they won't be intimidated by acts trying to jump on the bandwagon: "They can try as much as they want, but it's going to take them a long time to get it as tight as we have," warns Kate. "I mean, we are all trained musicians and know what we are doing and it's taken us a long time. It's a work of blood, sweat and tears. So if anyone did jump on the bandwagon they can give us a run, but they will be about two years behind."

And they will also have to watch out, because the Puppini Sisters have their sights firmly set on world domination: "We definitely have some interest from America, Japan and Europe. We really want to take it worldwide. We would love to go to America, I think we could really jazz it up there."

She has words, too, for any naysayers accusing them of simply being a glorified tribute band. So inspired were they by Charest's involvement in *Betcha Bottom Dollar* that they have since begun to write their own new material, Puppini style of course. "It's really hard because we're not quite sure of how to approach it. Do we write them like modern day pop songs or in the 1940s style? We're all working individually on this right now and hopefully album number two will be originals." ■



FORWARD
to the '40s

SO LONG

(and thanks for all the riffs)

It's 1990 and twenty litres of morphine, a wardrobe full of flannel shirts and an army of skateboarding longhairs are poised to revolutionise the music industry; grunge, an inevitable post-metal, predominantly male movement is about to land. Naturally, there is a female reaction – not so much an anti-movement, but at the very least an alternative. With prototypes Joan Jett and Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon at the reins, riot grrrl would soon rear her head, shaking from her hair the traditional punk acts that woke her.

For the next five years, feminist musicians such as Kathleen Hanna (*Bikini Kill*), Kat Bjelland (*Babes In Toyland*) and Allison Wolfe (*Bratmobile*) would whip up around them a political force not easily ignored and which continues to be hugely influential. And though their original trailblazing bands would quickly become consigned to the history books, many of the women at the forefront of riot grrrl remain involved in the scene, e.g. Hanna

in *Le Tigre*, Bjelland in *Katastrophe Wife* and Wolfe in *Partyline*.

Blasting through to the turn of the millennium, however, and there was really only one band who truly endured, transcended all the hype and are still considered to be a relevant, contemporary outfit today. On June 27th, 2006, however, that band unexpectedly announced an "indefinite hiatus" from the music industry following the release of their seventh and in many ways greatest album, *The Woods*. TIFFANY DANIELS reflects on the career of Sleater-Kinney and contemplates the sorry prospect of life without them.

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Hailing from the Pacific Northwest was almost a prerequisite for sporting the grunge label and it's surely no coincidence that the majority of the early riot grrrl bands came from the same locale, mostly in and around Seattle and Olympia. One of the first-generation women was Oregon-born singer/guitarist

Corin Tucker, who, with her friend Tracy Sawyer, formed the duo *Heavens To Betsy* in 1991, just as grunge went into overdrive surrounding the release of Nirvana's seminal opus *Nevermind*. A split 7" vinyl with *Bratmobile* surfaced soon after, followed in 1994 by their reasonably successful debut full-length *Calculated*, but the partnership was fairly short-lived. Meanwhile, in Olympia, out-and-proud singer/guitarist Carrie Brownstein was enjoying some success as one-third of queercore outfit *Excuse 17*, and the two bands often found themselves sharing a bill. It wasn't long before Brownstein and Tucker became firm friends and decided to start their own 'side project'. Named after a street in the town where their early practice sessions were held, *Sleater-Kinney* was born and soon became the prime concern of both women. Notorious for their drummer troubles, the band went through a succession of different line-ups, with Carrie and Corin the only



constant, before finally settling on Janet Weiss (then, as now, one-half of Quasi with ex-husband Sam Coombes, formerly of Elliott Smith's Heatmiser) in 1996.

The incredible chemistry between the three women was always in evidence, from the release of 1997's *Dig Me Out*, a jaw-dropping collection of passionate performances and memorable tunes, to last year's awe-inspiring *The Woods*.

In addition to these flying musical sparks, the trio shared similar ideals and political agendas and were particularly devoted to independent, regional record labels that supported their feminist ethos. Both their pre-Weiss albums – 1995's *Sleater-Kinney* and 1996's *Call The Doctor* – were released through Chainsaw Records, an Oregon-based indie devoted to queer-core. After Janet became a permanent fixture, the band signed to the unimpeachably cool, Olympia-based label Kill Rock Stars, home to many a riot grrrl, who released their next four albums up until 2002's *One Beat*.

But when faced with the reality of label downsizing, Sleater-Kinney voluntarily departed Kill Rock Stars and spent a year without a contract before inking a deal with Seattle-based label Sub Pop for *The Woods*. In doing so, some argued that the band had compromised their otherwise staunch dedication to their riot grrrl principles, given that 49% of Sub Pop is currently owned by multinational conglomerate Time Warner, but the politics remained.

With every album, Sleater-Kinney found room to address many a feminist issue. The song *A Real Man*, for instance, declared open warfare against the sexual dominance of men, *Anonymous* challenged women to become more vocal about the sexism that surrounds them, while *Ballad Of A Ladyman* stressed the importance of fighting for female independence within the music industry in a direct attempt to appeal to a new generation of riot grrrl artists.

They didn't soften with age either; if anything, the title track of *The Woods* was more vehement than ever; relating back to their earlier song *Little Babies*, it uses a retrospective tone to assert the dangers of heterosexual relationships and, in particular, how they can lead to female confinement.

They had other bugbears too, such as the war in Iraq; much of *One Beat* was an effective post-9/11 statement of discontent (see *Faraway* and *Combat Rock* in particular), but even then they couldn't resist a feminist slant on the matter,

encouraging women to participate in the debate just as much as men.

Sloganeering aside, Sleater-Kinney's contribution to the riot grrrl movement is clear, though they were not so much pioneers as they were keepers of the flame. Their influences on other women are far-flung and enormous. Bands like The Gossip and up-and-comers The Noisettes owe much to Corin's trademark bellow, while countless others have been inspired by Sleater-Kinney's capable infiltration of the mainstream without compromise. That they've gone out on a high is as impressive as it is frustrating – how many bands are able to blow the critics away with album number seven, if indeed they ever reach such a milestone? In March 2006, *The Woods* walked off with the PLUG Independent Music award for album of the year and was also nominated for the inaugural New Pantheon Music Award (the prestigious US equivalent of the Nationwide Mercury Music Prize).

Their feverish live act also picked up hundreds of plaudits, including rave reviews from the NME, who gushed that the girls play "brilliantly, passionately", while they picked up yet another PLUG award for best live performance.

Not ones to shy away from creative relationships with others, Sleater-Kinney consistently released split EPs, singles and compilation exclusives throughout their career. In 1998, they issued a split single with Cypher In The Snow as part of the Free To Fight campaign promoting self-defence for women (www.freetofight.org), whose original compilation album from 1995 featured tracks from both Heavens To Betsy and Excuse 17. Whilst Janet is off playing with Quasi, Corin occasionally does time in Portland-based band Cadallaca alongside (usually solo) singer-songwriter Sarah Dougher, while Carrie teamed up with indie-rock icon Mary Timony in 1999 for a single EP release as The Spells. A year later, all three stood in as the backing band for The Go-Betweens on *The Friends Of Rachel Worth*, their first album in a dozen years, to huge critical acclaim. Also notable is their cover of Hedwig & The Angry Inch's *Angry Inch*, recorded as a duet with The B-52s' Fred Schneider. In a neat twist, Hedwig's singer/lyricist Stephen Trask guested on *One Beat's Pristina*, providing the only male vocals ever to appear on a Sleater-Kinney album.

Given their undeniable legacy, it's more than a little sad to see them throw in the towel – though "indefinite hiatus" does leave room for some hope – and begs the question 'why?'. An acrimonious

split seems unlikely, for although there were disagreements and fraying tempers at times, mutual respect and a shared love of what they were doing allowed them to see past the heat of the moment. Talking to British music mag *Comes With A Smile* (also now sadly defunct) last year, Weiss attributed the line-up's eight-year longevity to the fortuitous triumvirate of luck, respect and friendship, saying: "It feels like we're doing something important, more important than working at Starbucks, y'know? That's a hard thing to throw away just because you're uncomfortable or upset. Those things you can work through."

Perhaps they felt that the new, harder direction they'd taken on *The Woods* exhausted their ideas for the time being, or maybe the constant grind of being on tour has worn them down and forced them to make compromises in their personal lives. Whatever the reason behind it, the fact remains that Sleater-Kinney played what may well have been their last ever show together in front of a rapturous home crowd at Portland's Crystal Ballroom on August 12th. Fittingly, the last song they played was *One More Hour* ("I know it's hard for you to let it go / I know it's hard for you to say goodbye / I know you need a little more time").

When it came to sticking to their principles, developing their sound and never looking back, Sleater-Kinney have proven themselves to be incredibly worthy. Though it's been roughly a decade since riot grrrl appeared to reach its peak, Carrie, Corin and Janet propelled themselves into an altogether different playing field to their peers who fell by the wayside. Despite moving further away from their definitive punk sound and into more angular realms with each successive album, their popularity continued to grow without costing them an ounce of credibility.

Sleater-Kinney's enviable position as one of America's premier rock acts has remained unchallenged for many a year, and even if there were another dominant rock 'n' riot girl band to fill their shoes, their unique sound would be nigh on impossible to imitate. With them hanging up their guitar straps, the music industry has lost something priceless, and the cause they once represented has lost even more. It will take another revolution to raise the war cry they managed to deliver.

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 Check out *Tiny Suns Infused With Sour* (toiras.blogspot.com) for exhaustive info.



TEAR WATER
TEAR WATER

BROADCAST
TEARS BUTT
TEARS BUTT

CHELMSFORD
TEDDY BO

TEARS BUTT
TEARS BUTT
TEARS BUTT

MICHAEL
I HATE
I HATE

SAMSARA
SAMSARA
SAMSARA

KID
KID
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TEARS BUTT
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TEARS BUTT

MICHAEL
I HATE
I HATE



Simultaneously self-deprecating and confident, whimsical and incredibly incisive, gently spoken and utterly precise in what she says, serious and very funny, speaking to Trish Keenan is an experience of apparent opposites that actually go together beautifully – an experience that echoes her music. Ever experimenting and pushing the boundaries, Broadcast elude all attempts to categorise or even to describe their innovative blend of electronica, library music, psychedelia, nursery rhyme, movie sound effects and a female vocal that is at once pure and strong, and evocative of childlike naïveté. Their new record, *The Future Crayon*, a collection of their B-sides and other rare tracks, draws attention to just how multifaceted and exciting this band is and has been for ten years. **CLARE BYRNE** managed to grab Trish for a chat just before the band went on tour for the first time this year.

You've said that Haha Sound was a motherly record and that Tender Buttons was a fatherly record...do you see The Future Crayon as rounding up some of your forgotten song children?

The orphans! [laughs] I don't know...we just liked the idea of putting out those rare singles. It's ten years for the band and it seemed like the obvious thing to do really. There are some rarities there that I think people will be interested in. We don't expect it to sell loads – it's just a nice little novelty thing really.

It seems like this project has been quite long intended. Was it the tenth anniversary of the first single that made you decide to do this now?

It was always an option to release them, because they were quite limited. Like *Distant Call* was only on the B-side of the 7" of *Come On Let's Go*. It's nice to

just put them out for people. Although I imagine most Broadcast fans have got them...everyone on the message board's been swapping tracks anyway. But it stops them being rare. Sometimes I get fed up with 'hard to find' things; I think it's nice to just put them out there.

The songs obviously span quite a long period of time, a period in which your band has changed quite a lot. Do you think this record functions as a sort of retrospective?

I think it does. It's like the rings of a tree... the growth of the band. I think we've focused in a lot more over the ten years. We were very ambitious and wanted to try everything. We were obsessed with soundtrack albums and what's brilliant about soundtrack albums is you get that funky track with the abstract sounds on it, and then you get that sweet female vocal track and then the nursery rhyme track that narrates some emotion in the film itself. You're exposed to a broad spectrum of music on a soundtrack album, and I think that was always our ideal. Broadcast try to umbrella everything that a soundtrack album might...I'm not sure how much people can digest all of that from one band. I don't know whether it's been to our detriment sometimes that we've tried to do too much. Perhaps we've spread ourselves a little thinly at times, but I think there are some great tracks on *The Future Crayon* that really work. We're much more focused in on what we do now though.

How did you choose which songs to put on The Future Crayon?

It's all the tracks that were never included on albums, so they chose themselves. As far as I can think there are only two tracks that weren't included. To be honest, we would have included those two tracks,

which are *Misc.* and *Stupido – Stupido* was an extra track for the Japan release of *Haha Sound* and *Misc.* was off a cassette for the NME – but we just thought they were crap. So it isn't quite everything, but almost...98% of what isn't on the albums is on *The Future Crayon*.

You've said in prior interviews that you approach recording EPs differently to the way you approach albums...what do you think that means for the overall sound of The Future Crayon?

When you're recording an album, you rework songs, you remix songs, you rearrange songs – your working process is developing all the time. And then all of a sudden that project finishes and then, when the pressure's off, something pops out that's great and really easy and fresh sounding. And that's always what happens with our EPs. Because we record them after the album – we get the album out of the way and hit the deadline (if we can) and all of a sudden the pressure's off and we can relax and then something brilliant pops out. So I wouldn't say we really approach the EPs differently, I think the process is different. Most EPs are a quarter or a third of an album, so the arc of that recording is shorter and you can envisage it more.

You have EPs that are thought of as quite significant in the evolution of your work. Do you think EPs have been important to you as a band establishing a fanbase?

I think they have really worked for us because they've allowed us to explore different things and take a few more risks, particularly with song structures. We like to have a small vocal section and then it bursts into a groove or a sample, and you can really chop and change it and mess around with structures when the pressure's off and

you don't feel like you have to craft twelve brilliant songs. By the time that's all over, you think "I'm fed up with verse chorus bridge verse chorus bridge, what else can we do?" And then you throw in a few more random elements and it's always more interesting. I think that's why we've had success with our EPs, because we've experimented a bit more, and because we've been on form after recording for a long time and writing for a long time, they've worked. For that reason it's perfect for us to compile them as a whole album. We thought of doing it all chronologically, as they were released, but that didn't make sense at all. So we worked on a running order that would work.

The general consensus with us is that your B-sides are better than most people's A-sides.

They're better than our own A-sides! [laughs] But a B-side is that moment when you can do anything because the pressure's off – nobody's looking. The spotlight is not on the B-sides so you really can have a bit of fun.

When I was a kid, I always wanted to buy the single for the B-sides, whereas now singles seem to have nothing on the B-side or just crappy remixes.

Yeah, that's very bad isn't it? It's so lacking in creativity. I think that's the problem with a lot of British music. It's scared to take risks. I always watch whatever music shows are on the TV, festivals and things like that, and I was just watching T In The Park. Not that I should expect anything brilliant from these kind of line-ups, but I'm always really gob-smacked at how little people try different things. I don't know what these bands are holding onto. Whether they're scared to take the risk because they're going to upset the cog that they're on. It's always a real shame.

I think a lot of people who hit on a successful formula will just stick to it...

That's it, because all of a sudden it employs a lot of people and it's like you upset your agent and then your promoter...it's so sad really. I think British musicians are really caged. When somebody's kind of free everyone goes crazy for it! If somebody shows that spark and that risk-taking bravery, then everybody loves it. We should go crazy a bit more! We're supposed to be mad anyway – we're cooped up in a little country all living on top of each other. Why we're not like Barcelona or somewhere where it is really crazy and heated and creative all the time...or maybe I'm being romantic about it, I don't know. But what is it we British are actually holding onto?

I was wondering about the significance of the title The Future Crayon? Where did it come from?

It's self-generated. It's a cut-up. It was two words that we spotted – you know when two words go together and they take you further into an idea. To me it said that the future was in young people being creative. To me, that's what it means. The future of any art is in the child. That's why I liked those two words together so much – I thought it really really worked. And it really seemed to sum up the nature of the recordings and the songs. The modern, electronic element and then, like *Where Youth & Laughter Go* and *Poem Of A Dead Song*, they're sort of crafted nursery rhymes...classroom kind of songs. And the two things do go together in the real world too. It was just such a lovely title. And I love that, just putting two words together like that.

It's interesting that you write cut-ups as well. I know that you experimented a lot with automatic writing when creating Tender Buttons.

Yeah, *Tender Buttons* was all automatic writing. There was some small crafting to shape its course into a song, but the ideas and all of the lines were generated from early morning automatic writing. I would get up first thing in the morning and that would be all I would do for a couple of hours. I would let it all rush out of the pen. I wanted to suspend trying to make sense. I really got fed up with trying to mean something – songs having this weighty poignant meaning. I got very bored of that – I'm over that. I don't have to mean anything any more. That's how I feel – I don't feel like I have to say anything about the world or about my emotions. I just wanted to be quite random about it. The subject matter chooses itself then and I think it's way more interesting than thinking, "what am I going to writing this song about...?" I hate that – you can smell it a mile off in a song when someone's got an agenda.

Do you think that experimenting with automatic writing has changed the way you write songs now? Do you think that's the way you will write from now on or was it a one album experiment?

I think the next album will be different. I'd like to craft a little bit more and find a balance between the two things. [pause] I'm saying that, but we've been doing a lot of improvisation recently. I think our focus for the next album is all about playing. I've had quite a lot of success with just making stuff up as I go along, whatever comes

to my mind, and that being it. I'm quite into vocal sounds at the moment. There'll be a bit more emphasis on the music this time around. With *Tender Buttons* it was about the songs and them being simple, and the music took a backseat. It had a minimal, library music approach to the arrangements – quite quirky but sticking to very similar sounds – a drum



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machine, a distorted organ sound, which was a Reactor Software plug-in. *Tender Buttons* was a computer album. Especially songs like *Michael A Grammar*, *Black Cat*, *Corporeal*, *America's Boy*, *Goodbye Girls...* these are grid-like songs.

Until now, you seem to have had one less band member with each album. Are you going to be using more different musicians on the new album?

Yes, we're doing a lot of recording with different people, different local bands and musicians. We've done a lot of recordings so far that have really worked. We've been working with a band called Gas Shepherds



that sit on the floor and move around and generate sounds. We've also been working with Cities Prepare for Attack – it's one guy who does a lot of drone guitar stuff. We've been improvising with anyone and everybody. Chris Clark, who's also on Warp Records, we've been doing some improv with him. Also Mark Sanders, who's a well-known improv drummer in his own right – he puts out records and he's busy playing with Evan Parker and all sorts of people all over Europe. We've been really focusing on playing – always playing and performing. It's been a really refreshing change.

Do you think making the compilation of The Future Crayon made you nostalgic for the bigger sound or did you always intend to expand outwards again after Tender Buttons?

I don't know. I enjoyed listening to it when we were compiling it but I don't like to look back like that. For one, it doesn't feel that long ago and I guess it's almost like it's not you anymore. It happened, but you don't feel connected to it. I miss the people – your mind goes through all the people that were involved. We've had a lot of line-up changes and a lot of producers and engineers. You see all those faces coming back at you, that's quite weird.

In relation to that, will you be playing the Future Crayon songs on the tour you have coming up? I was thinking that might be strange for you...

No, we won't be playing anything from *The Future Crayon*. There's going to be a lot of improvisation. There'll be three or four or maybe five new tracks. But there's also big gaps in the set where we won't know what will happen until we do it. Older songs, I think there'll be one or two off *Tender Buttons*. We're opening the set with two new tracks. We're also doing *Colour Me In* and *The Little Bell*. So we're sticking to those nice little classroom folk songs. But again, with different arrangements and different ways of generating those computerized software sounds, so it's looser and more performance-based. Oh – we're doing *Hammer Without A Master* at the end – a nice wipe-out track. There's a focus on drumming as well, we always like good drumming. We're using Mark Sanders, the improv drummer I mentioned before.

Your music is often described as 'mood music', and I wondered what sort of mood you have to be in to write? Or whether you do what Gertrude Stein and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets did and make yourself write, whatever mood you're in.

No, there's no waiting for moods going on. In a way, I've been there and I think waiting for moods is symptomatic of writer's block. And I think that's when you have stopped developing and challenging the process. I don't wait for moods – I can't. If you give yourself a working habit – like, I had a period a few months ago where I would have to write a song in half an hour. And it would have to be in half an hour, you give yourself strict conditions. The pressure's off – it's like, if it's crap it's not your fault, because you had to do it in half an hour. And I wrote a song a day for two months. One of those we're going to do in the live set, it's about a girl who's pregnant and the baby's growing in her stomach and it's about that progression, that narrative. Years ago, I used to sit down and go, "Oh God, I've got to write a song," or "I'm trying to write a song," and it all seemed so laboured and painful. It's only been the last few years, since my dad died...I don't know whether that has somehow been a psychological release for me, or whether it's just changed the way I think about life and the opportunity that I've got. But I feel much more free to do stuff – I don't put it off. I used to always put writing songs off. It's like, the one dream I always wanted and yet when the opportunity came along I procrastinated, and I never understood why I did that. But my dad dying made me look at why I was doing that, and you grow up when you lose somebody close to you. I think my process and my whole attitude has changed – I'm intrigued now by songs more than scared.

You've recently had some poetry and prose published in The High Horse. I was wondering how your music relates to your poetry, or what the difference is in the process, because poetry doesn't always lend itself to music.

No, it doesn't at all actually. I thought that I should write poems because I write lyrics, but actually they're really different. You can't always figure poem into song, although I did do that with *Locusts*, which was a Garcia Lorca poem, and that worked really well, but we cut the vocals up with that and messed about with it a bit and it just kind of worked. I have crafted poems that have just not worked in songs and I'm never quite sure why. I think because they're meant to be read on the page, they have a melody or a visual element to them that just doesn't lend itself to melody singing. I don't know why that is, it's interesting. For me, the crafting and rewriting of pieces of written work is really different to lyric writing. How much melody plays a part in conveying a narrative in a lyric...it's scary how powerful melody actually is. You can

– they're two men and it's all pedal work, it's all one-off crazy analogue noise boxes. There's a company called BugBrand and they make all of these one-off delay pedals and fuzz pedals, and they've got a whole array of wonderful colourful looking boxes

sing the most inane couple of words and yet the melody will give it real meaning, and can make it very tear-jerking. There's one song in particular that does that for me and it always gets to me – *Parallelograms* by Linda Perhacs. All she sings in the melody is shapes. It's a list song really, of different mathematical shapes, and it's tear-jerking. That's the power of melody. A lot of the time, really sad songs or really uplifting songs...to read the lyrics, they're two-dimensional on the page. Melody is great for giving meaning to words. You can hold the note on one word, and all of a sudden change the focus of the meaning or bring out the meaning. It's really interesting.

Do you have any bigger ambitions as a prose or poetry writer?

I really like short story writing and I'm always working on something. I don't tend to write very long pieces, although I'm writing a 6000-word story at the moment. But I don't know where it's going and I'm not really interested in it going anywhere – it's just something that I like doing. The pressure's not really on me to do it for a living. I think it was Gertrude Stein who said, "don't ever do what you love doing for a living," because once you've got an audience you're always writing for it and you're trapped I guess. I have no ambitions for it – I'll write it and I'll give it away. I don't want to earn money from it. Some people say "I've got a book in me," but I never want to write a novel – god forbid! The thought of it makes me shudder! I like writing short pieces, I enjoy crafting them.

When you started as a band, there was a hegemony of white male Britpop; did you feel like you had to react against that or was it always incidental?

No, I don't feel like I react to anything like that. I wrote my first song when I was thirteen and I did it without any wish to be famous. I just found myself doing it – I didn't have any ambitions. It just happened – I wrote a song. There was no music, it was an a cappella song. I don't remember seeing myself as a musician particularly, I just remember thinking, "I really want to write a song". That's me – it's the act of doing it that I've been compelled to

do. I don't care what sex I am when I'm writing songs, it's not an issue for me. There's more of a feminist agenda in my everyday life than in my life as a musician. Throughout history men and women have been successful in music, although there is a gender split. A lot of female musicians are singers...I liked your article on female drummers. There is that gender divide and it's interesting – but most girls don't want to play drums and that's fine too. A lot of women don't want to be car mechanics and that's absolutely fine. I think the problem will always come with how much we get paid. Like cleaning jobs are not well paid and a lot more women than men do cleaning jobs. Me and James have been together a long time – but the



arguments we've had over washing up have been way deeper than arguments we've had over musical arrangements. To the point where we've smashed crockery to end the argument over who is going to wash it up!

Something that's very interesting to me is what a big effect film and cinematic music have had on Broadcast. Do you see yourself ever being involved with an actual movie?

I'd really love to do that. We're ready now more than ever to do the soundtrack to a film. I think we've had a romance for a long time about soundtrack music without ever really wanting to do a soundtrack. We've been offered things but they've never really been quite right. The ironic

thing about our music is it doesn't really work that well against film. It's OK for the film-maker who likes a running order of songs that you can put on an album and release it as the soundtrack, but really it's a compilation of songs that you like that you've managed to work into your film. A lot of Warp soundtracks are like that actually. Lynne Ramsay, for instance, the 'Morvern Callar' soundtrack was actually just a compilation of songs. And I'm not massively keen on that – I always find that flattens a film off. With a soundtrack, you have to have a group of musicians who are going to take on the film. In the same way as Richard Thompson did for 'Grizzly Man' – there's an accompanying documentary of the making of that soundtrack with Werner Herzog in the studio. I didn't realise it happened in that way, but Herzog actually sat in with the musicians and directed them as they were playing and told them which bits he didn't like. It's a really interesting documentary and everyone was open to what he was saying and there were no egos. The soundtrack that came out at the end was really amazing. I think we're really ready to do that now, especially since we've been improvising a lot more and our approach to music has changed. I think we could really animate a film with the way we play music now.

So you're really just waiting for the right project?

We've been offered a really good thing actually, which is quite unusual, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It's with Doug Aiken – he's asked us to do some music for the sculpture garden outside the museum. So that's the next thing we're going to be looking at. He projects big moving images onto buildings and things like that. I don't know what he's going to do for this project but we're really chuffed that we've got that. It's a dream job really, so we're going to get our teeth into that next. We can't wait! ■

The Future Crayon is out now on Warp Records. Read Trish's prose and poetry at www.thehighhorse.net.



One of this year's most beguiling albums, and certainly one of the most delicate debuts in recent memory, Lou Rhodes' *Beloved One* will be all but inescapable this month as she competes against eleven of her most illustrious peers for the 2006 Nationwide Mercury Music Prize. PAUL WOODGATE caught up with the notoriously private artist over email to see how she's coping with the anticipation of being thrust into the limelight.

How does it feel for you to be 'Lou Rhodes' and not 'Lou Rhodes, formerly of Lamb'?

Wonderful, though people still feel the need to tag on the Lamb reference from time to time.

The album is beautifully produced. Life at Ridge Farm and the collaboration with Emre Ramazanoglu clearly suit you – how was the experience overall?

It flowed very naturally. An amazing process of having the freedom to follow my heart creatively and involve some of my favourite people in the process.

Beloved One has the feel of a personal manifesto. Do you see it that way - is the music more important than the message or are you aiming for a combination of both?

I don't really reflect much on what I'm aiming for and the word 'manifesto' suggests a very head-based and didactic point of view. I write songs from the heart. They happen when they happen and are usually triggered by emotions I'm feeling at the time. I can't really separate the music from the message; they're part of the same thing.

You've not been afraid to document breakdowns in your musical and personal relationships and there's a sense of catharsis throughout the album; did the songs have a long gestation period, and how's the world looking now they're in the public domain?

Yes, there's a definite sense of catharsis in these songs, and I guess in the songs I wrote with Lamb. That's just the way I write. As for their gestation period; the songs were written in bursts I guess. As

I said before, they come when they come. I wouldn't say, though, that it was a long process. The recording and mixing was done in five weeks altogether and one of the songs (*Fortress*) was written, recorded and mixed right at the end of the mixing process in two days.

Do you keep an eye on the UK music scene? Who's caught your attention recently and what are you listening to?

I don't keep an eye on the music scene at all and spend much of my time in silence or listening to older music. Recently though Devendra Banhart and Sufjan Stevens have renewed my faith in contemporary music.

How does it feel to be a 'Mercury girl'?

Ho ho. I don't feel like a Mercury girl! The nomination meant a lot though. More than anything, after making the album I'd been longing to make, it was such a bonus to have it recognised in that way.

Given the chequered fortunes the Mercury has bestowed upon some of its winners, is the prize a profile raiser or some kind of poisoned chalice?

It's what you make of it I guess.

Has your connection to the prize affected your ability to "...strip my life away" and "...live each day by day"?

A little. I'm looking forward to a little more tranquility when the 'big night' is over!

You're playing live in September. How does the intimate feel of *Beloved One* transfer to the stage – is playing to the crowd something you enjoy?

I enjoy it very much. The audiences, so far, have been amazingly attentive. It's a joy to share the silence in between [*the songs*] with a big crowd of people; a very special connection.

What's next after so personal a debut? Are there specific topics you're keen to explore, or is life, and the living of it, inspiration enough for you?

I have no other topics than life, love and the living of it all. I think that's a lifetime of inspiration and I'll never get to the bottom of it.

Finally, you're on *Desert Island Discs*; one song, one instrument – what are they?

Jesus! One song? I think it would have to be *My Lady Of The Island* by Steven Stills. The instrument? My Fylde guitar made from 70 year old recycled whiskey casks. ■

The Nationwide Mercury Music Prize is announced on September 5th.

A close-up photograph of a woman with wavy, reddish-brown hair and light blue eye makeup. She is looking down and to the right, embracing a brown, textured teddy bear. The scene is dimly lit, with a dark background. The text "not giving" is overlaid in a white, stylized font across the bear.

not giving

Critics must love it whenever Thea Gilmore unleashes a new album upon the world; it's one of those special occasions when they get to rummage deep down into their secret black book of superlatives for that just-so phrase that will get them up there on the billboards. Indeed, with so many accolades, it's a miracle that Thea can even walk through a door these days without her head getting wedged in the frame.

When ALAN PEDDER was told to meet her at The Hospital one lunchtime, he nearly brought her flowers, a bunch of grapes and a hacksaw. Fortunately, it turned out to be a private members' club in London's trendy Covent Garden instead, and as it happened, Thea was firmly in the pink of health (and the blue of expletive).

As we ensconced ourselves in the rather opulent surroundings – a glittery poster of Che Guevara notwithstanding – we broke the ice over a mutual feeling of utter displacement. As in many of her photos, Thea's cool, intelligent gaze comes at you in person through a swept over fringe; sometimes guarded and steely, her slight aloofness understandably comes

It's been an unusually long time since we last heard from you, well, relatively anyway. Almost three years! But it was certainly worth the wait. Congratulations on the excellent new album, how are you feeling about it?

I love it! It's certainly the record I wanted to make. With every record I've made, it's become closer to the finished product that I actually wanted, which I guess is a symptom of moving on and progressing and growing up a little bit.

Yeah, about that. How do you feel when you listen back to your early records like Burning Dorothy?

Mildly scared! There's so much teen angst there. And *Burning Dorothy* is one thing, but *The Lipstick Conspiracies* is another! I actually want to hit my 18-year-old self because I sung in an American accent and I can't understand why I did it. But that's one of those things that will haunt me for the rest of my days. I do really like the songs on it and I like the production of it. I like the sound of the record apart from my voice – little "Minnie Mouse American accent girl". It's not good.

because I haven't released an album for a while, but that's more because I've been touring the States so much and changing labels and stuff like that. Just writing non-stop, but morale wise I found that the music industry got on top of me. Usually, I can laugh off the shit that goes on but for the last three years I've been slowly succumbing to the kind of drudgery and depression and how hideous the whole thing is. There's a big part of me that doesn't want to be a part of it, but the other part of me knows that if you wanna make music, you gotta be in it – so take the pills!

There's been more upheaval, too, with a new record deal with major indie label Sanctuary, which should have much better distribution and marketing. Although, given the label's well documented financial troubles of late, are you anxious at all?

It's nothing to do with me! It doesn't worry me at all. The reason it doesn't worry me at all – I mean it would be a pain in the arse if your record company went bankrupt before your album came out – is because I've spent nigh on ten years doing it on

up the ghost

from hard-won experience after seven albums and similar sessions with truckloads of interviewers, some of whom must have tried their luck at tripping her up, no doubt failing in the process.

Luckily, *Wears The Trousers* was the very first stop on the promo locomotive and Thea's fierce intellect was in mighty fine fettle. Harpo's *Ghost*, the latest addition to her spotless and – for someone who's only 26 years old – impressively vast discography, is perhaps her most formidable statement yet. And that's saying something for a woman who, just a few weeks later, surveys an antechamber full of promoters and pluggers and announces her arrival on stage with a flatly emphatic, "yes, the bitch is back". Thea Gilmore, you see, has a reputation to uphold. Let's get to it.

You've had a tough time of it lately from the sounds of things; family illness, a bout with depression and all sorts of head mess...

It's a bit boring to talk about really. I don't want to get into "my depression hell" because everyone goes through that shit. I just realised that there were a lot of issues from my past turning up nasty dark stuff that I hadn't really dealt with. I'm not one who talks about things very easily, but I'm kinda getting there. Medication is a fine, fine thing. Bring it on! It certainly rescued me – that and my doctor. And music, obviously.

How have these things affected your motivation and morale?

It didn't affect my motivation in any way. It affected me because I wrote more than ever before, which I know is strange

my own so I don't need a record company. It's useful sometimes and certainly useful to get a record into the shops, and there are certain things that you do need a record company for. But I hope that they don't for their sake because they're a good company and they're the world's biggest independent record label and who could not like that? I'm sure there are people working for them who aren't doing them any favours, but that's business. You gotta get used to it. I'm kinda getting used to things going wrong when I touch them, like the gigs that I play...very soon after, the venue goes bankrupt. These things never comes as a shock, I guess I just bring them bad luck. There have been at least three gigs that I can think of. One of them went into receivership two days after I played there – and it wasn't my fault, the

gig was sold out! – but I think they were in so much shit there was nothing I could do. One of them burnt down – that definitely wasn't my fault, something to do with the chef – and I think another one went close to bankruptcy. I seem to have this effect on commercial institutions. The moral of that story is don't book me and don't sign me!

Speaking of signings, you must have gotten sick of being hounded by the major record labels...

Yeah, but I think they've given up on me now, which is great! I find the industry as a whole entirely depressing. It's becoming more and more like McDonalds. You know how McDonalds have started selling salads in a bid to try and make you feel that you're getting healthy food? Well, I feel that the music industry is doing that – it's very cynically trying to sell you what you would consider musical 'roughage' to keep you regular, but it's shit! It's full of fat, it's full of sugar – it's just dire and I'm really fucking sick of being polite about it now. I hate the music industry. I cannot stand the way music is sold to young people and it needs to fucking change; it must, otherwise it's just going to eat its own tail.

Well, you're certainly no stranger to taking a pop at the music industry and a number of your songs have either directly or indirectly done so. It's incredible how quickly the way in which we consume music has changed in the last ten years. Do you think now's a better time to be an independently minded artist than when you first started out?

Yes, I think it is, but I would question whether there are that many truly independently minded artists because there is so much...to use the term 'dumbing down' would be a cliché, but I guess that's what I mean. There is so much control and so much pressure exerted over people who make music to make a type of music that is easily consumable and easy on the ears. The term 'easy listening' comes with all sorts of images attached, but there is a whole lot of easy listening music out there and it totally dominates the charts. To be truly independently minded? I'm not sure it's entirely possible – sometimes you need that corporate machine to kick in and you have to use it to a certain extent. But now I'm on the biggest label I've ever been in my entire life, so who am I to talk? But you've got to remain in control of what you do and being truthful, I think, is the main thing. To allow the elements of the corporation that you can actually use and that you need to use in order to get the music out to people, to open out and broaden your scope. No musician

wants to stand on stage and play to ten people. Everyone wants to reach as broad an audience as they possibly can and I'm no different, but I think independence is a very tricky word and possibly needs redefining in the dictionary.

As someone who has taken the slowly-does-it approach to building a career, what do you make of Sandi Thom?

Sandi Thom? Well I wish she was a punk rocker with flowers in her hair! But she's just a product. There's no doubt the girl has talent but she's an absolute prime example of a McDonalds salad. *[laughs]*

Do you think that women are more liable than their male counterparts to suffer from the "flavour of the month" tag, achieve moderate-to-massive success and then be ignored thereafter?

Without a doubt, you know. Like it or not, it's an entirely masculinised industry. It's almost the last bastion of extreme sexism that exists in this country and I think women are readily marginalised, always. If you haven't got a pretty face or a gimmick to hang it on, then it's very rare that you're successful. I suppose KT Tunstall would be one exception, possibly, but it's not heavyweight music. Again, she's obviously talented and I have respect for her music – I think she's an incredible musician – but it's not weighty enough for me. I'd like to see more weighty issue-based female songwriters breaking through. She doesn't offend me, but I find music that doesn't offend me or make me wet my pants is often more offensive than anything. If I hate it with a passion, then great, then it's worth something. In America, if you're trying to get on the radio they talk about having a 'perfect 3' record. They mark records out of five – if it's a 1, then it's too bad to get on the radio, and if it's a 5 then it's too good to get on the radio. There are always gonna be people who either love or hate something, but if you get the perfect 3, if you aim it right in the middle – total middle of the road – then you're not gonna offend anybody. Therefore, people aren't gonna turn off your radio station. That's the music industry that we live with. I don't want 3s. I want 5s and 1s!

Do you listen to the radio much?

Occasionally. BBC 6Music is one of my favourites and I also really like Radio 4. I like the fact that you can listen to a piece about trees! That's fantastic, I'm into that! Unfortunately, music radio is a product of the industry in which it serves, isn't it? You need pop and you need weight and that's the way it's always been, and you can bleat

on about manufactured artists and stuff like that, and I really actually like a lot of pop music, but what I do have a problem with is pop that's posing as leftfield, artistic music. That's a lie. Music, for me, is about honesty. There's no shame in telling the truth about some boy you met down a club and wanted to shag in a pop song; there's no shame in that! That's what pop music is there for. But there is shame in lying about your intentions and that, to me, is unfortunately what seems to have gotten its claws into my fucking industry! This is my world and I wanna take it back.

What about music TV? With the demise of Top Of The Pops, you've gone down in history for having the lowest-budget video ever shown on the programme [the promo for Mainstream cost just £38!]. That's quite an accomplishment and one in the eye for the corporate monster, eh? So much money is wasted on videos that have the artistic value of a juggling newt – all novelty, no substance and, in a lot of cases, a lack of dignity. Does that make your blood boil too?

Yeah, I guess so. There's some shit who will spend £300,000 on a music video to justify his take-home salary. It's just dull, and I find music videos insanely tedious anyway. Who wants to watch a woman's arse gyrating for three and a half minutes, 'cos I don't. Certainly not mine, that's for sure! I would question anybody who would want to watch that, its not good. Spend as little as possible and have as much fun as possible I say. I guess that's kinda the strapline for my career! And being truthful.

Are you sad to see Top Of The Pops go to its televisual grave? I read that it's one of the only TV shows you watched as a kid just so you could relate to your school friends who hadn't memorised every note of Subterranean Homesick Blues by the age of twelve?

Yeah, it was my only touchstone to popular culture at the time because I was so immersed in the Sixties as a kid. I think it has long since outlived its lifespan though, more because the singles chart is so dull now. Fucking hell, I grew up with Bros and shit like that, but at least there was a bit of variety and a little bit of spice and never quite knowing what was going to happen – the classic being when Kurt Cobain and Nirvana appeared on the show – but it's all been ironed out now. I think the only true representation of music on TV is probably be Later...with Jools Holland. Although there's a new one with *[former Kenickie frontwoman]* Lauren Laverne, who I love – she's just a goddess.



“Sandi Thom?
She’s an absolute
prime example of a
McDonald’s salad.”

She has a brain second to no one, she's just incredible. I'd love to meet her one day, I just get the impression we'd have a great laugh. The Chart Show was alright, at least it dealt with album charts and indie charts, but TOTP, I'm not going to mourn its passing. I don't think that downloads have really affected the singles chart yet, but I think they will in a positive way, just because it's so much easier for more independent spirits to break through, and you don't need so much of the marketing spend to get your single in HMV or Virgin as you do to have your single as a download. The singles game is just a total fucking racket – they give them away, they actually give them away! If you've got the money to give away 200,000 copies of your single to Virgin and HMV then of course you're gonna get in the top ten, 'cos they're gonna rack you as high profile as possible. You don't even have to have a brain – a child of two could operate a business that works like that.

How ridiculous was the whole Mattel debacle over your lampooning of Barbie on the Mainstream single artwork? Sufjan Stevens had a similar incident with DC Comics over the use of Superman's likeness on his Illinois album. It's madness!

Yeah, it was crazy. And I tell you what, that cover was fantastic as well and I was really hacked off that they made me take it out. But, y'know, getting into a lawsuit with Mattel was not a good idea, so I thought, shit, better run on this one... make a stand somewhere else. It was such a great cover though. One day, I'm gonna sneak it up on the internet and put it up somewhere. I'll have to find a copy. I wonder if I can sneak it onto MySpace or something?

Do it! Anyway, getting back on topic, some of the songs on Harpo's Ghost seem a little more vulnerable than on recent albums – a bit less steely and a bit more bruised. Did you ever think you were in danger of writing too many oh-I've-seen-it-all songs?

Yes, it's very easily done. For a long time, I've kinda been able to keep myself locked in this little bubble and there has always been a kind of 'outside looking in tee hee hee' from me. And while people possibly like the music that I make, it's not very easy to get close to. With all the stuff that's been happening in my head and in my life over the last few years, I just haven't been able to do it because certain walls have broken down. It takes a long time to rebuild them – if you want to rebuild them at all that is – and some



.....
of the problems that I first faced anyway were down to the fact that I keep people at such a distance. I didn't intend it to be this way, but I guess it seems only natural that it comes out in the music. The only thing I did make a conscious effort to do was use a few less words, because a classic songwriter trick is to hide behind the words that you write. I find that I can confuse people as much as I can educate people with the words that I write, and I enjoy doing it, but there was a point where I just thought, "hang on a minute, actually say what you mean for a change and don't piss about!"

Did you ever worry you might be turning into Alanis?

[laughs] That's never crossed my mind but I'll think about it now!!

Of course, as with all your albums, Harpo's Ghost still has a healthy dose of swagger, and musically you're somehow managing to sound even more sure-footed with every album. I think it's safe to assume that you wouldn't have signed the deal if you weren't guaranteed complete artistic control, but will the deal affect your prolificacy? Would you be able to go back to releasing records every year if you so chose to?

The truthful answer to that is 'I don't know,' but the equally truthful answer to that would be that I'll give them hell if they don't let me, and I would imagine that they would expect that of me – they're not stupid people and they know who they signed. Um, I don't know whether they'll want me after this album, we'll see. They may think, "she's far more trouble than she's worth, we'll let her go".

That's allegedly what happened to Nellie McKay. She fell out in a big way with Sony when they supposedly refused to release her second album with 23 songs instead of the 16 they had chosen.

That's unbelievable! I tell you what, I was at the South by Southwest festival in 2004 and I walked into this amazing record store in Austin, just browsing, when I heard this voice. For some reason, I automatically assumed that there was some 45 year old woman getting kinda raunchy at the piano and I thought "this is really good"...I really enjoyed it so I went and asked who it was and I bought the record before I realised how fucking young she was. I was like "Jesus, this woman is incredible!"

Much has been made (and rightly so!) of your interpretive skills and genius way with a cover. But I've often wondered why you haven't covered more songs by women... why do you think that is?

It's a good question actually. I don't think it's conscious, necessarily. My remit for choosing covers is that you have to bring something of your own to it. When I did the covers album [2003's *Loft Music*], I was really close to a Kirsty MacColl song, but I didn't feel that I could bring anything new to it. She'd done the definitive versions of all of her songs, so what can I do? I think that, sometimes if you're covering something by someone of your gender, there is almost less interpretation because when people listen to it they're expecting a female voice. With a different gender, there's almost more of a "that's a new take on it" feel. Of course, sometimes it's not entirely liked, like with the Buzzcocks track. A lot of Buzzcocks fans absolutely hate that track, it's really funny; they don't like a wispy girly voice singing it. I think it's a sincere form of flattery for someone to cover your song. I would be very chuffed if someone like McFly decided they wanted to cover *Mainstream*, it would be great! It would make me giggle!

Given your political interests and propensity for springing surprise projects on your fans, what do you make of Neil Young's Living With War?

I actually haven't heard it yet. I think it's a good thing that he's done it, but I was extremely disappointed in his take on the fact that he was waiting for someone younger to take up that particular ball and run with it. I think it's a shame he didn't look further than his own doorstep because there are people out there. They may be doing it quietly, because it's very difficult to do it loudly – especially if you are a new artist, it's very difficult to be overtly

political and be on a huge stage with it – whereas he has the benefit of being Neil fucking Young, y’know. Everyone’s gonna listen to him! I mean look at Coldplay; they’re not my favourite band but they’ve tried to be political and got smacked down for it, and they’re almost as big as it can get these days. To say that there are no young bands trying to be political is a bit narrow-minded. Go out and find them, don’t just expect them to land on your doorstep. It doesn’t work like it used to. I think it was a real shame that he said that – I always know when I get angry because my head starts to itch – and I remember reading that and thinking right...okaaay. And it’s not often that I get angry with Neil Young because he’s a big hero. I’ve always had huge respect for him so I will listen to the album...I just have to get over my fury first!

As you’ve said before, you feel that artists have a duty to be political, and your fans have come to expect to hear your opinions on a wide range of topics, concerning both home and away. They won’t be disappointed with Harpo’s Ghost...there’s references to Hurricane Katrina and the ever-advancing doom of capitalism, among others. What in the world is making you most nervous right now?

I think what’s making me most nervous is pretty much the same as its always been. The world changes, shit happens, people go to war...horrible, horrible things happen all the time. Governments are crooked, presidents need to be impeached (as Neil Young once said) and all of that happens, and it goes on all the time, but what needs to change is people’s apathy about it. That’s the scary thing, that we’ve developed into a world that is so sodden with media and TV, so totally overtaken with sitting on our fat arses and just watching these things unfold in front of us, that nobody really wants to do anything about it any more. The truth of the matter is that people have more power now than ever before and we have a duty to use it. We all could change things, in small ways...and I’m not saying it would change overnight, but nobody sees the need, or if they do see the need, they don’t see the worth, because we are so blinkered. We’re living in dangerous, dangerous times and we need to do something about it.

Thankfully, there’s salvation in music, as Harpo’s Ghost’s hidden track asserts. Are you throwing your audience a bone with that after what is quite a dark album, something to lighten the mood?

I think as a songwriter you always have the propensity to shift towards the dark aspect of your psyche, because a lot of the time

that’s where the therapy comes from when you write. But I always try to show a way out, because there is always hope. It’s important not to wallow – there’s nothing more boring than listening to someone fucking wallow all the time. It’s like “get over it, you have an amazing life”. I have an amazing life, I’m lucky. I’m a lucky person to be able to do what I love, and goddamn it, I feel like shit sometimes but I’m not going to wallow in it. The last thing I want to do is make someone too depressed to put the record on again. I want people to feel hope as well as despair. That’s what life is all about.

I also wanted to talk about your friendship with author Neil Gaiman – he’s really into your music, isn’t he? And I hear you have a track on a new Gaiman tribute album... can you tell me more about that?

I just got asked by the company putting it together...Dancing Ferret, great name! You just want to be involved with a company with that name. But yes, I have a huge amount of respect for Neil and his work and he’s been a constant source of inspiration, help, interest and just friendship for me. This is just my way of tipping my hat to him. It was just so difficult writing a song about one of the characters from his books. I based my song on Shadow from ‘American Gods’, which again was kinda hard because the guy lives up to his name and he’s not easy to pin down, so the song lives up to that. It’s probably one of the least linear lyrical songs I’ve ever written!

Interesting! I heard you’ve also become firm friends with Martha Wainwright recently – how did that come about?

Yes, Martha, bless her! She’s incredible. Watching Martha and her mum Kate [McGarrigle] and her aunt [Anna McGarrigle] work together, they’re just so funny, they’re like a fucking comedy show, y’know, but the music they make is just exquisite...it’s just like breathing to them and Martha’s grown up with it. It’s real folk music – if I dare use the ‘f’ word – but it is in its essence. It’s not about beards and pullovers, it’s music that is totally about the musician and the people. I’d love to see whether she can sing on one of my records. I have asked her and she said yes, but she’s one of those people who’s quite hard to pin down. She’s a free spirit. We’ll see what happens – I hope she’s still up for it.

Stop me if I’m namedropping too much, but a real added bonus of the new album for me is that you’ve got Kathryn Williams on a few tracks. What inspired you to work together? She’s brilliant, isn’t she?

Superb! We haven’t been friends for that long to be fair. I met Kath for the

first time when we were asked to do this strange gig called the ‘Daughters of Albion’, which is an interesting concept. So I met Kathryn and Eliza Carthy and we were like three witches cackling together, like the youngest of the troupe, and it was great fun. Kath has got a wicked sense of humour – she is just such a cool person. I really wanted to get another female voice on the record, because you can become so male-centred – most session musicians and everyone from the engineers to the producers you work with are male – and Kath seemed perfect. She offered at exactly the right time and what she brought to the record is just incredible. The songs she’s on came alive when she sung on them. They were okay tracks just sounding like me, then she came along and put these amazing vocals on them... and the way her brain works in terms of harmony is really female. She’s got an incredibly female take on melody and it’s not obvious, whereas I will always come up with the obvious. I will always stick to rigid harmony and stuff like that. Kathryn will always dance around the melody and she’ll find these intricate details that just make a song. It was great watching her in the studio, and she was four months pregnant at the time!

Yeah? I saw her play at this year’s ‘Daughters Of Albion’ show at The Barbican and she was eight and a half months gone by that point!

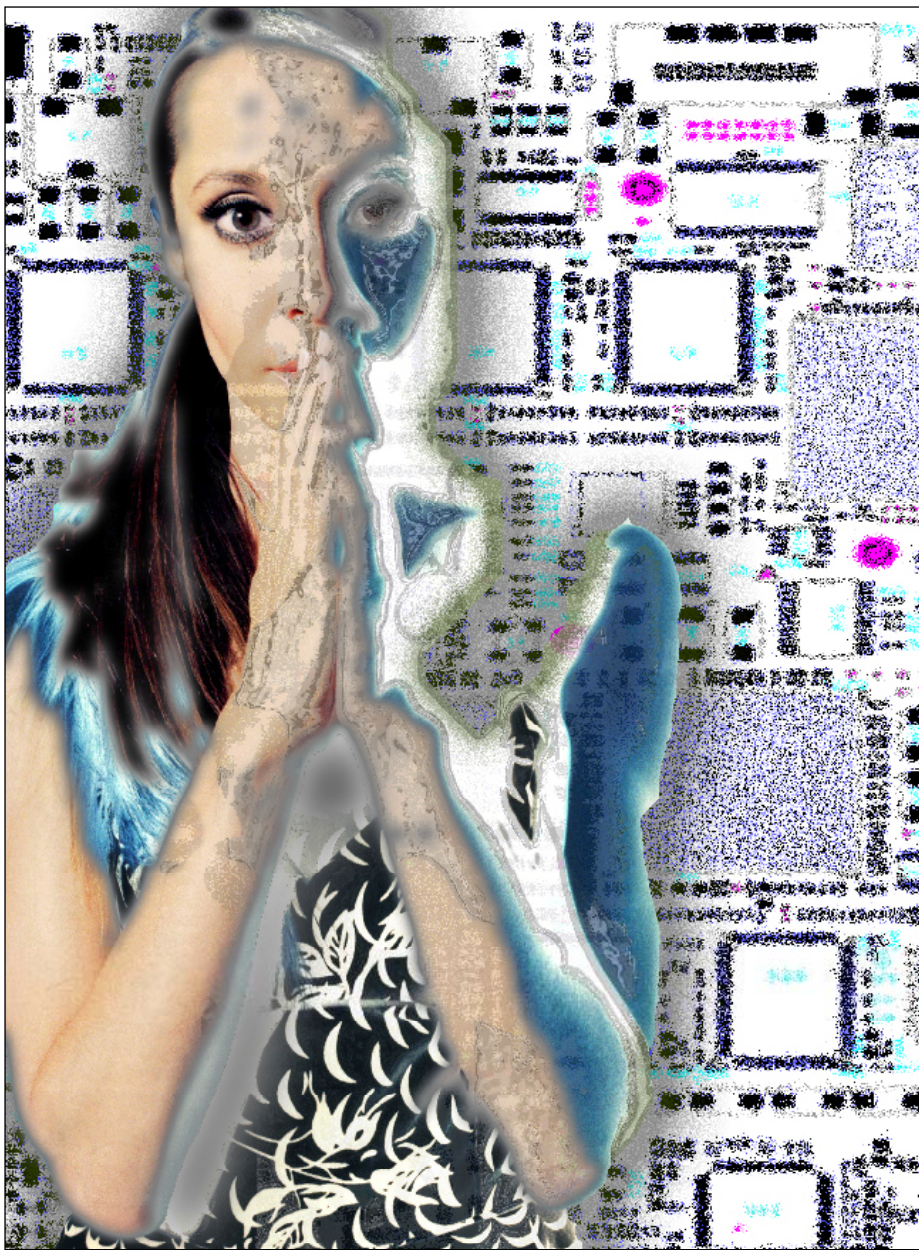
Yeah, I kept getting texts from her going, “ooh I’m really ripe now!” [laughs]

Unbelievably, an interviewer once said to Kathryn that she was the “new Katie Melua”, despite having been around and independently releasing records way before she was ever a twinkle in Mike Batt’s eye. Imagine if Harpo’s Ghost were to be a huge commercial hit and an ill-informed journal were to remark that you were the “new Sandi Thom” – how would you react?

I would probably do exactly the same. I would be fucking furious! It’s just lazy, lazy journalism. Her response was extremely good and that was one of the first things that made me really like Kathryn...when she mentioned wombles. And didn’t she say she wanted to put her in a dustbin and set fire to her records? I brought that up once and Kath said, “ooh don’t mention that!”...I think she bumped into Katie Melua once and had to run. I think she may look like a little dolly but she’s quite tough. I can take ‘er!

And Sandi?

Both! At the same time! ■



It's been a long, hard slog for rising star Nerina Pallot. Dropped by Polydor at the turn of the millennium after a dream contract that turned out to be a total nightmare, she pulled in favours from friends and industry contacts to independently record her second album, *Fires*. Since we last spoke to Nerina in December 2005, her new contract with Warner Bros. subsidiary 14th Floor Records and a slightly tweaked re-release of *Fires* have seen her fortunes take on the kind of trajectory usually reserved for lesser talents, the kind of people who barely have to don a skimpy outfit and mime to a backing track to score a big hit.

Nerina's victorious and vindicating reissue of the *Everybody's Gone To War* single saw her catapulted into the top ten for the first time in conjunction with huge amounts of radio play, TV advertising and entertaining interviews. It's not hard to see how this self-effacing funny girl has managed to build herself an ever-

expanding army of admirers over the years, and one of her biggest allies in this was her use of the internet to keep up the interest, even through the wilderness years. TREVOR RAGGATT got chatting to Nerina one night about this very topic just prior to the relaunch of *Fires* and she kindly obliged our good-natured nosiness by sending us the following discourse on the wonders of modern technology from a tin with wings flying somewhere over the Atlantic, by the wonders of modern technology of course!

How important is the internet for up-and-coming and established artists? Hmmm, I was going to say it's possibly the third most important tool for any artist, after TV and radio, but judging from the web-propelled success of the Arctic Monkeys, I would say it is just as important – and may well become a superior form of media in the not too distant future.

Having my own website is great as a primary source of information, but it

was minimally funded when I wasn't on a major label. I couldn't afford a lot of the more expensive features like a message board or a more interactive site. Enter MySpace, which is an absolute godsend for independent artists, or anybody who desires a presence on the net for a non-existent outlay. I have never had the budget for any kind of online advertising, but I have been fortunate to be favourably reviewed on webzines and things like AOL etc.

Just how much all this effort really reaps in terms of concrete benefits beyond a general vibe, i.e. more record sales, better gig attendances, I can't really know. Other than the feedback I get from people on the main site and MySpace... I would say it has to help both. Legal download sites like iTunes have really stimulated record sales because it's so immediate. As I'm typing this we're at the billionth download this week on iTunes, already! How amazing is it that people can hear my song on Radio 2 and I could see within an hour the album jump up on iTunes and Amazon?! I think *Fires* has also has some good word of mouth about it and people post about it on other sites etc., so these things all fuel each other. It's also so much easier for people to find out where and when I am playing a show, and for me to inform them about latest news.

Of course, it's going to become more difficult to separate spam from real recommendations, I think, although everyone is becoming a lot more savvy about marketing people who post once or twice on music fan message boards and then start hyping stuff. I think blogs might be where real word of mouth will happen, because it's hard to fake a blog, or a real person. Their likes and dislikes will be far more compelling than someone posting rubbish on an artist's message board. So too profiles on MySpace etc.; while the net is smothered in banner ads, it is still a place where individuals can be heard.

I think the trick is to know your market, as with any kind of promotion. Oh, and DO NOT BE AFRAID OF FREE DOWNLOADS. They only stimulate awareness of a band or artist. Look at the US band OK Go – their video for *A Million Ways* is the most downloaded free video ever – three million downloads!! That means three million people now know who the band are and a percentage of those will probably buy their records. It can't hurt. The internet is the new radio, and once upon a time people taped songs off the radio but still went and bought the physical formats.

With the new deal and everything, I have self-enforced a moratorium on MySpace promotion for the time being. I think the level of organic growth on my page is happening at a really healthy rate right now and I am content for things to tick along nicely. I also think that one person 'discovering' me on the site and then telling all their mates about it is far more productive than my bothering people now that I am no longer a strictly independent artist. I may think up a new way of nicely informing 'non-friends' about upcoming releases, but unless I am satisfied that it is a method that I would find interesting and charming enough to investigate myself, I won't do it.

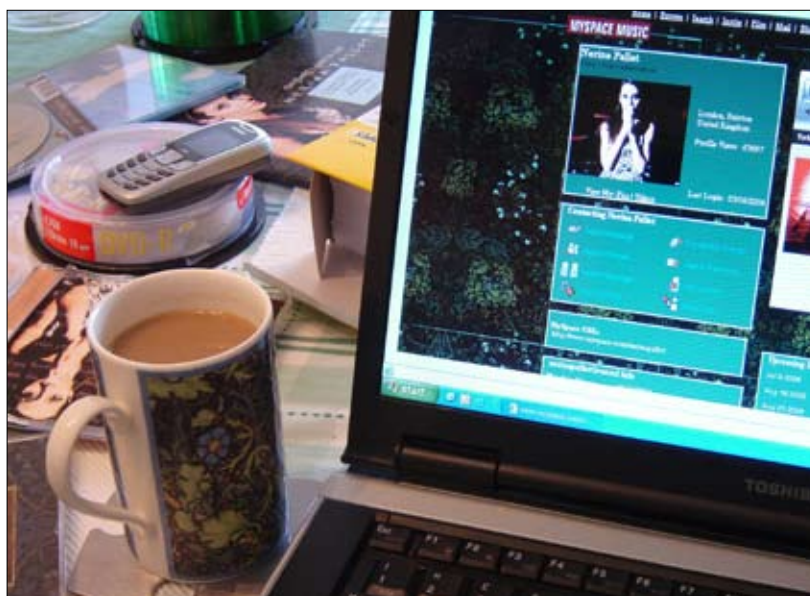
Right now, I would say MySpace is MORE important than my own website in some ways. Because of the immediacy of contact, the way of condensing info into one page, and the sheer volume of passing traffic/captive audience. I could of course have had a blog on one site, photos on another etc., but no site has ever consolidated all those things and offered what MySpace does, and to such a vast and varied demographic. In the few months before *Fires* originally came out as an independent release, I used it as a means of directly informing people who I thought might like my music from their profile information that I had a record due for release. Because I had more time a year ago, I wrote to each person individually and was really honest about feeling uncomfortable about essentially trying to flog them something, but also expressing that, being on a near zero budget for marketing and advertising, it was my only option. You would be amazed by the positive uptake.

Of course, it's really time consuming, and it has to come from me and me only, but I love that level of interaction. I am so emotional about the music I love and the artists who make it, that I will always be someone who needs to make a personal connection with fans, because I dunno, I have to know a real person makes the things I like and I figure other people must feel the same.

However, it doesn't mean anything to have 30,000 friends really, and everybody is on it in 2006 so if you're looking for a record deal, there isn't any point in sending

out 20,000 friend requests and hoping for a deal. Tila Tequila is testament to that [*an unsigned American urban/rap artist who is currently among the most 'popular' independent act on MySpace in terms of page views and 'friends'*]. Plus, it's on the wane. Maybe it's already over – a lot of the people who have been using it for a long time are leaving because of the new Murdoch ownership. Everybody now knows that the MySpace 'band of the week' is not on the front page because they're good, but because they have a big label that can afford the \$50,000 for that ad.

It's a remarkable invention, but don't be fooled – we all have a great time using it to post music, silly pictures of our cats, blogs about how much of an idiot George Dubya is – while what we are in fact creating is one of the world's most sophisticated and extensive databases



which our little friend Mr Murdoch will exploit religiously. Once upon a time, when you clicked on the 'Is MySpace free?' question on the FAQs page, it said 'ABSOLUTELY'. Now it informs you that for the time being it is, but there may be the introduction of some paying premium services in the near future. I absolutely love the place, Tom [*Anderson, MySpace creator*] is actually a very friendly and nice chap, good to luck to him, but unless it stays completely free, people will leave and go to a new site which will be much the same, even better, and totally free.

Also, when will folks learn that wallpapers that obscure everything of interest are just a complete waste of time? HTML is not everything, people!

Of course, MySpace is a fairly recent development. All through the unsigned years the level of support I got on my Yahoo!

Groups page was a real encouragement. But that page wasn't my creation – it was a number of my very early fans that set it up – although for the time being it serves as my main message board. While it's horrible to use and other fans have set up far, far superior boards, for some reason, everyone stays put! In terms of making a comparison with MySpace, they both serve very different purposes for me, so I guess I can't really compare them.

It would be no exaggeration to say that, were it not for the lovely messages on the Yahoo! Group hoping I would make another record when I myself thought that would never happen, *Fires* would be a bunch of demos on my hard drive. Until recently, I could honestly say I had met nearly everyone in the Group, which I guess was because we were tiny! But, more interestingly, a lot of people in the

Group have gotten to know each other too and become friends over the years. I've seen members' kids grow up over the last few years (OK, in photos!), we had the sudden loss at a very young age of an early group member, the loss of loved ones has been shared on the board too... graduations, members suddenly being allowed to practise medicine on unsuspecting members of the public who might not even be huge Mariah Carey fans [*paging WTT writer Michael Banna!*]. All this points to a

community. Is that unusual?

I think it's because I've been a marginal artist, and that creates a real bond between people – liking something practically nobody else knows about. I'm like that about Lewis Taylor – I could never dislike anyone who likes his music, because if they recognise that it's special, then they must be top people. It takes courage to like anything just because you like it, in a world where we're being told what we ought to like because a majority does, and when being 'different' is now much like being the same as everyone else.

Yes, Goth people, I love you all very much, but why are you bothering??!

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And with that, an airliner melts into the pink horizon and disappears from view. Nerina's new single Sophia is released in the UK on October 2nd.

LAMB
IN WOLF'S
CLOTHING?



It's been a decade since Shetland-born singer-songwriter Astrid Williamson struck out from the confines of cult (as in largely ignored) indie duo Goya Dress to embark on a solo career. Her first bite of the cherry was a bitter one, however, and her album sank without a trace despite an enviable clutch of quirky, offbeat songs that others would have sold their grans for.

As a result, she lost her deal and a second solo album later materialised on her own label, Incarnation Records, though it barely even registered on the radar and sold modestly. Well, they say that the third time's a charm, and while no one is realistically expecting her to become the next million-selling Dido-like, Astrid's latest album *Day Of The Lone Wolf* is receiving some of the best reviews of her career and things are looking very much skywards. In fact, so busy has her schedule been that tracking her down for an interview turned out to be a miniature nightmare.

After supporting Bic Runga on her recent UK tour and on a rare break between a bewildering number of festival appearances all over Europe, TREVOR RAGGATT eventually caught up with Ms Williamson and posed only the most pressing questions about life, the universe and, um, pitch 'n' putt.

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It never fails to make an impression in this line of work when you meet someone who is pleasantly at odds with their projected persona, and Astrid Williamson is no exception. Not because she's famed for any diva-like behaviour – quite the opposite in fact – but because her songs can often feel rather dark and introspective. So to find that she is anything but hyper-intense, that she's easy to talk to and open from the get go, is a relief and a pleasure. For all the brooding intensity that inhabits her music, she is candid and passionate about living life to the full and coasting any waves of opportunity that might come along.

It's a restless muse that does it, and she's already thinking ahead. "I've started to get that sort of quiver of anticipation when you start thinking you almost have enough songs for a new record," she says slightly starry-eyed. "It's like a relationship you haven't had yet, a little bit like falling in love. And even though I shouldn't be doing that now 'cos I'm bang in the middle of promoting *Day Of The Lone Wolf*, it's like a pendulum and I'll just think, 'OK, let's do something completely different' and just hole up at

home with my piano...particularly when it's a balmy night, I'll open the window and play."

She laughs, acknowledging a minor idiosyncrasy, and leans in slightly to make a further admission: "I'm the eternal buffet person, I just want to pick at something."

Having just watched her and her band cooking up a storm on a stage so tiny that the bassist was practically among the audience of diners in the little subterranean café, it's clear that the musicians are used to operating in a cosy manner, up close and personal with Astrid and everyone else. I ask whether having bandmates who are also really good friends is an important touchstone for her. "Oh god yes! Sometimes I feel sorry for profoundly, extremely successful people because they must be cast into an arena with people they don't know and have no control over whether they like them or not...they'll get a stylist that they may not like!" she chuckles. "Mind you, I'm sure that Jennifer Lopez isn't stuck with people she doesn't like, but nevertheless!"

"I was brought up in Shetland and was, for most of the time, at the end of the road in a tiny little valley with nobody else. And even though I had family I was very isolated so I'm not easy with people quickly, I tend to find my society in where I work. I think it would be very hard for me to have a session band because it's the intimacy, the sharing, the respect...I don't really just want to be the boss, *per se*."

The reference to her early years gets me wondering about the other ways in which growing up as part of an island community might have had a formative effect. "The other day, some friends were going out and rang me to ask if I wanted to come. They were going to play pitch 'n' putt and I suddenly wondered...where was my pitch 'n' putt in Shetland?!"

A broad smile lightens her features as she suddenly realises the apparent inanity of this supposedly profound statement. She laughs again. "My point being...in some ways Shetland can be a bit raw and I was really a country girl. It's odd what becomes normal in life...I mean, until I was twelve, I went to a school with twenty-six people, and I think that something like that really colours how you look at things. You know, when I was at secondary school there was always lots to do, clubs and stuff but not when you're out in the county.

There was a period when my father had remarried and was living in England, my mum was working and my

sister was in high school when I'd get home extremely early and I'd get the house all perfect just for me. I'd sit in this perfect place I'd created and think 'I don't want anyone to come in now and ruin my perfect world.' I'm quite a quiet, private person. I never felt lonely because it was just like this unspoiled peace. So I wondered about the pitch 'n' putt thing...that was so much fun and I never really learned to have that sort of fun."

Crazy golf isn't exactly rock 'n' roll in itself, so with even that simple pleasure denied to the young Ms Williamson, she must have had plenty of time to play the piano and make up some childhood ditties. "Well, when I was little – nine or ten years old – I was composing, making tunes up. Now I recognise that it was a very feeling process; it would move me. I don't think it matters about the situation, I think that the music would have happened whatever. That whole nature/nurture thing...your nature's so important. Playing the piano and stuff. I was just good at it as well! You know, music was easy. And I think that's a good thing if you're good at something and you go after it."

This early start was helped along by a unique exposure to the music in her island community. "When my mum eventually remarried, my stepfather – sadly he's passed away now – was the founder of the Shetland folk festival so he introduced me to folk music. He loved Dick Gaughan, Pentangle, Steeleye Span, Fairport Convention...he was really great...from Liverpool and pure 1960s, all Dylan and The Beatles. He was also a Communist so he had this incredibly left-wing take on folk music – English folk music, very pure. So it was him who gave me a sense of the integrity of music. Not self-righteousness, but that music is amazing and should be upheld and maintained in society; it should be given a platform.

"So I'd go down to the Festival Club and hang out with Dave Swarbrick! Which was a huge privilege really. I remember he came up to me when I was about eleven and said 'you've got a beautiful voice'. I was really shy then, really shy of men, and I was all, like, 'leave me alone'...I just went all shy and couldn't take the compliment. I was too little to understand that he was trying to give me encouragement.

"Of course, that was a nice introduction to the stage and to stagecraft too, learning about an audience, learning about microphones...I went on to

study classical music and loved that. You know, every genre has got such purity, with people who've committed themselves to it completely. My teacher at the time was an Australian woman who'd been trained in Russia and she'd make me memorise all the music before I came to the lesson, before she'd begin. So she'd have me memorise 40 minutes of music – which is a great many black dots...believe me, millions of notes! For a while I thought, 'my god, what are you thinking? What a bloody waste of time!'; but now I think it's just such a privilege to be exposed to such purity. To have that education, such an amazing environment to be in! But by the end of it, I'd gotten involved in bands in Glasgow and had started writing songs. And I knew then – in fact it was quite hard to finish the course that last year – that this was just perfect. I felt free. Suddenly it wasn't quite so hard, unlike being in classes for four hours a day!"

Leaping forward a couple of decades, we start chatting about her latest opus – something of which she's clearly (and deservedly) proud. "The most important thing for me was that I was in charge of how I wanted it to go. Making a record is like an amalgam of a million little decisions and I made so many of those myself. It was really liberating! So a lot of summing up the album was that it achieved the sonic landscape that I wanted. I did a lot of the arranging; I get pleasure in it, I don't want to hand it over," she grins.

"Maybe it was sort of fear, too. Because I was thinking 'what if it's the last one?', it sorta had to be right. And I decided I was going to put it out on my own label so I didn't have anybody to answer too!"

Reckoning that we've had enough time to build up a rapport, I decide it's safe to ask the obvious, stupid question... what's the story behind the title? Her eyes gleam again, and it's actually difficult to tell at first whether her words are self-mocking or aimed at me. "Oh, that's really profound! I have a coffee table book with everybody's birthday in it, 365 days. It says who was born on your birthday. William Blake was born on mine! There just isn't anybody cooler than that. And every day has a title; the day of the lone wolf is my birthday. It says...well, a bunch of stuff, but a lot of it's bang on! Anyway, I thought 'how amazing!' because I think I am quite a loner. I don't have a problem being alone but this kinda let me off the hook actually," she laughs. "So I'm allowed to be like this. You don't want to run with the pack? That's OK!"

"if you're not
out there waiting,
the javelin of joy will
land in Van Morrison's
garden. You've got to be
ready to grab it."



I mention that despite the subtext of loneliness and isolation in a society lacking community that runs through the album, a lot of reviews have drawn a sexual predator simile from the title. Astrid pulls a face that clearly says 'I know! What's that all about?' and after a few moments' reflection she commits to a comment: "I think that it's a very seeking record. But there's more to it than that, not just seeking of another...seeking some peace, some answers...not even an identity, but more the questions of why, all of it. Maybe it's not about loneliness, maybe it's about the questions you can never get away from. Life seems to be filled with seeking. You can't be fulfilled outside yourself, you must be fulfilled from within – and that kind of seeking never leaves, never stops."

I asked whether that was a reflection of her personal beliefs. "Spirituality, yeah! I think there's more to life than just flesh and blood. I genuinely believe that humans have a higher and a lower self, and you know when you're answering to either, because of your emotional response and what you feel in your heart. As a species, we have a huge capacity for living above and beyond things like 'what do I eat? where do I sleep? what do I drink? who should I sleep with?...' it's massively more than that. Of course it is intellectually, but spiritually too!

"I wouldn't want to put a name to it, but clearly that's where spirituality and religion come in...that need in humanity to feel bigger than yourself. I think that every single person has an enormous capacity for growth – for good or bad – and for making choices about what kind of human they want to be. I think that's a really big deal."

That rather suggests that human beings are more than just random collection of chemicals, right? "I think that we're extraordinary, we're amazing,

I'm very fascinated by creatures! When I was little in Shetland, there was nothing more intriguing than, say, going past a little wall and hearing the chicks inside... there were animals and life everywhere. Nature's astonishing but humans... humans! If you wanted to be completely Biblical about it, we're the creation of god. That's mind-blowing. I always think that when, say, there's a war...every time someone dies it's a great loss. One human being is capable of such creation that when they're destroyed it's like the death of so much. As a species we're capable



of such things; amazing, amazing feats of bravery and kindness and, of course, cruelty and hideousness too. As a species we're an extraordinary creation!"

It's a safe assumption that she agrees that music taps into this higher being in some mysterious way – it can move in a way nothing else does. 'Yes, I think that's probably why in scripture there are nine realms of singers, of angels who sing... nine different types of singer! I mean, can you imagine? There'd be Whitney,

Aretha and all those gospel singers along with the seraphim and cherubim – nine different kinds! For that to actually get in there means that music is important. It's given an important place. You look at any church and there are all these angels and they've got a trumpet or a guitar...and this is in places a thousand years old. They're all playing something! Music is extremely powerful. This is the point, it *must* be given a platform!"

Having plumbed the depths of the human experience over a beer it is time to wind the interview to a close so I return to rather more mundane matters; what the future holds for Astrid Williamson. A familiar theme returns. "Well, August's quite quiet so I'm going to do some writing – I love it! I really don't want to write the same songs, the same record. I always seem to have all these piano songs that never seem to find their voice so I was thinking of maybe doing something with them. Something really sumptuous! Och, it'll turn into another record but there's still so much to write. Whatever anyone says, I'll always write! This is what I do."

Noticing that the time's a-fleeting as usual, I squeak in one more question – does she find that the songs have to come with a lot of effort or do they just flow out of her head like a fountain? This provokes another smile and a self-aware giggle: "If I sit down and make the room for it, yeah! That can be pretty hard...it's like Graham Greene used to go and sit at the typewriter at 9am every day. I think I remember someone saying that if you're not out there waiting, the javelin of joy will land in Van Morrison's garden. You've got to be ready to grab it. Songs are like javelins going through the air; if you're not in your garden waiting to grab one, you'll miss it. That's nice that." ■

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Astrid's album is reviewed on page 65.

great things, small package

It's a dazzlingly bright Spring afternoon when TREVOR RAGGATT arrives at the BBC Club West One in the heart of central London for a chat with Bristol-born, Cardiff-based songstress Amy Wadge. The sight of the 'Wadgemobile' sensibly parked outside of the building finally dispels those irrational worries that he's got the wrong time, the wrong day or worse... that they've got the wrong reporter!

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Inside, the diminutive singer sits in a secluded corner of the bar with a couple of friends and husband, Alan, providing moral support. When I introduce myself, press pack clutched sweatily in hand and thank her for taking the time out to talk to me, she's genuine and warmly grateful that I've bothered to come. It's quickly apparent that this is going to be one of those easy interviews where there's no such thing as an awkward silence. As pre-showcase nerves set in, our conversation flits between fretting – "what if no-one shows up?" "There's twenty minutes to go, free sarnies and a bar... they'll show up!" – to the BBC's convenient proximity to shoe fetish appeasement on Oxford Street and the tax deductible nature of 'stage clothes'.

She needn't have worried. Five minutes from showtime and the room is buzzing with anticipation. Better still, the selection of songs from her new album *No Sudden Moves* easily convinces the roomful of jaded radio professionals, eliciting enthusiastic applause and no small number of whoops and whistles. Eyes that had been casually darting around are suddenly divided between rapt attention to the stage and earnest study of the promo lit. Amy closes with her thoughtful, moving rendition of the Manic Street Preachers' *A Design For Life*, and the spell is complete. A short while later, the room is worked, the right people are schmoozed, a live session on

Mariella Frostrup's show is booked and we find a quiet corner for our chat.

"These are very weird things to do," she laughs. "I've got nicely used to doing my kind of gigs where I don't worry about what I say and what I do. In these circumstances you know you've just got to get the songs out and not do a hell of a lot of talking. You're just trying to let them know exactly what you're about in twenty minutes, which is really hard. I much prefer to do it in an hour and a half."

Still, the BBC seems convinced and the album is picking up plaudits elsewhere too. "At the moment it's early days, but so far so good! I prefer to listen to people who actually listen to music. Of course, music reviewers are really important and it's lovely when you do get good reviews but there are always bad ones as well. So, for me, if people who are genuine music fans write a review or come to a gig and say 'Oh I love the album!', those are the things I really love to hear. But basically I'm just pleased it's out there at last. It's been a long time and a bit of a struggle."

When I mention that, to me, the album sounds really organic, like a good recording of a band on top of their form, her eyes light up. "Well, that's the best compliment I could possibly have. That's all I ever wanted it to sound like. On my first album, WOJ, I gave everything to the producer and said 'do whatever'; but it didn't really work for me. This time, I have a band that knows me really well, knows every single one of my flaws... and the best thing about it was exactly what you just said. I wanted to hear my band being recorded really well, particularly my drummer Aled [Richards, formally of *Catatonia*], and just do that sort of album. Just sit down and go for it.

"Despite having no money, we were able to create the greatest things that I'm really proud of! Things like the strings on the album. In a million years, I couldn't

afford a string orchestra, so it's just one guy; on *Shattered* he plays around twenty-five violins – multi-tracked. He's got nine different violins and violas so they're quite different and it sounds like a bunch of players. Also, I'm really pleased that some of the vocals literally were first takes; we tried recording them again and thought they were shit – particularly *Fairweather Friend*. I just sat down and recorded it for everyone to listen to and that take just stayed, which I like."

Having read some of Amy's blogs on the recording process, it all sounded rather idyllic – a house in the middle of nowhere where you just go to create. However, life's not always like that. "Idyllic?" she booms. "Yeah, on paper! In reality, I had to remortgage my house and get some financial backing from someone, but then it was the most amazing period of my life doing it! I lived up in Anglesey with [producers] Henry Priestman and Guy Batson for about six months, off and on, and we recorded there and a place called Bryn Derwyn. We finished the album in Real World [Peter Gabriel's studio complex near Bath] at the end of last year; we had about three months off because we ran out of cash! But there were loads of things I still wanted to do so we got some more money and went in and finished it off in Real World. So it wasn't straightforward by any means, but I wouldn't have changed any of it because it was the best year I've ever had, to be honest!"

The album's undisputed centrepiece is that stunning cover of *A Design For Life*, but it's been a controversial choice. One Manics fan commented on iTunes that pressing CDs of it would be a criminal waste of natural resources. "Well, first off I did it at the Corn Exchange in Cardiff during soundcheck – a couple of guys were there and they went 'oh my god, that's brilliant! You've got to do it tonight!'



so I did! It was a long time ago, I was supporting Eric Bibb and it was one of those moments. My Mum and Dad were there and they said it was the first time they thought, 'shit, everyone's gone quiet!'. It was amazing because, of course, it's an anthem and means a lot to people. I kept doing it at gigs and people were saying 'you have to do it, you have to record and release it', so I did and it goes down a bomb at gigs. The slagging off on iTunes thing? I expected it. It's literally 50/50. I either should be killed for doing it or it's the best thing they've ever heard. But the Manics really like it; Nicky Wire rang up to say so when I did it on Phil Jupitus' radio show. That's the only thing I would have worried about. I'm not doing it to get my 'big break', I just genuinely love the song."

"It's gut-wrenching because it's about the suffering of the valleys' people. I'd love to ask James and Nicky what it means to them. Everyone's always... *[goes into drunken footie fan mode]* 'waaah, we only want to get drunk... aaaaay!' – but they don't know what they're singing. What they're singing is so sad, those words just make me choke, so I just wanted to try and do it in a way that brought that out."

Conversation then drifts, as it often does in such situations, onto the trials and tribulations of being an independent artist, something that must have plusses and minuses? "Yeah, it does. I mean, I don't know if anyone really sits down and says 'oh, I'm only going the indie route', because if the right deal came along then of course you'd go for it. But I've always felt it would be better for it to happen now,

with my album finished and representing me how I want to be rather than going in and getting manufactured the hell out of."

"My record company and my manager are the same person, so he hasn't got any problem with someone coming along and saying 'here's loads of cash!'. They've stuck by me and I've been able to create a great album. But the whole thing with majors at the moment is just crazy. Until you've already got somewhere they don't sign you...so that's what we're trying to do. And if we don't get somewhere, I've still got a great life and a great career...we'll see what happens!"

It's clear that music is Amy's passion, something she just has to do. "Yeah, I always say – and it's really true – it's the reason I get up in the morning. Any time where music's been missing from

my life, it's never worked for me. Even if I didn't do it for a career, I'd be playing music anyway. I just love it and it really dominates my life. Sometimes I wish it didn't, but it does. I can't give it up 'cos it won't give me up."

From the very first song on her astonishing debut EP, *The Famous Hour*, Wadge has distinguished herself as a songwriter of depth, one who is able to mine deep, rich seams of emotion. Her inspiration? Life, in all its glories and disappointments. Amy explains: "I've always treated songwriting like a diary thing. Some songs will never see the light of day, where I just needed to write something about a specific thing. It might be too personal, but everything is always about my life or something in my life. It's actually much harder to write when I'm really happy – and I'm pretty happy these days! Happily married and stuff so I just tend to borrow other peoples' misery."

A huge grin starts to creep across her face; "if one of my friends is going through something horrid I'll think *great!* I'm sorry you're having a hard time, but thank you for the material!" she laughs.

Of course, that rather begs the question whether she sometimes finds it a little too weird to expose these things in such a public setting? "Yeah, no doubt about it. Sometimes you wonder at a show, do you tell everyone what it's really about? But most of the time I don't actually say. There are certain songs that are about specific things – *Play It Again* is about a friend of mine who died – so those things I definitely say, but you can make your own mind up about what a song's about. Sometimes that's half the fun!"

As well as producing songs for herself, Amy's talents have been increasingly procured for other projects. I wonder whether she finds writing with or for other people much different from doing it alone, provoking yet another hearty laugh. "Silly as it sounds, it's a lot less of a burden. When I write a song for myself, it's got to be better than my last song. But when you write with somebody else there's less of that because you're just

sharing something. It can be incredibly exciting. And you can also write a song for somebody that'll mean something to them personally but doesn't make you feel that you've got to give everything to it. I know that sounds weird, but you can talk to them about what they want to write about and then you can create something for them – which is empowering and exciting."

So is this likely to be a twin-track career? "Definitely! I think it's just sensible really 'cos I'm a woman so I'll probably want to have a baby at some time, and maybe I'll need a few months off...whatever. Basically, I just think that it's good to have another string to your bow. I've started do some



writing for the theatre and I really enjoy it. The more things I can do that I'm not at the centre of...well, that's great!"

"It can all get a bit self-centred," she says with another huge laugh. "You know, it's all about you all the time, so it's kinda nice to do something for somebody else, maybe give them a song and hope that'll help them get somewhere."

I ask about the *Educating Rita* project she's become involved in lately, a version set not in Liverpool as is traditional but in her hometown of Cardiff. "It's really weird, it's only just sort of happened. I wrote some music for a play called *The Butterfly* that was on at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff, so I presume it stemmed from that. Ruth Jones, who

plays Myfanwy in *Little Britain*, is playing the lead. They're doing a two-week run and they're using me, Cerys [*Matthews*, also formerly of *Catatonia*] and Jem for the musical backdrop. I'm going to launch it as well for them. It's just really flattering. That's a lovely bonus about living in Wales for me – that I can get asked to do these things. I'm really excited 'cos I trained as an actor so it's like I'm kinda keeping my hand in."

So is she tempted to jump up on stage and steal the show? The answer is an emphatic "hell no! HELL NO!! My husband's an actor. One actor in the house is more than enough!" Once again she dissolves into laughter; "Funny, I don't miss it at all!"

As we're wrapping up, I reflect on the fruitful and varied career she's already had – a busy touring schedule, reality TV, two consecutive Welsh Music Awards, accompanying the Welsh national rugby team as a cultural ambassador...did a little girl from Bristol ever imagine doing all that? "Never in a million years! Even if it all ended right now I could still look back and go 'Jeeesus! Look what I've done!'"

"You know, I always say that the megastardom thing is a total lottery, but what we've hopefully been doing is building something that is sustainable for a

very long time – maybe until the day I die! I'd love to get a career that's maybe a bit more controllable, where I can say I pretty much know what I'm going to earn every day...to make a sustained living out of music would be brilliant!"

A month later and I'm watching Amy sing her heart out to a rapt and jam-packed audience at one of London's foremost rock clubs. All attention is focused on the tiny powerhouse commanding the stage and the thought occurs that if passion, talent and dedication are any indication for a successful future, then Amy's dream just might come true. ■

No Sudden Moves is out now on Manhatan. For live dates, check www.amywadge.com.



In 2002, from almost nowhere, Stephanie Kirkham was signed by Hut Records for an astonishing five-album deal that seemed certain to ensure a bright and rewarding artistic future. But when financial crises sunk the label shortly after the release of her acclaimed (and entirely self-composed) debut *That Girl*, taking all hands with it, Kirkham was left high and dry. The world, it seemed, had missed out on its chance to befriend this fresh new talent with her uniquely English sound. Until now, that is; Stephanie is back and more determined than ever to steer her own destiny. Her new album, *Sunlight On My Soul*, was self-released earlier this year, again to high praise, and she's not looking back. TREVOR RAGGATT caught up with Stephanie and her musical ally Johnny Dunne at the first of a series of low-key gigs around the London circuit.

One of the first things that strikes you about Stephanie Kirkham is just how

delicate she seems, both in frame and in spirit. As we sit down, she bristles with palpable nervousness before settling into interview mode and relaxing a little. The thought that springs immediately to mind is how someone who appears to be so sensitive managed to weather being cast adrift after Hut's demise. "It was such a quick thing," she remembers, "people were still expecting something to happen and suddenly it was over. It was a bit like a dream really. For a while I didn't know what to do but I had Johnny to lean on. I kept writing and then we started putting the demos together and started to work on the album. It was just a case of 'this is what I do and I can't stop because someone says sorry, we've closed the business'. My business has to keep going so that's what I did."

Of course, putting together an album to a professional standard takes a fair bit of cash. But with Johnny's expertise as soundman and producer and her own

determination to prioritise the music above all else, sacrifices were willingly made. As well as occasional stints behind the counter at the florists run by her mum, Stephanie would often retreat to the back of the shop and express herself through painting. What started out as more of a hobby – "a case of make a mess if you want to" – has now become a potential source of income with her recent acquisition of a publisher who first caught sight of the paintings on Stephanie's website and offered to help her to sell them. "I think painting's a good outlet for me," she smiles. "It's quite abstract, more about the feeling they give. A lot of the time I ended up painting over everything. I really wasn't expecting to sell any, it was just a release. Now I'll keep doing them!"

"I've never worked a nine-to-five job," she admits. "My writing is the most important thing. I might not have achieved things that other people have – a house, a family, a fancy car... blah blah blah. But I'd rather have this type of life and fulfil myself than get stuck doing something I'm not in love with."

Clearly, she's a lot tougher than she looks. The total disaster with Hut taught her a few things about survival in the music industry and there was no way that she was going to put more of her work into someone else's hands. She wasn't going to let someone else decide how the music should sound, how the production should be done, how the album should be marketed or whether or not it would ever even reach the shops. It was a smart move, one that witnessed the birth of SLK Records and set the wheels in motion for a triumphant return. "I suppose the wind had gone out of my sails a bit," she ponders. "I just thought it was too much of a risk. That at least if I did it and put it out there myself, well then I've done it and whatever happens from there can happen naturally. I felt that I needed to keep all my cards close to my chest – a kind of protective instinct – 'no one's going to stop me. I'm going to do it in a small way but it will happen!'"

However, it wasn't easy; without outside assistance, Stephanie and Johnny found themselves occasionally going a little stir crazy in the studio. The project meant so much to them both but their perseverance at working in tandem paid off in the end. Even without knowing these things, *Sunlight On My Soul* feels instantly more personal than the bigger budget debut. Stephanie agrees: "Usually you have other people coming in and giving their input, but there's always a bit of a price to pay with that because it's not being totally true to yourself. This way we

could just make something that was pure, organic and how I really wanted it. It was difficult sometimes but it's more special because of it. There wasn't any interfering; it was a lot freer."

That sense of freedom undeniably translated well into the songs, allowing them a greater depth of character. Several of the songs, and particularly the title track, positively burst with experimentation and daringly unconventional touches that push the envelope considerably further than your average humdrum folk-pop collection. Who said a shoestring budget was a creative noose? *Sunlight On My Soul* sounds as plush as you like, though Stephanie is typically self-effacing about her achievements. "Johnny's brilliant at sound," she grins. "He was responsible for the technical side and making sure the music sounded right. We'd talked about the stories, where the songs had come from, the feelings involved. He'd say 'what about this?', 'what about that?' and, well, he made it all into an album!"

Dunne comes over from finalising some technical details with the venue manager to gently but emphatically underline Kirkham's own contribution: "We did it, Stephanie. You too!"

But what about getting to grips with the finer details and mechanics of label management and promoting the album? The simple answer comes back. Taking everything day by day and ticking off achievements one by one; manufacturing, check! for sale on Amazon UK and iTunes, check! "I couldn't have done it without Johnny, it just wouldn't have been possible," she admits. "But anyway, it's out now and people are finding it. It's a mammoth task but I didn't want to give all the control away. If someone came in and wanted to license it now it's done, that would be great. They'd be able to raise awareness. Hopefully they wouldn't want to change the album."

The first single to be taken from the album was *Show Me What You're Made Of*, a jazzy little number and the last song written. "We'd sort of got the album finished," Stephanie recalls. "I suppose I started getting worried about whether it would ever be finished. Would we get it right? Are we capable of getting it out

there when we didn't know anything about distribution, licensing and all those things; it seemed like there was so much to learn. So then I wrote this song. I think it was like a little voice in my head saying 'you will get there, just get on with it!'. It just came out with that jazzy feel because that was the energy behind it, a carefree, happy feeling. Actually, all the tunes tend to just adopt a natural feeling and the styles just mirrored that. I suppose that's why the album goes a little bit all over the place.

"*Bad Dream* is a nightmare," she continues. "I worked in Japan a few times and it was strange coming back and forth, like a pendulum; today I have to be this, today I have to be that. Constantly swapping and being what people expect you to be – I'd had enough of it. So it had to have a dark Eastern feel to it. I was



worried it might be a bit too dark but my niece who's five loves it. She whispers it in the back of the car '...it's just a bad dream, it's just a bad dream...' and it's like some kind of scary story but she just loves it."

Nature is a recurring theme in many of the songs, and when I comment on it she grins. "I don't know why that is. You know, I don't know about past lives and stuff... you never know for sure, but I must have really spent a lot of time outdoors!"

The smile breaks into a cheeky laugh. "Of course, I did when I was a child. My mum was always pointing out the beauty in nature, making us appreciate it, draw pictures with all the colours in and smell things. She's really brilliant like that – she'll pick out little things that you've never really thought about. But I do have most of my ideas when I'm in nature, outside going on walks and stuff. I think

that's why you often think of stuff in the car because you're on the move. There's just something about being on the move, being free and getting outside."

As you might expect with a title like *Sunlight On My Soul*, there's a charming sense of innocence to Stephanie's songs. Certainly not the usual cynical singer-songwriter fare; doesn't she ever get really pissed off? "I've got a few really grumpy ones but everyone has, haven't they? I tend to keep them in but sometimes you've just got to get your emotions out. That's why music's so brilliant because you can write an angry song and then move on to something else. When Hut closed down I wrote a really angry one, but they're just phases aren't they? You soon go on to the next phase.

"Even if the songs are quite sad, I think the music really lifts them up," she adds.

"It's a good thing because you're still telling the story but you're not making everyone cry at the same time. Overall, it's quite cheerful. I really really love it!"

"I'd like to do another album next year maybe. I've probably got half of one written and I'll keep working on those. We're planning to take it as it comes for a bit. These gigs are important to me because it's still early days as far as performing goes. Beyond that, I don't know. Just going out and singing is a good step for me. We'll see what happens."

Of course, such a multifaceted album is tricky to reproduce when you're just an acoustic duo but Stephanie doesn't seem worried: "They sound a little bit more folky because they can't have all those instruments. There will come a time when they can and it'll be more of a true representation. I think for now, though, they're alright. You'll find out in a minute!"

Another smile lights up her face and she begins to get ready for taking to the spotlight. She's right, the songs are considerably more stripped down and folky but the audience are nonetheless delighted. By being unafraid to show that purity and vulnerable side that makes her such a likable person, Kirkham seems likely to continue to capture many a heart, and deservedly so. It's good to have her back. ■

ones to watch...

Step up, wave the flag and get in on the ground floor with the 'next big thing'; here's a handy guide to some up-and-comers within the UK singer-songwriter circuit...



SHELLY POOLE

It's been ten years since Alisha's Attic had their first big hit, but those halcyon days couldn't be further from the mind of Shelly Poole. Her debut solo album *Hard Time For The Dreamer* is a constant reminder why she is one of the UK's best singer-songwriters. Catch her on tour with Will Young later this year.



ROSE KEMP

Like Kamilar Thompson, Rose is a child of folk-rock royalty (Maddy Prior is her mum) staking her own place in the music world. Take it from us, the stunningly surreal folkscapes created by this prodigious talent are a million miles removed from any of her parents' Womble-bothering tendencies. Album out soon!



JULIA HARRIS

One of *Wears The Trousers'* hand-picked favourites for 2006, Julia Harris' *These Days EP* perfectly encapsulates her funkily muscular take on acoustic rock, with a nod to the great Ani DiFranco spicing up the mix. A full-length album is coming later in the year. We fully expect to be gobsmacked.



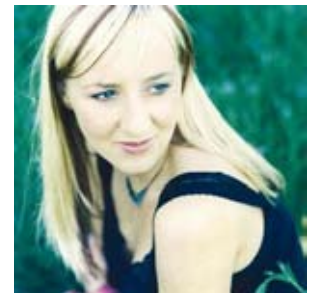
ANNA KRANTZ

London's spiritual successor to Carole King and James Taylor. Recorded at Abbey Road, her stunning debut album *Precious Time With You* demonstrates that piano-driven, adult-oriented rock done properly can still reap huge artistic rewards.



JANE TAYLOR

Bristolian singer Jane Taylor brings gentle pastoral folk songs to life with her sweetly innocent voice. One spin of her debut album *Montpelier* reveals that she has a wonderful way with a tale; a second spin and you'll be hooked.



HELEN BOULDING

The intelligent piano pop of this talented Sheffield émigré is further proof that MOR needn't always mean flavourless and dull. Boulding's thoughtful tunes and contemplative lyrics all deserve digging deeper into.



LILY FRASER

Lily Fraser's modern psycho-melodramas soar over a bumpy musical landscape populated by cello, concert harp and squalls of electric guitar. Add to that a persona that's equal parts unearthly siren, Norma Desmond and "the first Mrs Rochester" and what you've got is a surprisingly sublime, if scary concoction!



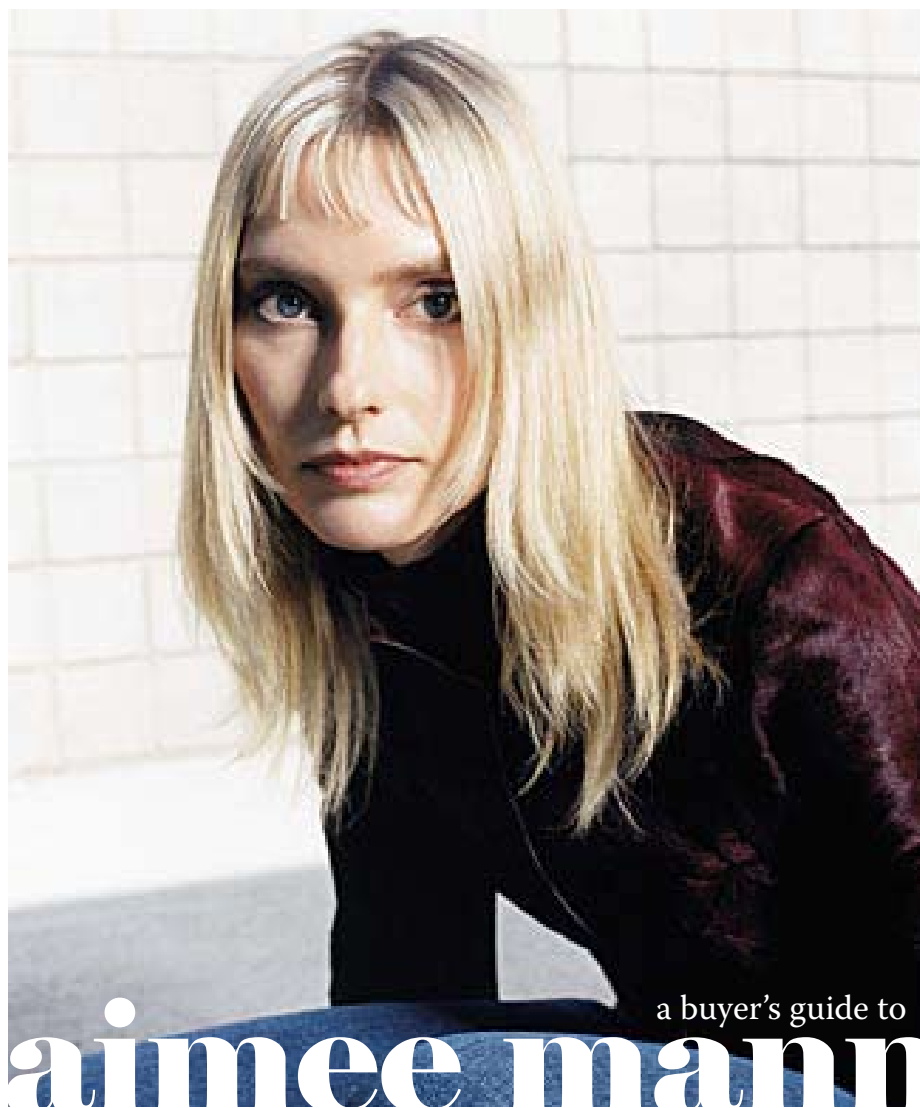
HAYLEY HUTCHINSON

Adopted Yorkshire-lass Hayley Hutchinson's debut album *Independently Blue* has picked up airplay and plaudits across the land since its release last summer. Hutchinson is currently involved in an independent film project due sometime next year and will be on the road with Eric Bibb this autumn.



ROSALIE DEIGHTON

Half-Dutch, half-Indonesian, half-Barnsley ...all talent! Rosalie Deighton combines sublime writing talents with a stunning voice. Singing her socks off in venues up and down the country, she's picked up a host of admirers that might soon include you. Rosalie goes on tour with Amy Wadge and Edwina Hayes in November.



aimee mann

a buyer's guide to

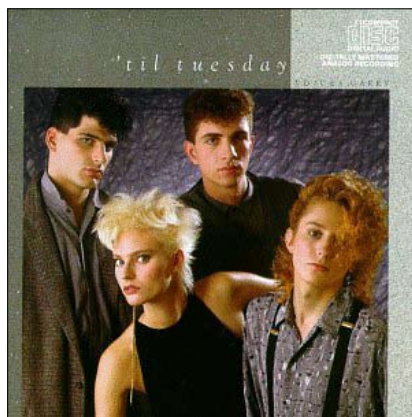
Creative force, campaigner for artists' rights, *bête-noir* of record execs, filmmaker's muse, professional cynic...this doesn't even come close to covering the multifaceted talents and fractured career path of Virginian songstress Aimee Mann.

Despite a stop-start career spanning over twenty years and more bad breaks than an orthopaedic surgeon could shake a splint at, she's amassed an impressive body of work across a dozen or so albums. It's testament to her consistency that the only below-par, completists-only offerings in her canon are a pair of cash-in compilations put together without her consent. Mann's career to date can be easily thought of as four distinct eras – the formative punk years, Eighties pop semi-stardom, major label agonies and the hugely credible independence with which she now operates.

The next entry in her oeuvre will be the somewhat surprising, if not downright unexpected, festive collection *One More Drifter In The Snow*, released this coming Hallowe'en. In typical fashion, she's warned us to keep the Kleenex close to hand; joy to the world will not be forthcoming. With that tantalising prospect in mind, **TREVOR RAGGATT** takes a look back at the extraordinary career of one of our very finest singer-songwriters.

♥ YOU 'TIL TUESDAY

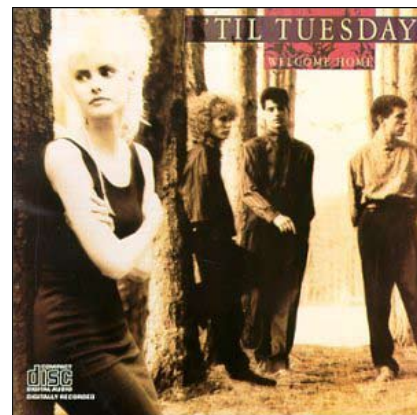
Mann formed the Eighties post-new wave pop outfit 'Til Tuesday in 1983 with fellow big-haired alumni of Boston's Berklee College of Music, Michael Hausman (her then boyfriend), Robert Holmes and Joey Pesce, and over the course of the next seven years produced three under-appreciated albums.



Voices Carry (Epic, 1985)

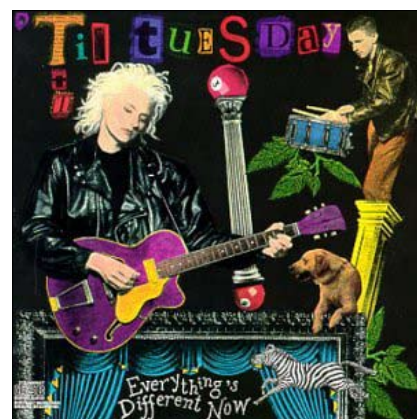
The first 'Til Tuesday offering is very much a product of its time, with its buzzing analogue synths, clanky up-front bass and overproduced guitar sounds. But dated as it may seem now,

it's still chock full of lush harmony vocals and thoughtful pop songs (many of which were inspired by Mann's split with Hausman). In truly bittersweet fashion, the album's title track gave Mann her sole bona fide hit to date, hitting the upper echelons of the Billboard charts.



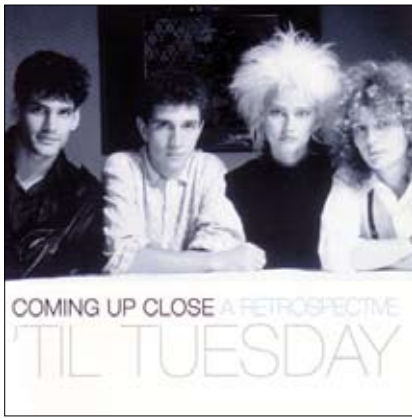
Welcome Home (Epic, 1986)

For the second album, Mann began to assume much greater responsibility for the songwriting duties. This led to a sound that was clearly maturing from the first album's dance-synth pop, providing a clear bridge to her later work whilst retaining an inescapably Eighties vibe. Standout tracks include *Coming Up Close* and the heartstoppingly beautiful *No One Is Watching You Now*. It may have been a commercial flop but *Welcome Home* is artistically sound.



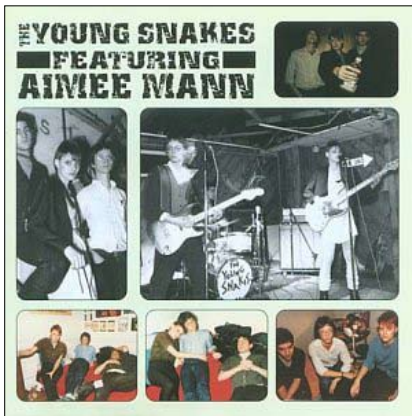
Everything's Different Now (Epic, 1988)

The third 'Til Tuesday album is effectively a band record in name only, and can be thought of as representing the first of Aimee Mann's solo albums. In fact, the band split soon after the completion of the disc and, in the first of many contractual wrangles with record labels, Mann was forced to tour the album herself, prevented from working as a solo artist in her own right. Such woes might suggest a weak and directionless disc but the opposite is true. Largely inspired by the end of her well-publicised relationship with singer-songwriter Jules Shear, the album boasts a number of great songs that foreshadow her later work, including *Limits To Love*, *J For Jules* and the Elvis Costello collaboration *The Other End (Of The Telescope)*.



Coming Up Close: A Retrospective
(Epic/Legacy, 1996)

Those who want to explore Aimee Mann's formative efforts but are unsure of where to start could do considerably worse than investing in this handy compilation. Includes 'new' song, *Do It Again*.



The Young Snakes, featuring Aimee Mann (Lemon, 2004)

In 1980, Mann dropped out of Berklee to form The Young Snakes – in her own words, a “little punk noise-art outfit” that ended up constrained by its own “break every rule ethos”. She eventually left to form ‘Til Tuesday as a reaction against the Snakes’ “lack of interest in sweetness and melody.” This compilation bolsters their 1982 EP with sundry studio sweepings. Avoid.

WISE UP AND BUY



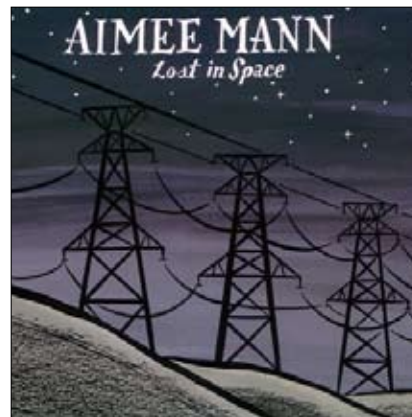
Whatever (Geffen, 1993)

Aimee's first solo album proper is a glorious slice of quality pop and mature, knowing songwriting where Sixties-inspired jangle-rock numbers like *I Should've Known*, *Fifty Years After The Fair* and *Put Me On Top* rub shoulders with quirkier musings like *Stupid Thing*, *Jacob Marley's Chain* and *Mr Harris*. Despite its faintly dismissive title, *Whatever* is a surprisingly joyous affair that largely avoids her, by now trademark, cynicism. As such, it could well be the perfect introduction for newbies.



Bachelor No. 2, or the last remains of the dodo (SuperEgo, 1999)

This is the album that almost certainly lost Mann her last major label deal – but not because it's rubbish. Quite the contrary! It is alleged that the suits at Geffen didn't hear enough radio-friendly single fodder and dispatched Mann back to the studio with her tail between her legs, or so they thought. After a lengthy legal tussle over artistic vision and rights, Mann was eventually released from her contract and *Bachelor No. 2* saw the light as an independent release on her own SuperEgo label. A baker's dozen of moving songs that still shine brightly, this is the record that famously inspired Paul Thomas Anderson's cult film 'Magnolia' (later pressings include the soundtrack's Oscar-nominated *Save Me*).



Lost In Space (SuperEgo, 2002)

Lost In Space picks up where *Bachelor No. 2* left off with another immaculate selection of downbeat tunes. Though rather more dour than its predecessor, with addiction and dependency as its overarching themes, it's still life-affirming stuff. Worth hunting down is the special edition version, released in 2003 through Aimee's

website. Presented in a hardcover book format with additional artwork by cartoonist Seth, its bonus disc includes five live recordings (including a great cover of Coldplay's *The Scientist*), two B-sides, a BBC session and two unreleased tracks, one of which is a duet with Glenn Tilbrook of Squeeze.

GET WITH STUPID



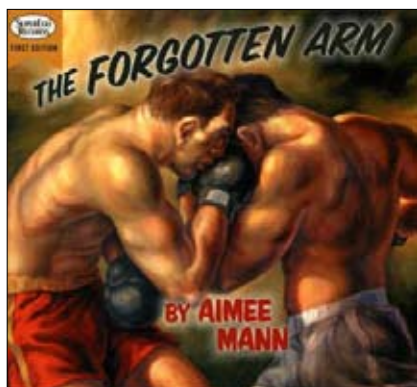
I'm With Stupid (Geffen, 1993)

This second solo offering is patchier work than *Whatever*, its outpourings of punk-pop angst on tracks like *Superball* seemingly betraying a growing frustration with her label's demands for a hit. You can't help but wonder, then, whether the sleeve's depiction of the lyrics was cocking a snook at the powers that be - all the words are there...in alphabetical order! However, the luxury of 'patchy' in this particular artist's back catalogue is that the songs remain well above the acceptable standard for most artists (notably *Choice In The Matter*, *Long Shot* and *That's Just What You Are*). Glenn Tilbrook and former Suede guitarist Bernard Butler guest. Well worth exploring.



Music From The Original Motion Picture Magnolia (Reprise, 1999)

Not to be confused with the Jon Brion score, *Music From...* features nine songs by Aimee, two by Supertramp and a Brion instrumental. Inevitably, there is some overlap with *Bachelor No. 2*, but the otherwise unavailable tracks like *Momentum*, *Wise Up* and Mann's unforgettable cover of Nilsson's *One* are worth the admission price alone.



The Forgotten Arm
(*SuperEgo*, 2005)

Mann's latest opus is a loose concept album consisting of a series of vignettes charting the relationship between a down-and-out boxer and his girlfriend, from the first flush of love at the Virginia State Fair through separation (*Goodbye Caroline*), failure (*Little Bombs*), addiction, (*I Was Thinking I Could Clean Up For Christmas*) and finally redemption (*Beautiful*). Taking a stripped back, live in the studio recording approach harking back to Seventies rock, it's almost flawlessly executed. It's beautifully packaged, too; the sleeve presents the songs as if they were a novella and features illustrations by award-winning artist Owen Smith.

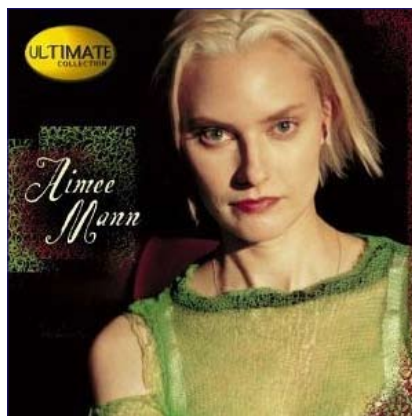
LIVING IT UP



Live At St. Ann's Warehouse (*SuperEgo*, 2005)

Available as a bare-bones CD/DVD set, this sole live offering to date suffers from a capable but somewhat diffident performance. An Aimee Mann show will never indulge in on-stage histrionics, however, so it's probably a fair testament to an artist appearing where, perhaps, she seems least comfortable. Filmed over a three-night residency at Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse, the neatly cherrypicked setlist spans all of her full-lengths, with *Pavlov's Bell*, *Long Shot* and *Deathly* being particular highlights owing to some dazzling musicianship from Mann and her fellow guitarist Julian Coryell. Aimee and the band have a decent enough stab at the backstage interviews, but anyone looking for real insight into the band dynamic will most likely be disappointed.

HITS AND MISSES



The Ultimate Collection
(*Hip-O*, 2000)

This collection of songs up to and including the *Magnolia* era presents some difficulties for the diehard Mann fan. Yes, it includes a moderately representative bunch of album tracks and rarities (including five hard-to-find B-sides), as well as the 'hits', but Mann is openly critical of it. Whilst the album reeks of contractual obligation and was indeed compiled without any artistic input from Aimee herself, it is still a fairly decent introduction for the neophyte listener.

DOWNLOAD DELIGHTS

Aimee occasionally pops up on soundtracks, compilations and other people's albums. Here's a few worth investigating...

Rush – Time Stands Still (*Mercury*, 1987)

It's hard to believe that Canadian prog-rock dinosaurs ever went through an accessible "pop" phase but this single proves it. Mann provides backing vocals and also appeared in the video lying on her back rotating gently in the air above the band!

Shaken & Stirred: The David Arnold James Bond Project – Nobody Does It Better (*EastWest*, 1997)

Mann's contribution to this star studded tribute to the classic Bond themes doesn't quite match Carly Simon's original in terms of class, but her vocals and the Beatles-style arrangements come pretty close.

Aimee Mann & Michael Penn – Two Of Us / Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds (*V2*, 2002)

Another Beatles connection; these two songs are taken from the soundtrack to the Sean Penn/Michelle Pfeiffer film 'I Am Sam'. Other highlights are Sarah McLachlan's version of *Blackbird*, Ben Folds' *Golden Slumbers* and Heather Nova's take on *We Can Work It Out*. ■

FORTHCOMING RELEASES:

September 2006

- 04 Beyoncé - B'Day
- 04 Missy Elliott - Respect M.E.
- 04 Charlotte Gainsbourg - 5:55
- 04 Anna Krantz - Precious Time With You
- 04 Maria McKee - Acoustic Tour 2006: Live
- 04 My Brightest Diamond - Bring Me The Workhorse
- 04 Dani Siciliano - Slappers
- 04 Stereolab - Serene Velocity: Anthology
- 04 You Say Party! We Say Die! - Hit The Floor!

- 11 Bat For Lashes - Fur & Gold
- 11 The Duhks - Migrations
- 11 Kelis - Kelis Was Here
- 11 Diana Krall - From This Moment On
- 11 Nina Nastasia - On Leaving
- 11 Revl9n - Revl9n
- 11 The Rogers Sisters - The Invisible Deck
- 11 Susanna & The Magical Orchestra - Melody Mountain

- 11 T.a.T.u. - The Best Of
- 18 Shawn Colvin - These Four Walls
- 18 Cyann & Ben - Sweet Beliefs
- 18 Fergie - The Dutchess
- 18 Mates Of State - Bring It Back
- 18 Scissor Sisters - Ta Dah!
- 18 Veruca Salt - IV
- 18 Weapons - Weapons
- 25 Tori Amos - A Piano: The Collection
- 25 Brightblack Morning Light - s/t
- 25 Christina Carter - Electrice
- 25 Natalie Cole - Leavin'
- 25 Janet Jackson - 20 Years Old
- 25 Jamelia - Walk With Me

October 2006

- 02 Evanescence - The Open Door
- 02 Julie Feeney - 13 Songs
- 02 Juliette & The Licks - Four On The Floor
- 02 Tilly & The Wall - Bottoms Of Barrels
- 02 Kathryn Williams - Leave To Remain
- 09 Alesha - Fire'd Up
- 09 Be Good Tanyas - Hello Love
- 09 Husky Rescue - Ghost Is Not Real
- 09 Frida Hyvönen - Until Death Comes
- 16 Isobel Campbell - Milk White Sheets
- 16 Sarah McLachlan - Wintersong
- 16 Madeleine Peyroux - Half The Perfect World
- 23 Girls Aloud - The Best Of
- 23 Lucie Silvas - The Same Side
- 23 Amy Winehouse - Back To Black
- 30 Aimee Mann - One More Drifter In The Snow

November 2006

- 06 Joanna Newsom - Ys
- 13 Sugababes - Overloaded: The Hits



reviews

INDEX:

Abigail Washburn	84	Lavender Diamond	88
All About Eve	87	Leigh Nash	82
Allison Moorer	84	Lisa Germano	75
Amy Millan	64	Liza Minnelli	87
Andrea Corr	91	Madonna	90
Ani DiFranco	69	Magneta Lane	76
Anja Garbarek	63	Mark Knopfler &	
Anna Krantz	82	Emmylou Harris	78
Asobi Seksu	88	Metric	65
Astrid Williamson	65	Mia Doi Todd	89
Barefoot	72	Mina Agossi	73
Birdie Busch	67	Nina Gordon	82
Camera Obscura	66	Nouvelle Vague	65
Cerys Matthews	92	Peaches	79
Cibelle	89	PlanningToRock	83
Cocosuma	73	Psapp	79
Controller.Controller	77	Regina Spektor	64
Dixie Chicks	77	Revl9n	71
Elin Ruth	78	RobinElla	68
El Perro Del Mar	73	Sandy Dillon	66
Espers	75	Scanners	89
fields.	92	Skye	85
Howling Bells	81	Sol Seppy	73
Ill Ease	68	Sylvie Lewis	72
Immaculate Machine	81	Tender Trap	75
Imogen Heap	86	The Dresden Dolls	93
Iona	90	The Fiery Furnaces	80
Jane Weaver	83	The Gossip	86
Jewel	76	The Grates	75
Joan Baez	79	The Hot Puppies	81
Josephine Foster	74	The Long Blondes	93
Julia Harris	84	The Morning	
Justine Electra	83	After Girls	66
Karine Polwart	67	The Pipettes	69
Kat Flint	71	The Puppini Sisters	74
Kimya Dawson	71	The Tiny	68
KT Tunstall	70	The Weepies	80
Ladyfuzz	93	Trespassers William	72

REVIEWS COMPILED BY:

Russell Barker, Ian Buchan, Anna Claxton, Stephen Collings, Tiffany Daniels, Robbie de Santos, Matthew Hall, Stephanie Heney, Lisa Komorowska, Andrzej Lukowski, Jean Lynch, Anja McCloskey, Scott Millar, Gary Munday, Helen Ogden, Alan Pedder, Trevor Raggatt, Alex Ramon, David Renshaw, Lynn Roberts, Marc Soucy, Rod Thomas, Danny Weddup, Bryn Williams and Paul Woodgate



Anja Garbarek

Briefly Shaking / Angel-A OST
EMI

★★★★/★★★★

A decade on from her startling English language debut, *Balloon Mood*, delightfully quirky Norwegian chanteuse Anja Garbarek returns with not one but two new albums, *Briefly Shaking* and *Angel-A*. To be fair, the latter contains little in the way of new material and what's there is largely instrumental. But as the soundtrack to maverick director Luc Besson's ('The Fifth Element', 'Léon The Professional') mysterious new film, shot in black and white on the streets of Paris in almost total secrecy, it is more than up to the task. Given that this is Besson's first film without composer Eric Serra, there was a certain element of risk in taking Garbarek on, but Besson is clearly a fan; five old songs are seamlessly scattered among the newer ones.

Of course, the risk was really very tiny. Not only has Garbarek been consistently excellent throughout her career, she also has an outstanding pedigree for this sort of thing, following as she does in the footsteps of her world-famous jazz genius father Jan, who has often dipped a toe into creating musical moods for fiercely independent European cinema. As they have often done in the past, father and daughter collaborate on a number of tracks, notably on new song *It's Just A Game* with its jazzy but subdued reassurance that "this is as good as it gets". Don't you believe it though. The sublime *No Trace Of Grey* is so convincingly sweet versus sinister that it could well have been recorded at a teddy bears' picnic in, say, the bathroom of cabin one of the Bates Motel.

Sticking with a murderous theme, the actually quite frightening *Can I Keep Him?* (the only song to appear on both albums) is written from the point of view of serial killer Dennis Nilsen, who lured several young men back to his home in Muswell Hill, north London [*just round the corner from Wears The Trousers HQ!*], and chopped them into pieces. It's a towering example of Garbarek's skill as a writer; she plays with the lost pet interpretation of the

title and then, as Nilsen kills, the previously serene instrumentation explodes into beats so harsh and aggressive that it sounds like a trio of typewriters at war. Being taken inside the head of a mass murderer is rarely an attractive listen, but Garbarek's portrayal is up there with Sufjan Stevens' *John Wayne Gacy Jr.* in its almost sympathetic exploration of its subject.

It's little wonder, then, that Garbarek has since remarked that she should have called the album 'Beauty & The Beast' instead of *Briefly Shaking*. That title comes from the chorus of the excellent first single *The Last Trick* with its dark lyrical content, candied vocals and unsettlingly perky backing. It was written as Garbarek was struggling with her muse after giving birth to her daughter and could well have been her swansong had it not been for the thunderbolts of inspiration found in tales of horror and crime. *Sleep*, for instance, tells the story of a woman who was kidnapped and locked in an underground bunker but works equally well as a metaphor for her burdening creative imprisonment.

The most keenly felt difference between 2001's *Smiling & Waving* and *Briefly Shaking* lies in the addition of drums, particularly on songs like *Dizzy With Wonder*, a thunderously intense and dramatic number in which Garbarek plays the role of an observer surveying some twisted, post-industrial landscape, and *Shock Activities*, with its slightly overblown kickass rock bits and unexpected mid-song shift into a cod-Gwen Stefani breakdown but with far greater charm. Other highlights include *My Fellow Riders*, with its piping keys and gently throbbing electro pulses, and *This Momentous Day*, an ecstatically unpredictable monster that juxtaposes flute and strings with grinding guitars and coolly passionate vocals.

Having said all that, while *Briefly Shaking* is easily Garbarek's darkest album to date, it's also her most accessible and lavish. Motherhood certainly hasn't reined in either her knack for telling unusual stories or her beguiling way with a drop-dead gorgeous melody. Considering that she doesn't play a single instrument yet still can pen such epic compositions, her achievements are simply astounding. She may not be the most prolific of artists, but with every release improving on the last, seemingly unbettable album, it's only a matter of time before her brilliance is properly acknowledged. File between Laurie Anderson and Björk and play with an alarming regularity.

Alan Pedder

Regina Spektor

Begin To Hope

Sire

★★★★½

Photo: Big Hassle



The moment when any semi-established artist braves that most perilous of career moves and delivers their first major label release is always a worrisome one. Though it's hard to imagine that fans who invested in Regina Spektor's formative albums — the

self-released *11.11* and *Songs* and 2003's breakthrough *Soviet Kitsch* — would begrudge her finally getting the deal she justly deserves, it's bound to ruffle some feathers.

Born in the former Soviet Union and having moved to New York

City aged seven, Spektor has been playing bars the size of broom cupboards for years. Primarily a word-of-mouth phenomenon, her dramatic rise in fame has led to sold-out concerts in more spacious surrounds and, as a result, *Begin To Hope* has clearly had a whole wad of money hurled in its direction. With over two months spent recording compared with *Soviet Kitsch*'s brisk ten days, Spektor has been given a chance to experiment with production and instruments that she's never been able to before, with beats, drums and bigger arrangements that her previous albums only ever dreamed of.

The result is an album that feels rich and cared for, but one that has already alienated some hardcore fans with cries of "Regina's gone pop!". It's certainly true that some of these songs sound completely different to the girl-and-a-piano affair that is Spektor performing live. But would an album of purely piano-based songs really be as varied and exciting as *Begin To Hope* is? I doubt it. Regardless, nothing is able to detract from Spektor's obvious talent for songwriting and performing.

Each song has its own story to tell, both musically and through Spektor's fascinating way with words. Her lyrics are at times haunting and moving, such as *Field Below*'s evocative refrain: "darkness spreads over the snow / like ancient bruises", and at other

times laugh-out-loud funny: "Hey remember that month when I would only eat boxes of tangerines / so cheap and juicy!" (*That Time*).

Fittingly for that commanding title, many songs on *Begin To Hope* are uplifting and invigorating, such as opener *Fidelity*, with its bouncy plucked-strings beat, and the rock-out thrill of *Better*. Recent single *On The Radio* seems to almost parody the sound of your average radio hit, but the lyrics are thought-provoking and somehow it works. Elsewhere, a number of other songs on the album are kept sparse, with Spektor's talent for the piano the main focus. The best of these is *Samson*, a soulful weepie, while the Russian gothic of *Après Moi* is suitably dark and epic, complete with the atmospheric effect of clocktower chimes.

There are a couple of songs that aren't so successful, such as the strangely unmelodic piano splurge that is *20 Years Of Snow* and *Edit*, which might lead you to wonder whether Spektor has been having a little too much fun with ProTools. On the whole, though, *Begin To Hope* is an outstanding album of substance and thought, a comprehensive delve into one of the greatest young musical talents around who is carving out trends, not following them.

May her fame continue to soar so that she has more chance to experiment with her passion and her art. **Bryn Williams**

Amy Millan

Honey From The Tombs

Arts & Crafts/V2

★★★★½

Few artists can pull off an entirely elegiac album without sounding overly tedious or annoyingly self-pitying, but Stars frontwoman Amy Millan has just about done it on her first solo outing. *Honey From The Tombs* is a highly intimate work of self-disclosure that touches upon loss, emptiness, restlessness, love gone wrong and the healing effects of whiskey on a broken heart.

Although Millan tries to dodge the 'country' label, the conventions and sensibilities of the genre are clearly instated in the upbeat twangy guitars, banjos and mandolins, blues-infused solos and melancholy finger-picked acoustics. Further justifying this is the presence of bluegrass group Crazy Strings on back-up. Even so, some tracks are arguably more folk than country, a few more pop than folk, and several lean more towards a traditional rock sound. Interestingly, these songs are the

product of several years spent as works in progress. "I wrote all the songs prior to joining Stars," Millan revealed in a recent interview with the Montreal Gazette, "then I ran away from home to L.A.; I came back to a black hole..."

There are numerous highlights; a disconsolate narrative on the loss of first love, *He Brings Out The Whiskey In Me* comes as close to classic country as you can get — and even Millan admits to this — with its light rhythmic picking, gentle slide guitar and ruminations on where it all went wrong. Abandoning the twangy lap-steel in favour of multi-layered dreamy atmospherics, *Skinny Boy* is reminiscent of Stars' engaging pop aura with its feathery lush vocals, xylophone and guitar. It's also one of the few tracks with drums, and while it's pretty enough to stick in the memory, it stays within well-mapped territory for Millan and is certainly nothing novel. The rocky *Headsfull* is short but sweet, while the swirling electro essence of *Wayward & Parliament* makes for an incongruent anomaly among the simplistic quietude

that characterises the rest of the album.

The exquisitely somnolent *Pour Me Up Another* signals an end to proceedings, Millan's tear-tinged musings meeting despairing, clean acoustic lines to create a pathos unparalleled by her earlier efforts: "the nights are for forgetting who I am / so pour me up another before bed" — OK, so perhaps many of Millan's turns of phrase are not really all that far removed from your average garden variety country song, but for the most part she employs enough musical variety that, as a whole, it somehow works.

Honey From The Tombs is neither groundbreaking nor wearisome. Some tracks are pleasant but interchangeable; others are catchy and poignant enough to include in your cathartic heartbreak compilation. On the whole, it makes for a memorable collection that works best when you're in the mood for mellowness, but keep it within reach for those days when you're nursing a bottle of whiskey and feeling real lonesome.

Lisa Komorowska





Metric

Live It Out
Drowned In Sound
★★★★

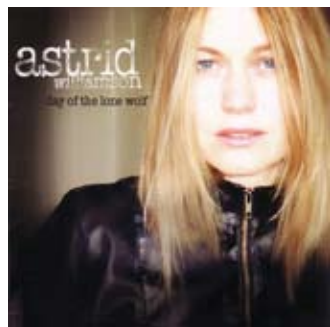
Ah, Metric. Back in their native Canada, it's practically impossible to meet anyone of a certain age who hasn't caught on to the hype of Emily Haines and her trio of musical men. Their debut *Old World Underground*, *Where Are You Now?* was hugely successful and earned the band a place in the hearts of young hipsters all over the nation. *Live It Out*, the much-anticipated follow-up was released last year, attracting the attention of British indie label Drowned In Sound (home to fellow Canuck Martha Wainwright) who are issuing this UK edition. Right out of the starting blocks it's clear that *Live It Out* is fantastically diverse, blending genres with ease. Is it electro-pop? Melodic punk? Distorted garage rock? Eighties new wave synth nostalgia? Actually, it's all of them, and even finds room for some heart-rending piano balladry. Phew!

Haines' presence surely ups the potential for Metric to achieve mass idolisation above and beyond recognition of her occasional contributions to Canadian supergroup Broken Social Scene. Her lyrical ability and vocal range — an assortment of throaty whispered hushes, authoritative roars and everything in between — perfectly compliments and contrasts with the musical backdrop. Building upon, but not exhausting, the beguiling pop/rock sound that made *Old World Underground...* so accessible, *Live It Out* retains the winning formula for indisputably catchy crowd-pleasing riffs, yet noticeably focuses much more on rocking out with heavier guitars, thunderous drums, fun solos and everything feedback.

Probably the catchiest song on the album, *Monster Hospital* begins with an upbeat, distorted riff that will compel you to subtly headbang and madly tap your feet. With a sly nod to The Clash, Haines howls "I fought the war / but the war won!" amidst a pleasantly simple drum line and creeping high notes. The exuberant *Handshakes* is another highlight, oozing sarcasm with its

chanted mantra of "Buy this car to drive to work / drive to work to pay for this car". Recent single *Poster Of A Girl* boasts a disco-esque beat, heavy synths and extreme danceability. Haines' vocal switching effortlessly from cooing in English to quietly murmuring in French. Elsewhere, *Ending Start* veers the furthest from the sprightly pop/rock appeal of the rest of the album; drenched in a river of reverb, Haines sings "Gave them our explosions, reactions, all that was ours / for graphs of passion and charts of stars". The delicate piano, melodious ethereal guitar and haunting resonance of the vocals permits the song to linger and enchant.

For some fans, *Live It Out* might not live up to the 'modern classic' status of *Old World Underground...*, while others may blame the fervent hype for setting such lofty expectations. Whatever. The fact remains that this is another undeniably well-crafted piece of work that, at its best, will rock your clothes off. Turn up the speakers, put on your dancing footwear, and for goodness sake, hang on to your trousers! **Lisa Komorowska**



Astrid Williamson

Day Of The Lone Wolf
Incarnation/One Little Indian
★★★★

It's been ten long years since Shetland-born singer Astrid Williamson struck out on her lonesome, forsaking the safety in numbers afforded by indie duo Goya Dress in which she provided the lush, hypnotic vocals. That decade has seen her put in a number of guest appearances and a pair of solo excursions — one on Nude Records, the other self-produced and distributed through the mighty BMG machine. *Day Of The Lone Wolf* finds Williamson taking the DIY route once again under the auspices of her own label, Incarnation, with indie stalwart One Little Indian taking care of getting it out there.

These days, DIY is no longer necessarily equated with slapdash bodgery or hissy four-track production. *Day Of The Lone Wolf* is as sumptuous an aural experience as any bigger budget offering

and as insightful a soundtrack to 21st Century living as an entire library of US TV series spin-off compilations. On a cursory listen, and as is certainly implied by the title, these intelligent contemporary pop songs hint at a confident, self-reliant woman negotiating her way through a post-Sex In The City climate with predatory confidence. But Williamson's songs deserve more serious consideration and scratching beneath the hide of the album sees the veneer of the hunter stripped right back, exposing the loneliness and solitude of a life separated from the comfort and support of the pack. Suddenly the noble hunter seems a little less majestic, rather more flawed, dysfunctional and unfulfilled — and perfectly in tune with life in the urban landscape.

Siamese kicks off proceedings in a muted manner, musing on the nature of connection and trust. It's just a little too reminiscent of Laura Veirs' *Galaxies* but sets the ensuing emotional tone quite nicely. But not just yet; the wistfully uplifting *Superman 2* (the sequel to a song on her previous album) bursts into life after a brief string intro, driven along by fluid piano and charming Wurlitzer. Like Lois Lane jumping into Niagara Falls on faith in her hero alone, Williamson concludes that sometime it's best to leap headlong into love and to hell with the consequences. *Reach* brings the tone back down with bare acoustic guitar showing that Astrid's no slouch on the six-string either, her equally exposed vocal counterpointing *Superman 2*'s veiled optimism. *Amaryllis* continues in a similar vein, her half-whispered vocal teetering on the edges of perception.

Williamson has often courted controversy with her lyric writing, but while *True Romance*'s striking couplet "Look at me and think of this / all my tangled hair across your hips" has been hotly debated, the song's meaning goes far beyond veiled oral sex references to explore the twin fires of obsession and dependency. Other highlights include the perky *Shh...* (surely a future single?), the Brion-esque piano etude of the instrumental *Carlotta*, and the stunning standout *Tonight*, a tender and sensitive plea for companionship.

The informal trilogy of *Another Twisted Thing*, *Forgive Me* and *Only Heaven Knows* dares to ask some of life's bigger nagging questions (no, not whether Brandon Routh makes a better Man of Steel than Christopher Reeve), the latter bowing out with a mixture of cynical resignation and contentment with circumstance. The lyric "sometimes your beauty suffocates me, but I would gladly

die and repose" makes for a fitting conclusion to an album of exquisitely beautiful uncertainty. *Day Of The Lone Wolf* sees Williamson growing ever more confident in bending to meet her muse and in her abilities as an artist. Even if this isn't the album to establish her as a major talent, all the evidence points to Astrid finally having her day in the not-too-distant future.

Trevor Raggatt



Nouvelle Vague

Bande À Part
Peacefrog
★★★★½

Nouvelle Vague's self-titled debut was a spectacular bossa nova revamp of some of the world's most established new wave acts. Now the French collective are back with **Bande À Part**, an original and personal take on works by Eighties post-punk idols such as Bauhaus, New Order and Echo & The Bunnymen. As inspiration for their approachable and seemingly unforced adaptations, the band cite the gamut of Caribbean music from the Forties to the Seventies: "Musically it is moving between Jamaica, the cradle of mento music, which became ska/rocksteady then reggae, to the calypso isle of Trinidad via Cuban salsa, Haitian voodoo, and eventually back to Brazil."

In keeping with this, we're immediately greeted by the sounds of birds and splashing water as the band ease into the Bunnymen classic *Killing Moon*. Soft female vocals (courtesy of returning vocalist Mélanie Pain), laid back guitar strums and dreamier than dreamy vibes locate the listener in the heart of the Caribbean jungle, with added mysticism courtesy of a swooning accordion. These musical motifs are much repeated throughout the album, including Blondie's *Heart Of Glass* — who would have thought that chirping birds, South American percussion, resolving accordion chords and soothing vocals could actually turn this into a genius reconstruction of a song?

Other highlights include Billy Idol's *Dancing With Myself*, a cheeky rhythmical piece loaded with bassy piano and percussion, their bluesy, sexy and full of attitude take on The Cramps' *Human Fly*, and Visage's *Fade To Grey*, a melancholic sea voyage riddled with weepy accordion. But whilst these and most of the remakes sound texturally layered and innovative, The Wake's *O Pamela* seems hastily arranged and would have benefitted from the use of more natural sounding instruments. Heaven 17's *Let Me Go* also suffers from a standard arrangement and the strings sound a bit overproduced.

Giving a nice twist to the tale, the brains behind the brand (namely Marc Collin and Olivier Libaux) only allow their vocalists to perform songs entirely new to them, thereby ensuring that any breach of sanctitude claimed by their detractors is most often the result of their own prejudice. If you like the sound of *Blue Monday* sung in soothing female vocals with a heavy French accent (Pain again) accompanied by an armoury of colourful instruments, this album is for you.

Anja McCloskey



Sandy Dillon

Pull The Strings
One Little Indian

★★★½

For over twenty years, the career of Sandy Dillon has been one hell of a frightening fairground and somewhere along the line our gravel-voiced heroine must have smashed an entire hall of mirrors, such has been her god-awful luck. Incredibly, even her earlier struggles — two shelved albums and a terminated contract with Elektra — pale in comparison with the trials of the last five years. After losing her beloved husband and musical partner to a heart attack in 2001, Dillon has battled with cervical cancer and a terrifying ordeal with the MRSA superbug. That's a lot of black cats crossing hundreds of paths, each one dusted with a tonne of spilled salt, but instead of slinging it over her left shoulder into Beelzebub's

eyes, she's gargled it defiantly, refusing to be a martyr to ill health. Indeed, on the evidence of *Pull The Strings*, her most desolate, injured and grim recording yet (and that's saying something!), truly the woman could unseat the four horsemen and circumvent the apocalypse. Of course, some people would rather listen to a symphony of air raid sirens than to Dillon's serrated, half-strangled vocals, but frankly that's their loss. The sheer feral beauty and menace at work here adds a sometimes exquisite, always interesting texture that's totally unique.

Of the many moods and dense emotions captured throughout, the one that resonates most clearly is a longing for escape — escape from loneliness, escape into death, you name it. Though it may not sound like it on first listen, the vibrant and sinisterly sexual title track is actually a manifesto of atonement to the (wo)man upstairs. Joined on vocals by Alabama 3's growly Robert Love, Dillon's third-person tale of repentance becomes more akin to what the sound of mating basilisks must be like — full-blooded, throaty and raw above all else.

The jaunty but creepy *Documents* and Dillon's remarkable turn on *Over My Head* are similarly sultry, while the raucous *I Fell In Love* is a darkly humorous swamp-blues stomper that returns her to the glass-eating Bessie Smith-inspired sound of her One Little Indian debut, *Electric Chair* (1999). That she howls and wails as if having a grand mal seizure is really all just part of the fun.

Anyone who has followed Dillon's career will know that for all her impressive vocal extremities, her real forte lies in torch song balladry. Fortunately, *Pull The Strings* does not disappoint on that front either, from the traditional number *Motherless Children* and the sumptuous cover of Hoagy Carmichael's jazz standard *Baltimore Oriole* to the exhausting, occasionally morbid but beautiful tributes to her husband (*Enter The Flame*, *Wedding Night*) and her own lost innocence (*Play With Ruth*, *Broken Promises*).

Throughout these heartfelt weepies run subtle flourishes of organ, electric piano and softly brushed snare, not to mention musical saw for that added tearjerk factor. Dillon even wheels out a harmonium on *Why?*, a sweetly-sung duet (again with Robert Love) that's almost vaudevillian and slightly but nicely cheesy. *Who's Answering* follows the theme of accepting destiny as Dillon implores whoever or whatever lies beyond the grave to see her in safely and with a little comfort

— “give me a lover, a bed and some gin / I beg the one who's answering” — delivered with poignancy, believability and soul.

Doing justice to a Sandy Dillon album is an impossible task; like the music itself, it takes a lot of perseverance, repeated listens and an open mind, and you may still end up not knowing what to make of it. Certainly, those who are faint of heart should steer clear, but if you're the sort who worships Captain Beefheart, Tom Waits or just loves a challenge, there's much to enjoy here. It's a little over-long, however, and making it to the conclusion of *Carnival Of Dreams* in just one sitting guarantees an arduous listen. That said, in the triumph over adversity stakes, it's a truly remarkable statement from one of our finest, most uncompromising artists.

Alan Pedder



The Morning After Girls

Shadows Evolve

Best Before

★★★

Their press release will tell you that The Morning After Girls' "... hazy melodies pull you right into the world of the morning after — a moment they characterise by a dreamy grogginess, a dischord of transient yet striking memories and sounds, nostalgia; a yearning to go back to last night..." Or, depending on your taste, just to stick your head in a toilet.

But seriously, The Morning After Girls are regarded by some as yet another entry in a long line of fashionable faux-New York bands who emulate Lou Reed; hard-working but perhaps a little over-hyped. So what the musical offspring of these five Aussies really sounds like is initially not so cool (at least, not in my book), taking us back to the shoegaze era with startling precision, where one must keep an eye out for The Charlatan-osaurus sniffing a Stone Rose on a kind of Happy Monday, whilst all team members probably dye their hair black in the name of über-chic and have definitely listened to the noisier bits of The Dandy Warhols.

OK, so you get the idea that The Morning After Girls (who,

controversially, are all men save for sometime vocalist Aimee Nash) would probably have fitted in much better, say, fifteen years ago. Refer to the title track and *Always Mine* for two obvious examples if you don't just believe everything you read. Yes, this debut offering is mostly disguised as 'proper indie', even featuring a cameo by Ride's Mark Gardener, no less, meaning I had to listen to it at least three times before I could even begin to appreciate it. After which, it was gathered that the word 'disguised' is particularly apt. Because, once you chomp past the somewhat indigestible and rather bland exoskeleton of self-proclaimed psychedelia moulded into the start of the album, you are rewarded with something much more worthy of your pennies.

So while the unavoidable instrumentals shamelessly appear to boast more of laziness than of creativity — the few lyrics that were thrown in justify this, even admitting "ain't got a lot to say" — glowing treats from the melodic and upbeat *Straight Through You* to the aggressive Cobain-esque vocal of first single *Hi-Skies* and the sweeping stoner lust of The Beatles crossed with The Vines-inspired tracks like *Slowdown* and *Chasing Us Under*, make for a much more convincing dynamic. Indeed, the phrase "saved by the bell" comes to mind.

Though by no means a unique specimen, The Morning After Girls are worth checking out as they pimp their noisy wares at the festivals this summer, if only to hear what they are *under-rated* for. Like uncovering a rare fossil of the long-forgotten time when Damon Albarn sported a bowl cut, blow off the dusty bits and you'll no doubt get excited. **Anna Claxton**



Camera Obscura

Let's Get Out Of This Country

Elefant

★★★★

The habitual comparisons with fellow Scots Belle & Sebastian seem somewhat overstated when listening to this, the fourth full-length album from Glaswegian sextet Camera Obscura, fronted by TraceyAnne Campbell (no rela-

tion to Isobel). Although there are occasional hints of the distinctive B&S indie-pop sound here and there, *Let's Get Out Of This Country* is so much more than imitation. In fact, the listener is treated, tour guide-style, to a veritable history of pop music.

There are moments of pure pop breeziness on first single and album opener *Lloyd, I'm Ready To Be Heartbroken*, a song written in answer to the final track on Lloyd Cole's classic debut, *Rattlesnakes* (1984), and again on the title track, where St Etienne's catchier sunshine moments are emulated well. Indeed, the witty lyrics and upbeat mood recall a female-fronted Divine Comedy covering Cole himself in his prime. However, the real beauty here lies in the lounge country sway elements of the album where the pace is slower and more bittersweet. *Dory Previn* and the French waltz of *The False Contender* are enchanting and have the wistful qualities of a last dance with their unhurried melodies and sophisticated folk-pop tenderness. We're transported to an abandoned, creaky back porch where timeless themes of longing and lost love are all encompassing.

Fittingly, everything goes back in time to the retro high school prom queen heartbreak of *Come Back Margaret*. With its clever doo-wop production that could quite believably have been recorded by Connie Francis, a saccharine tune right out of the Fifties accompanies innocent lyrics of despair and teenage dramas. Further vintage melodies are explored with The Supremes-esque sound of *I Need All The Friends I Can Get*, a full on charming disco number complete with hand claps and tambourines. In terms of emulating older styles, nothing quite tops *If Looks Could Kill*, a song that lodges in your head and refuses to budge, cramming in everything that made those Phil Spector-produced Ronettes classics so great, right down to the glorious Wall of Sound and organ accompaniment.

It's a testament to Camera Obscura's songwriting talents that such a collection of retro styles can still sound so fresh and vibrant. Not content with simple pop sweetness, the band tackle sombre themes of broken relationships and lonely yearning for romance and love. The closing track, *Razzle Dazzle Rose*, is a beautiful farewell that sounds like it was recorded in a deserted ballroom. Tracyanne's haunting Julee Cruise-like vocals perfectly express the ghostly atmosphere and a trumpet solo rounds up the magical history tour. Far from under-achievers, Camera Obscura sound like a band who

have really hit their stride — not just unafraid to explore different eras and styles, but mastering each of them. **Stephanie Heney**



Birdie Busch

The Ways We Try

Bar/None

★ ★

As another in a long line of songwriters working on the premise that her homemade brand of acoustic vignettes on love and life will strike a chord with a wider audience, Emily 'Birdie' Busch enters the fray fresh from the Philadelphia coffeehouse circuit. After completing a range of struggling artist jobs, Birdie realised there was something else she was born to do, after which it appears she picked up a guitar, took to it like a native and voila, the benefit of her somewhat naive musings are available to those looking for the next 21st Century troubadouress. If only all career moves were so easy! So, what does the Philly filly have to offer?

Well, it's much as you'd expect. There's an innocence to these simply structured melodies and arrangements; Busch floats through songs like a seed that's caught the wind, happy to be carried in any direction as long as the destination is America's west coast circa 1967. Unfortunately, '67 was a long time ago; the naivete of the artists that gathered in Laurel Canyon to change the world with six strings and multi-part harmonies was truly a snapshot of its time and Busch is strictly little league in comparison. Then again, perhaps the comparison is simply unfair; the world is an uglier place in 2006 and the odd moment of happy-go-lucky sing-song is a welcome break from the daily routine, but the music still needs to be memorable at least.

I'd like to say that the songs benefit from a long gestation period, the culmination of ideas and experiences that stretch back years, but it's difficult to say whether this is the case, or whether Birdie knocked the album out in an evening session at Starbucks. The songs rarely rise above pleasant, the pace rarely above a Sunday

walk, and each one merges into the next in a below-par mélange of gently strummed or picked guitar, brushed percussion and upright piano. The songs aren't bad; *Zeros* has a breezy Sunday morning feel behind its cod-philosophy lyric, *Room In The City* uses repetition well to enhance its momentum and *Drunk By Noon* winds its way through your mind in a passable imitation of solo Kristin Hersh, but nothing reaches out and grabs you. There's no eureka moment that raises the hairs on your arms, no careful turn of phrase or sparkling change of pace that sets her aside from the pack.

Despite several weeks of listening, willing myself to sing along and be impressed, I can't honestly say that any of the material on *The Ways We Try* has stuck. I don't find myself humming *The Cup's* harmonica line on my way to work, despite it probably being the most memorable melody. If I stumbled across Miss Busch in the aforementioned coffee emporium, I'd be pleased with the temporary release from my daily chores, applaud in the appropriate places and thank her when she'd finished, but I wouldn't necessarily want her CD. Unless I had an elevator to paint. Must try harder.

Paul Woodgate

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Karine Polwart

Scribbled In Chalk

Spit & Polish

★★★★

Karine Polwart has been no stranger to applause since quitting her day job as a women's issues campaigner. Her first album *Faultlines* cleaned up at last year's Radio 2 Folk Awards and won many critical plaudits. The question is, can *Scribbled In Chalk* live up to already stellar expectations? I'm glad to report that the answer is an unequivocal yes. Polwart has turned in a charming and affecting collection of folk songs equally capable of raising a grin as they are of moistening eyes, running the gamut from mountaintop expressions of joy to the murkiest teatimes of the human soul.

Stylistically, Polwart confidently straddles the line between modern folk and contemporary adult

pop, with an added edge of alternative country. That she does this without ever sacrificing her integrity or losing her distinctiveness to lowest common denominator slush deserves particular praise. *Hole In The Heart* sets things off in an ominous minor key with regrets and reminiscences of a life that's been frittered away, before the single *I'm Gonna Do It All* lovingly lightens the tone with a wistful, charming reverie of hopes and aspirations (though it's hard to imagine her swearing so loud she'll "strip the silver lining from a cloud"). Even by the towering standards of Polwart's sensitive songwriting, it's an absolute gem.

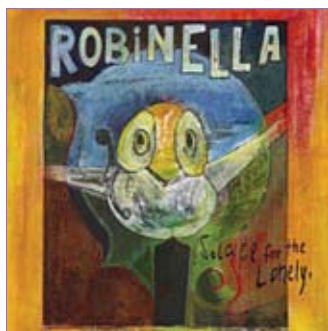
Many of her songs draw on Judaeo-Christian imagery but never fall into the mantrap marked 'didactic', instead using these ancient stories to ground her songs deep in folklore and history. Only on *Holy Moses* does she deal direct, using the Patriarch as a metaphor for the ability of the human spirit to rise above expectation and circumstance to achieve a destiny as yet unknown. It's a cute little touch that the music meanders beneath like the river that ferried the baby to safety.

The frankly chilling *Baleerie Baloo*, however, is a very different proposition. Mixing the ancient and modern, it's a moving tribute to missionary Jane Haining who died in Auschwitz along with the Jewish orphans she had cared for in Budapest. The 'crimes' for which she was imprisoned included weeping whilst sewing the compulsory Star of David onto the children's clothes.

Terminal Star delves deeper into the dignity of an unsung hero, while *Take Its Own Time* employs an interesting horticultural metaphor; the gardener who delights in letting parts of their garden be planned by nature rather than design suggesting that we might do better to hold onto our troubles more lightly. The track also features some delightful accordion from Inge Thomson, weaving pastoral melodies around the chords.

Follow The Heron closes the album in contemplative style, 'covering' a song of Polwart's own making (it was originally recorded by the band Malinky, with whom she has collaborated in the past). But then, in the instant that the final notes fade, Polwart cannot help but render a falsehood — these songs are by no means ephemeral scribbles that vanish with the first drop of rain, they are instead small treasures that, once heard, are not easily forgotten.

Trevor Raggatt



RobinElla

Solace For The Lonely

Dualtone

★★★★½

The music of Baptist choir-leader's daughter RobinElla has been variously described as containing touches of jazz, pop, funk and soul, but from the opening acoustics of *Break It Down Baby* and the drawled out *Hey*, the genre that strikes you most is country. But this is neither the trad Dolly Parton-isms beloved of conservative America nor pop-lite C&W, this is the sound of steamy, swamp-fuelled Tennessean nights conjured by the likes of Lucinda Williams and Tift Merritt. RobinElla's potent blend of nasal Appalachia suckers you right in, her characterful voice full of experience and sounding like a cross between Alannah Myles and Abra Moore.

Truly kicking into gear by track number three, *Solace For The Lonely* rarely fumbles the charm thereafter, yielding deceptively simple sounding melodies that ultimately reveal hidden and wonderful depths. A slow-burning ode to religion and family, *Press On* builds over insistent tom toms and hushed keyboards into something quite magical, while the decidedly jaunty *Down The Mountain* picks up the pace, propelled by train rhythm brushes and RobinElla's vocals a friendly guide between the stations. With its unexpected but pleasant mid-song change of tempo, *Whippin' Wind* is reminiscent of recent Patty Griffin albums, both in quality and tone, though that's less surprising when you consider that *Solace...* was produced by Griffin's musical sidekick Doug Lancio.

Elsewhere, *Little Boy* gives an unabashed nod to funk, with flashes of Hammond giving way to a full-blown organ solo over Stevie Wonder-esque electric bass; *Oh So Sexy* is a nifty little bar anthem about the universal human affliction that is the ability to view our drinking buddies as relationship material once we're three sheets to the wind. Shanty waltz *Teardrops* is another gem of excellent musicianship from a tight band that understands the value of space between the music,

allowing RobinElla to emote without pretense.

Indeed, those wondering where the catch is will be pleasantly surprised. This is great stuff to the last; *I Fall In Love As Much As I Can* is a fitting farewell, evoking thoughts of Ella Fitzgerald serenading passengers on a Mississippi steamer, muted brass and wozy fiddle intact. *Solace...* has humour, grace and diversity in spades; most importantly, it also has a voice that truly deserves to be heard. If you're lonesome tonight then don't be; share the RobinElla love!

Paul Woodgate



The Tiny

Starring; Someone Like You

DetErM ine/V2

★★★★★

Although preconceptions of yet another Swedish band hitting the market are probably rife, unlike many of their counterparts, The Tiny have recorded an album that will surprise even the most clued-up music fan. Bearing in mind their intention to make a record that's "grandiose and true to life in a cinematic way, taking each idea to a new level whilst still keeping our tiny personal identity", one thing becomes immediately obvious: The Tiny write for no one but themselves. The initial and most poignant charm of *Starring; Someone Like You* lies in its sheer authenticity — no matter how bizarre the songs may become or what may be said, there isn't a second where you don't believe them.

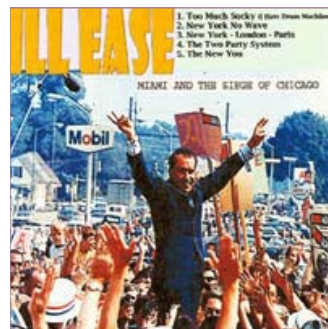
A trio, The Tiny combine the childlike but strikingly original voice of Ellekari with the classical training and string arrangement skills of cellist Leo and double bassist Johan. Instead of sticking to a purely orchestral sound, however, innovative combinations of sounds flicker between songs like scenes in a film. Like a candlelit journey through a fairytale forest, god only knows what is going to happen next. The unpretentiousness of the song titles and simplicity of the language used are designed to lure you into a false sense of security. For while effectively elementary instruments are put to good use — strings, a

toy piano, a saw — nothing about this album is 'simple'. Each sound is perfectly placed, each change in mood a natural movement and each song paying compliment to its predecessor.

My Mother sounds like a spell being cast; vocals circle round gorgeous strings and a bewildering narrative, which then trickles into the equally ethereal *Know Your Demons* — a dark, yet strangely uplifting number, full of haunting pedal organ and piano as the vocals chant "know your demons as they know you, wherever they go you're bound to". Without you even realising it, The Tiny will excise you completely from your earthly surrounds.

Ed Harcourt makes an appearance on *Sorry*, oddly sounding almost more natural here than on his own compositions, while talented Norwegian songstress Ane Brun contributes backing vocals to a number of tracks. Elsewhere, the arrangements vary wildly from upbeat, fast-paced tracks like *Dirty Frames* to the more stripped down sketches of *Everything Is Free* — surely the most unusual cover of a Gillian Welch tune ever — and *In Reality*.

At its quietest, *Starring...* is as intimate as a whispered confession and almost unbearably lovely. At its most energetic, it's full of life, full of colour and bursting with character. The dynamics work unbelievably well, the ups and downs maintaining interest and continuing to enchant right until the very last moments of final number *My Greatest Fear*, perhaps their most spellbinding moment. Going back to the blueprint, it's clear that their goal has been attained. Cinematic in the way it creates an entire new world, both grandiose and simple, and undoubtedly unique, *Starring...* marks the beginning of an exciting new talent; somewhere between genius and insanity but totally, totally brilliant. **Rod Thomas**



Ill Ease

Miami & The Siege Of Chicago EP

Ohayo Records

★★★★★

Ill Ease is the project of Brooklyn-based musician Elizabeth Sharp,

formerly the drummer for New Radiant Storm King. Having tried her luck signed to Too Pure for 2003's *The Exorcist*, Sharp returned to her DIY roots for last year's excellent *The After After Party Party EP* and she's clearly still in her element. Considering the intricacy of the drum lines and guitar parts, not to mention the suited American rasp behind each song, this self-made musical achievement is exactly that, and a revelation to boot. This is no antifolk record; Sharp has venom and hatred so pure that she propels herself away from that scene entirely and into a league of her own.

To fully appreciate this record, it's necessary to understand the history surrounding 'the siege of Chicago'. Like The Doors and MC5 before her, Sharp has focused on the after effects of the 1968 National Democratic Convention where pro-war Hubert H. Humphrey and anti-war Eugene McCarthy were both campaigning for a nomination to become the country's next President during the Vietnam War. The vote was arguably rigged for Humphrey to win, which he did, and the McCarthy voters and peace activists protested. The confusion that followed is highlighted in *Two Party System* through grinding guitar loops and lyrics that don't pull punches ("we've all been fucked by the two party system" being a prime example).

This feeling of wrongdoing towards the people and popular culture of America is a recurring theme, although Sharp concentrates on the hypocrisy of musicians and their fans in the other songs. Opener *Too Much Sucky (I Hate Drum Machines)* throws references to Devo into the mix and shapes some crazy, conservative musician screaming over bass-heavy riffs worthy of Death From Above 1979 about the influence of new wave in New York, while *New York No Wave* gives a shout out to the antifolk movement. Both *New York London - Paris* and *The New You* sound like Whirlwind Heat out on the prowl, pickaxe in hand, looking for the next fresh scenester killing.

Of course, whether you understand the complicated American history and the even more complicated political system is not the be all and end all, it simply makes the songs more interesting and adds value to Sharp's lyrics. The music itself, with its continuous thump and ingenious post-grunge structure is ample enough evidence to make this a priority on your ever burgeoning 'to get' list. You'll only be shaming yourself if you don't.

Tiffany Daniels



The Pipettes
We Are The Pipettes
 Memphis Industries
 ★ ★ ★ ★

When The Pipettes first appeared on the stages of London and Brighton's grubbier pubs and clubs two years ago, not many people could in all honesty imagine they'd be releasing their debut album and playing sold out theatres across the country. The band fought dismissive slurs of 'novelty band', 'kitsch' and 'unmarketable' and simply kept touring and releasing pop gems on limited-pressing 7" vinyls. As such, *We Are The Pipettes* arrives as the product of the hard-won realisation of their ambitions to replicate the essence of Sixties

girl groups — from their self-styled svengali (guitarist 'Monster' Bobby) to the contemporary Wall of Sound production, via coordinated outfits and dance moves.

For those who eagerly collected the hard-to-find vinyls and witnessed the earlier live shows, a first listen to the album might be hard to swallow. The tinny sound of their demos has been replaced by luscious synths and sound effects, and some of the organic DIY charm has been compromised in favour of a more consistent sound. On second listen, however,

such fans ought to find it in their hearts to forgive them; *We Are The Pipettes* positively shimmers with a real sense of accomplishment, the more polished production serving to bolster the seriousness with which the band have tackled their concept, certainly in comparison with those early recordings.

The Pipettes, you see, possess a knack for writing classic pop songs. Of the fourteen tracks, at least nine might find older listeners questioning themselves over whether they might have gotten down to it at a town hall disco

in 1965, such is the authenticity projected through Rose, Gwenno and Becki's crystal clear vocals, arrangements, ooohs and ahhs. Old favourites like *ABC* and *It Hurts To See You Dance So Well* maintain their dancefloor magnetism, as do newer songs like recent hit *Pull Shapes*, a command so brilliant that it cannot be resisted. Though their performances are wonderfully uplifting throughout, the band don't shirk on the adolescent tinges of naivety and sadness that really capture the spirit of the girl group era. What The Pipettes bring fresh to the party is a distinctly British twist on the sound, their southern accents ringing with a nicely comforting familiarity.

If nitpick we must, there are points on the album where the fine line between pop perfection and overplayed kitsch is in danger of being traversed. Creating a modern twist on the girl group era need not have entailed some of the tackier sound effects, evident on the titular theme song and *Pull Shapes'* canned applause, while the sometimes overly glossy production makes the songs seem a little less personal. However, these are small criticisms of an otherwise excellent album on which every song is worthy of being a single. If the girls can find a way to progress without becoming a parody, this exciting debut could be the beginning of a long and sparkling career.

Robbie de Santos



The Chemical Brothers once said of Beth Orton that if your soul could sing, she is what it would sound like. By this reckoning, Ani DiFranco is like the voice in the back of your head, not always telling you things you want to hear but telling it like it is nonetheless, and this time perhaps more than ever she means business. "I ain't in the best shape / that I've ever been in / but I know where I'm going / and it ain't where I've been," she sings on *Subconscious*. As always with DiFranco, it's a believable manifesto, one that takes on extra resonance with the recent announcement of her first pregnancy. Sonically, however, we're in familiar surroundings.

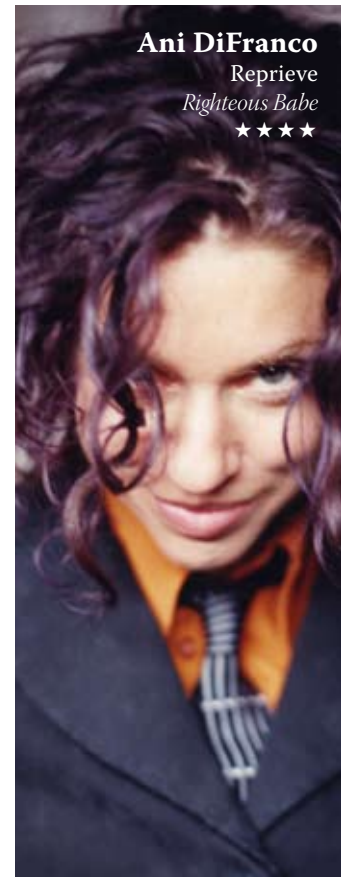
Reprive's closest cousin is 2004's self-played, self-produced *Educated Guess*, but whereas that record had a swagger that reflected DiFranco's freedom in the studio, *Reprive* is altogether a more considered affair. The ghost of Hurricane Katrina hangs over proceedings, having famously halted the recording sessions when the resulting floods damaged her New Orleans studio. Forced to decamp to her other home in Buffalo, New York, DiFranco found herself continuing the recording on an old synthesiser.

The resulting album resonates as an unwitting tribute to the dislocation felt by the millions affected by the tragedy. Though it's not explicitly referenced, aside from the oddly prophetic *Millennium Theater* which ends on the line "New Orleans bides her time" (the material was written long before the hurricane hit), lines like "the stars are going out / and the stripes are getting bent" (*Decree*) seem to say it all.

Elsewhere, much of the album is classic DiFranco. Opening track, *Hypnotize*, recalls one of the most

arresting moments of her career, *You Had Time*, a song that emerges out of nowhere, a meandering piano intro that eventually finds its way into a melody. A similar technique is used here, the sound of the artist working out a way to articulate an emotion she's not entirely comfortable with: "you were no picnic / and you were no prize / but you had just enough pathos / to keep me hypnotized". It makes for a sombre opening but, to quote Joni Mitchell, there's comfort in melancholy.

Reprive is perhaps DiFranco's most cohesive record to date, never really feeling the need to shift out of its plaintive mood, which is both good and bad. Aside from the fantastic *Half-Assed*, surely soon to be regarded as an Ani classic, there is little here to truly stir you out of your seat. Perhaps I miss the band. Perhaps I miss the point. Check out righteousbabe.com for an explanation of the cover art and a clearer idea of what she's trying to say. For now though, there may not be much time for dancing but Ani DiFranco is still standing, still singing and that, for us, is the most important thing. **Matthew Hall**



Ani DiFranco
Reprive
Righteous Babe
 ★ ★ ★ ★

KT Tunstall

KT Tunstall's
Acoustic Extravaganza
EMI

★★★★



The acoustic/live session version of a mainstream but 'credible' artist's best-selling album is fast becoming a useful marketing tool (or dare we say it, cash-in) for record companies looking to maintain interest in between albums and tours. So we've had James Blunt's fairly inexcusable *The Bedlam Sessions*, Maroon 5's post-*Songs About Jane* acoustic live CD and the list goes on and on. Invariably, the resulting product is just that — product with a capital P, a marketing expedience rather than a creative experience.

Jaded as we are then, it would be almost too easy to approach *KT*

Tunstall's Acoustic Extravaganza with precisely the same cynical view. In fact, watching the documentaries on this double CD/DVD package (available exclusively through Tunstall's own website), there are hints that this might have been just what was on the EMI shareholders' Christmas wishlist when the project was first mooted. Plans were made and a couple of days were duly booked at the stub end of 2005 in a tiny studio on the Isle of Skye.

Happily, Tunstall's own cheekily subversive streak meant that corporate plans didn't go quite

as planned. As she states during the making-of documentary 'Five Go To Skye', "We all decided last night that, instead of doing the album remake, we're going to do something a little more unorthodox...which is great...and we're going to do some B-sides, and a couple of new songs...so we've got quite a crazy little setlist that we didn't expect". Well, *Wears The Trousers* rolls up its denims and yells "viva la revolution!" for the end result is something much more worthwhile.

Although *Eye To The Telescope* was certainly one of the revelations of 2005, many maintain that

it was over-produced and that some of Tunstall's true character was suppressed and sacrificed at the altar of commerciality. Here, that balance is nicely redressed and the rawness of KT's talent is allowed to shine out with minimal post-production to obscure it. The clear advantage of taking a band straight off a world tour and recording them live in intimate surroundings is the lingering presence of musical ESP between them and that spirit really comes across. Producer Steve Osborne has also done a great job of capturing the sessions, while Tunstall's singing is as soulful, gutsy and smoky as one would have anticipated.

Of course, all that is rather irrelevant if the songs themselves aren't up to much. There's no worries on that score, however. The eight 'new' songs (*Gone To The Dogs* and *Change* originally appeared on her self-released album, 2000's *Tracks In July*) are uniformly strong, while the songs chosen from *Eye To The Telescope* are perhaps less obvious, neatly avoiding any of the singles yet well worthy of inclusion. *Ashes*, an obscene love song of the "can't live with you, can't kill you" variety kicks off proceedings with verve in loping acoustic country style.

Girl & The Ghost and *One Day* are more recognisably Tunstall and immediately likeable — in an alternative reality either would make a sweet little single. *Golden Age* contains echoes of Sheryl Crow's *Over You* in its feel and harmonies, while *Boo Hoo* goes country blues on us, breaking out the slide guitar and Hammond organ. *Throw Me A Rope*, which first appeared on the pre-fame *False Alarm EP*, closes out the album in lovely stripped-down fashion.

So, is *...Acoustic Extravaganza* a better album than *Eye To The Telescope*? Probably not, but it does give a glimpse into a rawer, musically more honest side to Tunstall and should be considered a must for fans. It surely won't be long before the tracks included here become firm favourites among her appreciative throng, while the DVD portion provides interesting insights into both the artist and the creative process. The outtakes reel and a fun feature on her now infamous 'Wee Bastard' pedal are particularly enjoyable.

Perhaps it would have been nice to see some more web content included, such as the solo recording of *Black Horse & The Cherry Tree*, or to bundle in the videos from the singles. But that's just being greedy! As it is, *...Extravaganza* is a refreshing and lovingly crafted treat for eyes and ears.

Trevor Raggatt



Kat Flint

The Secret Boys Club EP

Naz Recordings

★★★★

In case you haven't discovered her yet, believe me when I say that Kat Flint is a rare and wonderful find; recently awarded the New Lyricist Award by Channel 4, her lyrics are beautifully crafted to speak of the dangers and joys of modern life. *The Secret Boys Club EP* is released through Rough Trade Shops and is doing very well indeed, deservedly topping the sales of even major artists such as Arctic Monkeys and Dirty Pretty Things.

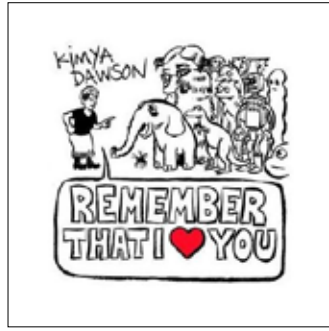
Flint has the same vocal presence as every great female solo artist; perfect and simultaneously unique. Her songs, rightfully described as "a love letter to the children we were, the adults we become and the places we make for ourselves in the world", are deliciously nostalgic, craving the innocence we had when we were but young 'uns.

That said, it's not simply fanciful whimsy either. Flint is smart enough to realise that we may be able to look to the past, but we're constantly shuffling forward. *Anticlimax* neatly surmises the EP's spirit with the admirably economical lyrics, "because all I need is time, to grow up, to grow forward and to grow wise".

Opener *Fearsome Crowd*, arguably Flint's masterpiece thus far, is a paranoid tale of love, childhood and surviving both, while *Ohio* tells of the more sinister side of modern life, recounting a tale of prostitution in junkyards. Elsewhere, *Headrush* finds Flint pleading for the Apocalypse, while *The Blinking* and *London Lullaby* make for an engaging pair of bitterly honest ballads.

Magical is often an over-used description in the musical world, but it truly applies to this particular lady. Ironically, despite the indie uprising of recent years, her category has been partially ignored and similar talents dropped by labels; if *The Secret Boys Club EP* is similarly ignored, it would be a criminal offence. Don't let it happen.

Tiffany Daniels



Kimya Dawson

Remember That I Love You

K Records

★★★★½

Sometimes she's your best friend cooing softly into your ear; sometimes she's a street loon babbling on while you nervously back away; both stand-up comedienne and tragic heroine, on-hiatus Moldy Peach Kimya Dawson comes at you uncensored and unapologetic. Certainly, she doesn't flinch at penning lyrics that other artists might shy away from for being too extreme, too brazenly political and — particularly here on her fifth solo record in four years — a little too close to home.

My Mom is a deeply personal and affecting song that sounds like a diary transcript — you almost feel guilty for listening, eawiggling on her private thoughts. There is something entirely childlike about Dawson's description of her mother's illness that conveys how difficult it is to deal with the sickness and impending death of a parent, regardless of our age. Such events bring out the bewildered child within everyone, and it's this child that sings "And there's something in her blood / And there's something in her leg / And there's something in her brain / My mom's sick, she's in a hospital bed". This topic recurs elsewhere on the record; on *Caving In*, Dawson attempts to imagine the death of her mother and the subsequent dissolution of her family in an attempt to cope better when the event arrives.

Dawson's interest in personal tragedy is not a self-involved one, however; on *12.26* the view expands and Kimya places herself in the shoes, or the bare feet, of a tsunami survivor who has lost literally everything. The song is a heartfelt elegy that analyses the world-wide response to the 2004 Boxing Day disaster and damns American complacency and selfishness: "We'd have 12.26 tattooed across our foreheads / If something this atrocious happened on our coast instead."

Remember That I Love You may be a rough, ramshackle and under-produced record, but somehow

any other production style would seem entirely wrong. The lo-fi homemade quality is intrinsic to the Kimya Dawson ethos; on *Loose Lips*, when a whole host of voices join Kimya for the chorus, it matters less that some of them are out of time than that they sound like a gang of friends having a good time. Technical virtuosity is not the point; besides, the lyrics take centre stage to their musical base — consistently her trusty acoustic guitar.

Occasionally, the album makes for frustrating listening. When *I Like Giants* turns into a paean to a friend of Kimya's called Geneviève, if you don't know who that is (and I don't) it can feel like you're on the outside of a private joke, or listening in on banter that goes over your head. But on the whole this is a very charming album, and this is the only place on the record where witty irreverent humour becomes irksome silliness.

For better or worse, Kimya Dawson is unafraid to pour her heart onto the page and for that she should be saluted. *Remember That I Love You* veers from political idealism (when Kimya rails against George Bush on *Loose Lips*) to surreal humour and truly affecting personal revelations, often in the course of one song, but its voice is always honest and brave. This is an empathetic, comforting record whose aims are summed up in the lyrics of *Competition*: "Different voices, different tones / All saying that we're not alone."

Danny Weddup



Revl9n

Revl9n

Because

★★★½

Revl9n (originally named and still pronounced 'Revlon 9') make dirty disco death karaoke with leather boots, glitter and tiny, cheap, fantastic drum machines, packing in enough appeal for any frustrated gyrating scenester to get their filed polished teeth into.

Those who like to bask in the raw musical power of a dominant woman will find much to enjoy

here, but the more straight-edged listener who isn't into haute couture music and requires a background to their random hip thrusts and mechanical arms may well find this debut album too much or, equally, too little to get excited about.

With their roots running deep within the sleazy urban fashion scene, it's surely no coincidence that the trio's name is twinned with a universally renowned hair product (no plug intended). Their reasons for changing it were presumably legal, but who knows. It's apt and that is all. That they hail from Sweden is hardly surprising; the country has a proven track record in spawning ice cool throwbacks proud to have missed their true genre generation by decades, somehow managing to pull off all the shots that their forerunners did but with twice the effect — The Raveonettes and The Peepshows being particularly apt examples.

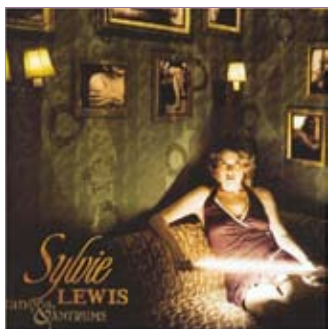
Beneath the breathily suggestive vocals of serial heartbreakers Maria Eilersen and Åsa Cederqvist lies the random guttural urges and robotic tampering of Nandor Hegedüs and his vast array of machines. Listen once and you're dropped behind the gleaming eye of a high-powered filter lens peering down the inner sanctum of a smoky club draped with bastard fashion art and futuristic lightning; at the far end, there's a catwalk down which the two women strut and point and rack up the heat. This is the beauty of *Revl9n* in all its grandeur — straight out of the glossy pages, ragged and overtly horny.

Listen again, however, and the constant club thumps, rhythmical pouting, sometimes ill-advised samples and old-school keyboard riffing begin to wear thin — the fabric frays, the heels break off and the fur coat whips around and stings you on your peachy, bronzed butt. Maybe it's just that something's gotten lost in translation with high-camp, cheesy lines like "I feel super fantastic / I feel fucking fantastic", but whatever it is, the album just doesn't front up enough genuine likeability to be the new black/brown/taupe etc.

Being out of your mind on club drugs may be what's required to enjoy this album as its makers intended. Lyrics like "I'm on my knees / I'm dripping wet / I tie you down / I kinda feel forced / It feels so good" are ridiculous and laughable otherwise.

All in all, *Revl9n* may have muscles but for now they're only flexing them. Next time let's see some sweat on those thighs.

Gary Munday



Sylvie Lewis

Tangos & Tantrums

Cheap Lullaby

★★★★

Enchanting right from the outset, *Tangos & Tantrums* boasts a beautiful blend of eccentric music hall-style backing and a voice that sounds as though its been classically trained and then eloped to New Orleans with a bluesy jazz band. Surprisingly upbeat considering its invariably dark subject matter and melancholic minor chord leanings, each track is a snapshot of a world that only Lewis seems to inhabit, her sepia-toned memories elegantly floating along. Fittingly, the sleeve bears no lyrics and is filled instead with anecdotes connected with each song, including musings by the artist and, in one case, a recipe for the cocktail imbibed at the time of writing.

By *Heart* sets the mood of the album perfectly; Wurlitzer, piano and percussion chime along nicely, invoking the feel of a gently turning carousel. As the lament unfurls, Lewis comes to the painful realisation that, although the relationship in question is not on her terms, she will stay the course until her beau decides to end it, whilst in the interim she learns to read his every move. Lines such as "your eyes are always straying, you want whatever's far" form simple but jarring contrasts with the playful accompaniment.

Such stunning mini-stories are woven throughout the album, tackling different stages of relationships with a distinctly elegant and unusual take on every aspect. For example, in *All His Exes*, Lewis is seemingly possessed by the spirit of a Twenties flapper, asserting her individuality away from the titular cast-offs. Many of these songs are steeped in atmospheric melancholy, for example, the waltzing *When I Drink*. In fact, so often does Lewis discuss drinking and tragedy that if you gave her a dobro, more twang in her voice and a pair of very delicate cowboy boots, she would not be out of place in country music. *Promises Of Paris* tells the tale of a man who's liable to drink himself to ruin and death while believing

his own deranged whisperings of the capital's majesty. Musically, the song possesses a climate all of its own, with a saxophone solo so richly textured that it feels as though you could step inside the scenario and find the afternoon sunshine streaming through slatted blinds and a chrome fan ticking in the background, hardly moving the hot, sticky air.

Despite its glorious lyrics about being unable to awake from "daydreams of blue roses you used to bring", *Love Songs* is a slight disappointment and *New York* could feasibly be skipped altogether to get to the fabulous *Conversation Piece* where Lewis is joined in a duet by Richard Swift, their voices seductively blending in a tale of love punctuated with allusions to war. *Valentine's Day* slows the pace to a cynical crawl before picking up once again for the delightfully dramatic bit-terness of *My Rival*, inspired by Rudyard Kipling's *Other Than That*, and the poignant *Old Friends*, which serves as a fitting finale for the album, as though bidding farewell to the listener with promises of a far-off reunion.

If given the attention it surely merits, the sensual, heart-sick world of Sylvie Lewis will transport you back in time and may even help you deal with a modern-day dilemma or two. Perfect for a lazy Sunday or an afternoon when you need to take time out from the world or perhaps to mend a wounded heart. **Gem Nethersole**



Barefoot

Barefoot

Pusspuss

★★★★

Concept albums, by their very nature, are a hit and miss breed. The clue is in the name; if the concept is a bad one, then the album is destined for ridicule as an exercise in pretension. How about a debut album made up of acoustic jazz covers of club, house and hip-hop anthems? Never mind the Balearics... here's Barefoot.

When singer Sam Obernik performed a Cubano version of *It Just Won't Do*, the Tim Deluxe hit featuring her vocals, it was large

enough a radio hit that Obernik struck upon the idea to combine her guitar-based songwriting abilities with her dance scene success. Enter Tommy D, a DJ, producer and songwriter famous for his work with the likes of Kylie, Janet Jackson, Catatonia, KT Tunstall and Corinne Bailey Rae, to name but more than a few. One evening and a bottle of wine later, Obernik and Tommy D conceived the idea of reinterpreting their favourite club anthems and Barefoot was born.

A project like this could easily be dismissed as a tongue-in-cheek slice of Hoxton postmodernism. Even in the late Nineties, Turner Prize winner Jeremy Deller orchestrated colliery brass band versions of acid house anthems, while Radio One sessions often include acoustic reworks of dancefloor fillers, like Will Young's *Hey Ya* or Jamie Cullum's *Frontin'*. *Barefoot* is more than just a musical curiosity, however, and the contemporary jazz and bossa nova stylings recall the likes of Nouvelle Vague, Zero 7 and Morcheeba. Most of the album was recorded live and the immediacy of the musicianship works in the album's favour, taking the songs that extra step further away from their over-polished origins. Plastered over so many bargain basement Asda checkout compilations, the word 'chillout' may have lost all meaning, but this is more laid back than a lounge singer seductress provocatively draped over a white baby grand.

On the surface the tracklisting reads like an 'old skool classics' CD, from Grandmaster Flash's *White Lines* and Crystal Waters *Gypsy Woman* to Underworld's *Born Slippy* and the Run DMC/Jason Nevins mash-up number one *It's Like That*. Aimed at the Nineties Ibiza crowd who have swapped the clubs and plastic pints of lager (lager, lager) for red wine soirees in their dockside apartments, what this album highlights perhaps more than anything is that dance music has always boasted a wealth of great tunes beneath layers of pounding beats and sequenced loops. Even ubiquitous dancefloor fillers like Mousse T's *Horny* are given fresh life, with Obernik's breathy vocals suiting the brazen lyrics to a, er, T, while a seductive bass line coolly pulses in the background.

The range of material here is the perfect vehicle for Obernik's vocal versatility, but where Barefoot go from here is anyone's guess. A debut concept album may have limited their future potential, but as far as concepts go it's an intriguing prospect and one that more than delivers. So if you're

looking for an album to impress your friends this summer, kick off your dancefloor heels and take an i-podiatry shuffle through the Barefoot experience.

Stephen Collings



Trespassers William

Having

Nettwerk

★★

Let's get things clear, Trespassers William live with their heads in a big fluffy cloud. That's not to say they're otherworldly — this particular nimbus definitely sits within the confines of our atmosphere — nor is it to say that they're deceiving themselves into thinking they're better than they actually are. *Having* is far too modest to ever be thought of as arrogant. Trespassers William sound like The Cardigans on tranquilisers, which is a great thing indeed if you want to relax and slip into unconsciousness but not so good first thing in the morning when you're commuting down a busy road on the way to work. There's no coffee call in sight; these songs will neither stick in the mind nor wake you from a slumber.

Opener *Safe, Sound* could easily be paralleled with Broken Social Scene's *Passport Radio*, awash as it is with echo machines and dreamy guitars. But while singer Anna-Lynne Williams croons lovingly over the top, she can't quite match up to Leslie Feist's hypnotic whisper. Sadly, it's all downhill from there, each track unfurling like dribble from your snoring mouth. *Weakening* is so vacant you wonder whether the music is about to disappear into itself, while the title of *Eyes Like Bottles* really speaks for itself.

Elsewhere, *Low Point* almost succeeds in its mission of becoming a table leg to which the listen can cling onto, saving them from the imminent impact with the floor. *No One* and *Matching Weight*, however, act like a bat to the back of the head. The end result resembles middle-class junkie heaven: a polished mahogany coffee table, half a cup of nettle tea and an unconscious, neatly-

dressed 'O.C.' watcher lying face up on the rug.

Trespassers William ultimately prove that too much of a good thing is, well, not so great. There are inspired songs here, absolutely, it's just that the comatose effect of *Having* in its entirety means that fewer listeners will come to appreciate the fact. Had the acoustic guitar been turned up just a little and the sound of waves dimmed down only slightly, the whole album would have been saved. As it stands, the only time that having *Having* will be handy is when you're finding it hard to nod off. **Tiffany Daniels**



Cocosuma

Pointing Excitedly To The Sky
Setanta

★½

On *Bam! Tululu!*, song number two on Cocosuma's fourth album *Pointing Excitedly To The Sky*, singer Amanda exclaims "I've been Jesus Christ". Whether or not she really believes this is a question unto itself, but the band's label Setanta clearly think that the lyric holds some truth. Either that, or the band are being used and abused to launder as much money as possible out of the coffee table genre, but *Pointing...* is unlikely to filter through to the few-albums-a-year demographic.

The sad truth is it's nothing special, neither good enough to slot into a prominent shelf on your CD rack nor bad enough to want to destroy it and bury the pieces deep underground. In a severe error of judgement, Cocosuma seem to have taken their primary influence from the insidious and grating background music found in Sims games, particularly on the opener, *Communication's Lost*. Luckily, it seems that they've also been listening to Azure Ray and Frou Frou, and it's these elements that rescue the songs. *The Servant* maintains the ongoing theme of hushed, under-the-breath vocals but attempts, and fails, to diversify into the electro genre. The underwater Casio, or whatever it is they've used, simply doesn't work. Whilst *Sparks* has an opening guitar riff worthy of any classic

Britpop act and is one of the more enjoyable numbers, the vocals let the whole thing down. There are occasional glimpses of greatness; *So As A Gentleman You Should Be More Polite* is a gem with delicate acoustic guitar and thankfully brightened-up vocals, but more often than not the songs are simply a slightly different version of the track before.

Essentially, Cocosuma are attempting to imitate every successful alternative band in America, but they always fall backwards into a puddle of their own hush-hush reject songs. Some of the songs show incredible potential, but to achieve what they're truly capable of, the band are going to have to stop trying so hard to fit in. **Tiffany Daniels**



Sol Seppy

The Bells Of 1 2
Grönland

★★★★★

Is Sol Seppy a faerie queen? Did she make this as a soundtrack to her magnificent transfiguration? I only ask because, from the atmospheric opener *1 2* onwards, one cannot help but be enchanted, nay, mesmerised by what has been achieved here. Often womblike in its comfort, like taking a big floaty bubble bath with Sigur Rós or diving by moonlight to the ocean's murky depths with Stína Nordenstam, *The Bells Of 1 2* heralds the arrival of a preternatural talent.

Alas, the faerie bit is a touch of truth economy. Sol Seppy's alter ego is actually a woman of mere flesh and bone, a woman known as Sophie Michalitsianos, who happens to be something of an all-singing monopoly; a woman with one foot in England and one in Oz, who began to write songs when she was only five years old, who found time to become a classically trained musician, build her own studio, tour with Radiohead and make special sounds with Sparklehorse in the U.S.A. She's a multi-faceted and shimmering creature who seemingly can't help but lay herself bare, capturing the sound of an unpretentious drifter who is unsure of where she's been

but is definitely aware of where she's headed. Someone who wants to share with you what she's seen. What she's seen is sadness and hope, sex and confusion, simultaneously powerless and powerful. Her music is devastating where it's touching and uplifting, heart-wrenchingly human in the most basic way, but a story told with a supernatural quality that belittles all that. Gracefully innocent piano, sitting amidst unaffected hushed vocals and soft orchestration, is wonderfully contrasted by a darker attitude, where the likes of Lamb or Ruby flit between the sombre moodiness of Gorillaz's *El Mañana* and the twisting of pretty homemade lo-fi knives into beats that border on trip-hop; each part of this vast spectrum illustrated with magical poetry like a modern day spell.

Consider me under it. This is utterly breathtaking stuff and deserves to be immersed in for quite some time to come. Quite simply, a twinkling debut from beginning to end. **Anna Claxton**



El Perro Del Mar

El Perro Del Mar
Memphis Industries

★★★½

Three years ago, a chic-looking Swedish girl went on a Spanish beach holiday when a dog popped out of nowhere onto the shore. The girl, named Sarah, was inspired by this, went home, worked hard, wrote an album, swapped a lot of CDRs, got signed to the same label as The Pipettes and Field Music and toured with José González and Calexico. I suppose that this slightly odd fairy-tale goes a long way to explaining exactly what her project is about. Albeit, of course, nothing to do with canines. Musically, however, this is a debut offering that interestingly mixes the sublime with the unusual.

Because, whilst bittersweet, longing and often alienating, El Perro Del Mar essentially creates delicate, minimalist retro-pop by blurring a kaleidoscope of playground string quartets, gentle handclaps and Supremes-style harmonies with the vulnerable vocal of a chronically depressed

Nina Persson and the mild kitsch of Petula Clark in her heyday. Yet she does it in such a way that it makes you want to stop sobbing into your milkshake in favour of doing 'the monkey'; this is a collection of songs made for the cool chicks in tight pencil skirts wiggling their bums at ne'er-do-well boys named Kenickie. Songs with a dignified sound that will also appeal to ladies what lunch. Songs that will be cherished, most strikingly, by anyone who's ever been in love. And been dumped. And, shortly afterwards, had someone drive past and splash a giant puddle all over their best diamanté.

Upsetting and confusing, yet undeniably refreshing, from the melancholy "be-bop-a-lula" of *Party* and comforting Argyle sweater-wearing stroke of the head that is *This Loneliness*, to the pant-flashing mantra *It's All Good*, and resigned yet slinky Brenda Lee cover, *Here Comes That Feeling*. In short, each track is a chapter in a frighteningly frank journey into the female psyche, an empowering celebration of grown-up teenage heartache on the outside, pure bubbling neuroses on the innards.

Meaning that, by bringing a whole new perspective to being a woman in the Noughties, these seemingly cute ditties, fraught with determination and extreme femininity, just might not be for everyone. Still, if any of the above sounds a bit like you, twirl gum round index finger, fluff out petticoat and have another vodka. Rest assured you're in good company. **Anna Claxton**



Mina Agossi

Well, You Needn't
Candid

★★

Afro-French chanteuse Mina Agossi has been making serious waves on the European jazz circuit with her stripped back, to-the-bone approach to avant-garde jazz. This second album follows hot on the heels of her well regarded debut *Zaboum* (2005), taking further and more confident steps along her chosen, and certainly somewhat surrealist pathway. Standards, contemporary covers

and original compositions are all present and each is delivered in Agossi's unmistakable, inimitable style, and therein lies the rub.

There's simply no arguing with Mina Agossi's skill as a jazz singer. With such commanding control over her warble cords, it's certain that to watch her and her band perform these songs in a dark, smoky jazz hole would be an experience equal parts exciting, unsettling and terrifically moving. You'd never quite be sure whether the swirls and pulses conjured would coalesce into perfect, pure jazz or collapse into a trainwreck of cacophony, which frankly would be half the attraction. But as has been proven by many who have come before, it is nigh on impossible to capture the adventure and controlled anarchy of this style of jazz on a recorded format. Sure the notes are all there but the danger is inevitably lacking. So often with more avant-garde or improvisational pieces, a moment that when experienced firsthand seems daring and risqué becomes merely sterile and contrived when frozen in time. Rather than a magnificent, wild snarling beast we're delivered a shadow, caged and pacing with no small amount of discomfort.

There's a clutch of more digestible songs such as *Drive*, *Laundry Man Blues* and *May I Sit At Your Table*, and most likely it's these that will work best for the casual listener. Other tracks take a rather less palatable approach — on *Don't Look At Me*, Agossi's voice dissolves from an appealingly sultry croon to a wailing maelstrom not unlike scathing electric guitar feedback before resolving back into the calmer vocal line, while on the title track she employs an admittedly stunning scat technique on top of the skeletal backing. It's initially impressive but soon wears thin, taking on a tonality more Crazy Frog than Ella Fitzgerald. This is a double irony since the vocal on the mostly a cappella *After You've Gone* bears more than a passing resemblance to the grand old lady of jazz's velvet tones. Interestingly, Mina's signature approach works pretty well on a cover of Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Chile*. Her voice is given free reign and she achieves that rarest of things, an effective jazz interpretation of an iconic rock song. The fearless innovator in the late guitar hero would surely have approved.

Now back to that sorry looking rating. On a purely technical basis, this album is clearly deserving of praise. The sparse production is crystal clear, letting every nuance shine through, and Agossi's tightly skilled band are beyond reproach. For the jazz aficionado

with leanings towards the modern and avant-garde forms, this will be manna from heaven. It really is that well done. But a casual listener, including myself, could find themselves enjoying each successive listen less and less. Elements and devices that first added interest soon begin to grate and it's a real shame. Those in the know in the jazz world will continue to beat a path to the door of Mina Agossi's concerts and form orderly queues at their local record stores to get their copies of her albums. For anyone else with merely a passing interest in the lighter ends of the jazz spectrum, the question remains: should you buy this album for your listening pleasure? And the honest answer is well, you needn't...

Trevor Raggatt



Josephine Foster

A Wolf In Sheep's Clothing

Locust

★★★★

With *A Wolf In Sheep's Clothing*, opera school dropout turned freak-folk songstress extraordinaire Josephine Foster has created a wonderful album free of form and conformity. It is a rather unconventional and exceedingly brave take on 19th Century German *Lieder*, which many regard as one of the classic schools of songwriting. Composers such as Schumann, Brahms and Schubert created wonderful and delicate works using the lyrics of the literary geniuses of the romantic era including Goethe and Eichendorff. Naturally, these compositions have been performed and recorded many times, yet Foster has found a way to filter them through a unique and magical lens using a mix of modern and classical instruments and a sound that reminds one of church recordings of the early 1900s.

An Die Musik, Schubert's ode to the wonders of music, opens the seven-song suite. Sounding at first quiet and delicate with rhythmical strumming and Foster's angelic vocals, it soon develops into an electric guitar workout in which the instruments are played lazily and messily, giving one of the

world's most famous classical works a rather outlandish sound. *Der König in Thule*, also a Schubert composition, embraces the evanescence of love and life. A rough sounding electric guitar in lead melody accompanied by a softer countermelody sounds at first strangely modern, but after several listens appears effortlessly cool, Foster's versatile vocal adding to her straightforward, honest adaptation.

Everything on this album has been played to emotional perfection. Foster has clearly been indulged with complete artistic freedom. It's refreshing to listen to delicate and moving songs that have not been pushed to alien-sounding technical precision by commercially driven producers. Wolf's *Verschwiegene Liebe*, a long-ing ode to the freedom of thought, and Brahms' *Die Schwestern*, a wonderful and sound-layered piece about the unextinguishable bond between sisters, both strongly benefit from Foster's approach; free from constraint, heavenly and moving. The instrumentation and arrangements are almost playful, always responding to the call of Foster's voice. Schumann's *Wehmut* and *Auf einer Burg* and Schubert's *Nähe des Geliebten* have such a strong recording approach, it's as if you were discovering original works by this dark, delicious enchantress.

The songs may date back over a hundred years, but in Foster's fair and capable hands, the dust never settles on these dramatic and arresting interpretations. Startling stuff. **Anja McCloskey**



The Puppini Sisters

Betcha Bottom Dollar

Universal Classics & Jazz

★★★★

It's a cold hard fact that Britain has a habit of embracing novelty acts over and above most other major music markets, more often for worse than for better. But The Puppini Sisters (Marcella Puppini, Kate Mullins and Stephanie O'Brien) aren't just any old novelty act — they pay homage to the Andrews Sisters and other performers of the 1940s in a way

we haven't seen in a long long time. They're the whole package — look, moves, old school swing sounds — and through this impressive dedication to the details, they've developed a sizable cult following in the hipper parts of London. To fully appreciate The Puppini Sisters, you really have to see them live because they put on a hell of a show. As such, focusing purely on the musical aspect was always going to be something of a shaky proposition, running the risk of pigeonholing the band as yet another covers band with a twist in the hideously schmaltzy vein of G4 and Il Divo.

But don't be so quick to dismiss them; *Betcha Bottom Dollar* is a delight with barely a whiff of a stinker. The 'sisters' have studied their inspirations to perfection and in doing so have created an amalgam of styles that is truly unique, adding something new to even the most familiar of tunes. Getting Oscar-nominated composer Benoît Charest ('Les Triplettes De Belleville') in the producer's chair was a masterstroke for the Puppinis. His expertise ensured that the trio's close harmony singing was recorded in the most natural way and the array of weird instruments he introduced to the mix adds distinctive touches of character throughout.

Classics such as *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, *Bei Mir Bist Du Schön* and *Jeepers Creepers* really show off how tight the ladies have become. *Mr Sandman's* acoustic-sounding swing arrangement is reminiscent of Buena Vista Social Club and other old-school Cuban acts, while their very sexy take on *Java Jive* offers irrefutable proof of their individual vocal talent and greatness. It's the Forties makeovers of modern classics that really make this album special, however, and first up is Kate Bush's *Wuthering Heights*. Unbelievably, they pull it off; what at first seems like an unusual choice develops into a spooky swing affair with added musical saw for eerie effect. Female power-anthem *I Will Survive* also gets the full Puppini treatment. In true acoustic swing style with ever-running double bass lines and drop-in piano chords, it's a thrillingly unique interpretation. They also tackle Blondie's *Heart Of Glass*, a perennial covers band favourite that also appears on Nouvelle Vague's recent album. This version is quite different — sung in Forties doo-wop fashion with what can only be described as ragtime percussion clattering beneath the vocal.

There are less exciting numbers too; their version of The Smiths' *Panic*, for instance, doesn't seem to have received that much of

an original twist. Even so, it all comes good in the end as the album concludes with a lovely impromptu live recording of *In The Mood* with finger snapping and plenty of attitude. The Puppini Sisters really seem to be on to something worthwhile here, and it's not hard to see how they were snapped up for a cool £1 million by a major label in no time. That they're currently writing their own original song material is even more promising. Here's to a future steeped in the glorious past.

Anja McCloskey



Espers

Espers II
Drag City

★★★★

In parapsychological terms, the word 'espers' means 'ghost hunters', or rather 'extraordinary supernatural phenomena explored and revealed'. It's an astoundingly fitting description for this six-piece psychedelic folk act from Philadelphia, centred on the trio of vocalists Greg Weeks, Meg Baird and Brooke Sietinsons. The self-explanatory, Led Zeppelin-aping title aside, *Espers II* is a dark and melancholic mixture of traditional folk and freak electronica, like listening to a Sixties folk tape whilst watching a spaceship land outside your muslin-curtained window — simply outlandish. This is in fact their third full-length release, following last year's unusual covers record *The Weed Tree*, and things are getting progressively weirder.

Opener *Dead Queen* is a spooky, graceful affair that mixes high-pitched trembling electro sounds with medieval guitar melodies and airy female vocals. What starts quite simply slowly evolves into a thickly-layered, eight-minute epic; strings, electric guitars and synthetic sounds combine to create layer after layer of counter-melodies, culminating in a wall of dissonant sound that almost drives you to discomfort. The beauty of *Espers* is that although they use a modern approach to recording, the technology never seems to compromise the songs' authenticity; modern and

classic elements blend together extraordinarily smoothly.

Widow's Weed and *Cruel Storm* offer a more rhythmical approach, though both are equally melancholic and dark. Sometimes reminiscent of a funeral service, sometimes like a lonely summer night's walk through a sinister forest, the arrangements are simple but clever. Another mini-epic, *Children Of Stone* is an emotional masterpiece that is justly given the time it needs to evolve rather than reaching a premature conclusion. Various interludes — first a flute then a squealing theremin and lastly a swooning cello — truly accentuate the rare, strange and fragile beauty of this uniquely harmonious composition.

Mansfield & Cyclops, *Dead King* and *Moon Occults The Sun* also blend the new with the old in clever ways. Rhythmical and textural layers and the use of dissonant and sometimes unbearably high electronic sounds have a freaky and dark effect on the listener. The closely miked recording of the vocals is just as unsettling and will leave you wondering how something so distant and unearthly can be so near.

Espers may indeed be hunters of ghosts but listen to this latest excursion into the future-past and you'll find they're not beyond indulging in a little haunting of their own. **Anja McCloskey**



Lisa Germano

In The Maybe World
Young God

★★★★

It's hard to disagree with Young God Records founder Michael Gira when he claims that Lisa Germano belongs "right up there with the cadre of strong, emotionally raw, challenging and original women singers such as PJ Harvey, Marianne Faithfull, Cat Power and Björk", though quite why she isn't, commercially at least, is and isn't obvious. Like Harvey, Germano makes music that's more often than not unremittingly intense, sometimes catching you off guard with unexpected shots of humour — a tried, tested and triumphant Björkian trick. Like Faithfull and

Chan Marshall, her lulling voice is both narcoleptic and ravaged, deceptively sombre and extraordinarily distinctive. But where the self-professed Emotional Wench truly excels and betters even these mighty pillars of all her peers is in her ability to establish a mood and immerse you so deep inside it that you're never quite sure whether the gut knots she invokes are down to claustrophobia, fear or rapture.

If this were Germano's first ever album, hacks would be stabbing each other in the eyes with pencils in a race to coin a brand new genre. But it's not, it's her seventh in a fifteen-year career and no one has quite managed to pin her butterfly down. And really what's the point? Still, if it's a label you want, I'm prepared to make the effort and after much consideration have plumped for 'dreamo' — sort of like emo through an opiate haze, where snot-nosed woe-is-me's are banished in favour of sophisticated dreamweavers who far outstrip generic dear diarists with delicately nuanced tales of human nature. Oh, and a little self-deprecation as the reward of *actual* life experience. That's always good.

Funnily enough, a few of *In The Maybe World*'s dozen songs could easily be shredded into out-and-out rock monsters in the hands of another. Take *Red Thread*, for example, whose emo appeal surely lies in its call-and-response telephone exchange of "go to hell", "fuck you" — you can practically hear the crack as the receiver collides with its cradle. But Germano is too wily a creature to languish in the obvious, twisting the lyric to broaden the moment into a greater realisation that anger is just as valid and healthy an emotion as love, and that one can often drive the other.

Elsewhere, her main preoccupation is death. The fortunately unprophetic *Too Much Space* arose from her fear of losing her dad after a serious health scare; *Golden Cities* arrived on the occasion of her much-loved cat's death from cancer; while the solo piano elegy of *Except For The Ghosts* is a decade-old number written in honour of her friend Jeff Buckley, exploring his headspace in the moment he accepted he was a goner. *Wire* and *Into Oblivion* are equally affecting, packing more emotion into a single line than Conor Oberst at a wake for his own credibility.

Germano's charm is incontrovertibly eerie and certainly fanciful enough to put the less enlightened off, but this is her finest work since 1994's dementedly brilliant *Geek The Girl* and 'maybe' just won't cut it. If you're asking whether to investigate further, the magic word is yes. **Alan Pedder**



The Grates

Gravity Won't Get You High
Universal

★★

This debut album from Australian upstarts The Grates should be subtitled '...And Neither Will We', such is the disappointment with which you may be faced had you caught the foursome whilst touring with The Go! Team and The Zutons earlier this year. Where their live show is a riotously enthusiastic neon bonanza, their energetic zaniness translates with severely mixed results on record.

There's a noticeable attempt to sound like a blues-rock band in that same bass-free way as Sleater-Kinney or Yeah Yeah Yeahs, though the sound is tinny and irritating rather than raw and intense. The songs mostly bounce along in a summery fashion and there's no denying that it's pleasant at times, particularly with the addition of some third-wave ska-inspired horns in *Lies Are Much More Fun*.

It's when they try to sound angst-ridden and angry that things go awry. *Feels Like Pain* is a grunge-lite ditty with its token quiet, sullen verse and scream-along loud chorus, but comes across more like rubbish German rockers The Guano Apes than the more enjoyable likes of Hole. Despite being a fairly respectable slice of raw indie rock, even their breakthrough single, the chaotic *Trampoline*, is horribly let down by embarrassing lyrics.

The trouble is that none of it sounds remotely convincing; the album feels like a smash and grab 'n' mix of various bands The Grates are rather too fond of. Patience Hodgson's accent changes from Canadian to British to American and back to Australian, a sure sign of someone trying too hard to emulate their idols. Here's Karen O and there's Alanis, over yonder's Corin Tucker and lurking somewhere else is a yodelling Marlene Dietrich. OK, so none of it is really that terrible, it's just that the reasons to own this album are excruciatingly scant when there are better versions of every song out there already.

Robbie de Santos

Jewel
*Goodbye Alice In
 Wonderland*
 Atlantic
 ★★



A success! The exorcism was a success! It seems that Alaskan singer-songwriter Jewel Kilcher is no longer in thrall to the same tormenting demon that resides in the likes of Britney Spears and other pop icons. While some may accept that the cause of these pop princesses' inexplicably ridiculous and self-destructive antics is simply sheer idiocy, possession is the only explanation for Kilcher's 2003 album, *0304*. Need a reminder? *0304* was a shocking, neon-stained, soul-sold-to-Lucifer, dance-pop disaster, trading in her folksy image and battered acoustic for hair extensions, a push-up bra and a choreographed entourage of hyperactive dancers. It was a long long way from the album that made her, 1995's *Pieces Of You*, a sweetly naïve but soulfully honest collection that yielded several hits in her native US.

Now it's 2006 and Jewel is back from through the looking glass with *Goodbye Alice In Wonderland*, her sixth album. With most of her tendencies for pop exhibitionism shaken off, Jewel has bidden farewell to more than just Alice and the Mad Hatter, but also to whatever she was drinking (or smoking) at that unhinged unbirthday shindig. Delivering a collection of songs either composed or played live over the last ten years, but never

recorded, Kilcher gets closer to the Jewel that millions loved. Not quite all the way back to the *Pieces Of You* days, but following closely in the glossier tracks of 2001's *This Way*.

Somewhere along the way, between *This Way* and the still folksy *Spirit*, Kilcher struck up a friendship (a love affair even!) with the recording studio and the make-you-break-you mainstream. Take a look at her career to date; of some seventeen singles released, twelve have been altered in some way for radio. Sadly, the passion hasn't gone out of that relationship yet and the studio is very much a presence, despite initial rumours of a lo-fi approach following an acoustic tour. Fans who are looking for titles heard from these and earlier acoustic renditions won't find those versions here. There's a hint of acoustic sparkle, certainly, but make no mistake about it, this is beefed-up, polished product.

The title track is billed as her most personal to date but you'll struggle to hear genuine feeling over the studio sheen that takes the song from simple acoustic beginning to its grossly overdone conclusion. Catchy lead single *Again & Again* is smooth as silk, with a nicely done vocal riding over a steady drumbeat, and the same goes for the new up-tempo version of *0304's Fragile Heart* -

a perfect example of the revision queen reworking a song for radio play. *Satellite* makes a U-turn, straying away from the direction of the rest of the album. Though it retains a primarily country feel, the pervasive radio-friendly production mires the song in its own ghastly slickness. Perhaps it's the aftershock of *0304*; after all, what else can be expected from a woman who was formerly doing the devil's bidding? That fact and a nod to Jewel's impressive vocal range make this sour pop ditty almost excusable.

Goodbye Alice In Wonderland might be unnecessarily overburdened with beats and extras, drowning out the simplicity for which her earlier albums were so highly regarded, but at least it's a sign that Kilcher is well on the way back. It may require a modicum of patience, but there's a brilliant diamond lying in the rough (if you can consider this well-buffed album rough in the slightest) if you make it to the end. *1000 Miles Away* is an astonishing gift; its minimalism, simple strumming and innocent vocal will pull you back to 1995. That's right, it's a piece of *Pieces Of You*. It's a godsend; a ray of light. Refreshing and welcoming like she's finally come home. It might be goodbye Alice, but it's hello again to Jewel.

Marc Soucy



Magneta Lane
Dancing With Daggers
 Paperbag
 ★★½

Formed in 2003, Magneta Lane are a Canadian power-pop trio featuring French, Lexi and Nadia in the classic combination of bass, drums and vocals/guitar, respectively. Having finally issued their debut EP *The Constant Lover* this side of the pond last December, there couldn't be a better time to capitalise on the Canadian-friendly musical climate. This debut full-length apparently takes its inspiration from the angel and devil that sit astride each of our shoulders; thus, sinful rock and saintly melodies co-exist for the delectation of those enjoying the long dark teatime of their souls.

Unfortunately, any hopes of something special are fairly swiftly dashed. Don't get me wrong; it's a decent album in itself, just not one that lives up to its twin muses. A more accurate description would be Blondie meets The Strokes. There's Debbie Harry's archness and glacial cool, her band's effortless pop tunes and style. From Julian Casablancas and co., the girls have duly noted how to preserve the rougher edges of their sound to give the music a bit of grit and spike. However, like recent albums from both these bands, the main problem here is a sorry lack of variety. If an album has a constant feel, it also needs to be constantly brilliant. *Dancing With Daggers* isn't; it's good, but your attention may well waver after just five songs, as if you've heard all you needed to hear.

It doesn't help that this kind of thing has been done before, and rather better at that, by bands like The Duke Spirit; Nadia may have a mighty fine voice but she's no Leila Moss. *Dancing With Daggers* would have been more digestible were it split down the middle and released as two EPs, tempting the palate not dulling it with overkill of a single ingredient. If Magneta Lane learn to hide their flaws much more effectively, the next course might go down a treat.

Russell Barker



Tender Trap

6 Billion People

Fortuna Pop!

★★★

Twee queen Amelia Fletcher returns with the long-awaited second album from Tender Trap, a band that includes her cohorts John Stanley (bass) and Rob Pursey (guitar), both of whom have been with Fletcher since her days fronting the much-loved Nineties indie band Heavenly and their second incarnation Marine Research. The addition of drums from The Magnetic Fields' Claudia Gonson gives the album a fuller feel than its stripped back, electronic predecessor *Film Molecules* (2002).

If anything, *6 Billion People* sees Fletcher reverting to type, being closer to Heavenly in style than the glossier sounds of Marine Research. Having said that, the title track veers closer to the latter, with a touch of doo-wop gracing the shuffling rhythm and Fletcher's coy vocal bemoaning the difficulties of finding a perfect partner for her friend, unselfish to the last. Indeed, when it comes to her own love life, she just gets all tongue tied and starts *Talking Backwards*. Yet by the time we reach the self-assured and sultry *I Would Die For You*, things are becoming a mess of contradictions.

Whilst *Applecote* isn't the new genre that you might be hoping for, it's something slightly different for Tender Trap, closer than they've ever come to avant garde. The skin-and-bones chorus displays an art-rock element and fits well as a centrepiece double with *Fahrenheit 451*, as despairing and sombre a thing as you'll hear all year. Revelling in the success of these musical departures, Tender Trap prove themselves adept at mixing it up across the rest of the album, the experiments being the highlights. (*I Always Love You When I'm*) *Leaving You* is another dark number, one you can imagine soundtracking the lead from a black and white movie as they lurk and dart through the shadows. Elsewhere, *Dreaming Of Dreaming* evokes memories of the spirit of Ride, being a hazy phase offering that falls somewhere lovely between shoegaze and post-rock.

Fletcher and her friends have delivered yet another solid album, and indeed there's something inherently reliable about any project she's involved in. Whilst her albums will almost certainly fall short of changing the face of music, the world would be a much duller place without them.

Russell Barker



Controller.Controller

X-Amounts

Paper Bag

★★★

Here's a teaser for you: at what point in a band's career does hype become counterproductive? I doubt the music industry will ever quite figure it out, but here's a case worth studying. Toronto's Controller.Controller quickly became critical darlings following a whirlwind press blitz on their debut EP, *History*. A quick signing from the label that brought you Broken Social Scene and Magneta Lane later and the pressure was on to justify every bit of the buzz.

In terms of genre, Controller.Controller are hard to pin down, though the phrase 'death disco' seems to follow them around. However, what they do is far from conventional dance, even under that colossal genre umbrella. Instead, their tunes are predominantly dubby bass driven, but where you might expect ska is edgy rock and punk. The disco bit comes in with beats that intertwine with menacing riffs reminiscent of Joy Division or early Cure — you can see why they were billed with Franz Ferdinand on tour and why they're best mates with compatriots The Organ.

With echoes of New Order, Interpol and fellow Canadians Metric, the songs have a cold experimental feel and often threaten impending doom. Regular guitar onslaughts stab away at any overriding dance or techno themes, creating a cacophony of genre-busting rhythms. The tension created from the deliberate dichotomy is practically tangible as we're challenged by something that is one moment minimalist and the next moment bursting with melodies at war.

The songs that appear on *X-Amounts* may have worked in front of an audience with all the full-on energy and attitude that makes the live experience, well, live, but they don't work here, especially as a collection. The relentless, brash assault soon begins to grate and everything melds into one giant racket. Singer Nirmala Basnayake's vocals have euphemistically been called 'honest' and 'raw', but she really only uses one tone and it jars with the angular rhythms. In the same way that Sleater-Kinney or PiL can sometimes be better in diminutive doses (x-amounts, if you will), the same applies to this record's monotonic resonance and dull uniformity.

Coming back to the original question, those buying into the media hype surrounding Controller.Controller may well be disappointed by the lack of sustainable interest on offer. Get one thing straight though, *X-Amounts* is neither safe nor dependent on the latest hot-or-not countdown — a fault that mars so many debuts from bands showered with early praise. Controller.Controller have managed to sidestep such pitfalls; their style and approach is genuinely innovative and, though the album largely fails, there are moments of exquisiteness (*Heavy As A Heart* in particular is energetic and tuneful). Don't blame it on the hype, the moonlight or even the good times, it's the dearth of tunes that really does them in.

Stephanie Heney



Dixie Chicks

Taking The Long Way

Columbia

★★★★

Taking The Long Way is the Dixie Chicks' fourth studio album, produced by man of the moment Rick Rubin. The girls share writing credits on all the tracks — a first for them — with such songwriting luminaries as Sheryl Crow, Neil Finn and Gary Louris of The Jayhawks. There's a conscious effort to expand upon the acoustic, bluegrass feel of 2002's *Home*. Driving rhythm guitar and three-part harmonies abound in a nod

to the 'rockier' side of country. Fear not Chicks fans, the banjo, mandolin and fiddle still play a major part. It's clear that Maines, Maguire and Robison haven't totally abandoned their Nashville cousins, but be under no illusions — this is the sound of three competent songwriters with a wealth of experience cutting loose, both musically and lyrically.

Yes, they have bones to pick. Yes, they choose to do so with a certain lack of subtlety, but who can blame them? Their run-in with Dubya received more column inches of newsprint than can possibly be deemed healthy in a world where unspeakable horrors occur on a daily basis. But don't be fooled by the media backlash; the Chicks were courting controversy way back on 2001's *Goodbye Earl* and the acerbic *White Trash Wedding* from *Home*. If you think these girls are a manufactured country/pop wet dream, think again — they've always had the chops, the humour and, yes, the intelligence to shake it up with the best of them.

Taking The Long Way opens with *The Long Way Round*, a road movie Don Henley would be proud to have written. It's a fine way indeed to say 'we're back!' with the nice addition of some clever lyrical nods to earlier Chicks songs. *Easy Silence* follows with swathes of harmony and a plea for the simple things in life to keep you sane. Key talking point and canny first single *Not Ready To Make Nice* is Maines' response to the CD burning and radio boycott the band endured as a result of her London outburst; it rocks, it says what it has to, and it's followed by *Everybody Knows*, a lovely melody and an introspective look at how the last two years has affected the close-knit trio.

It goes on. Each cut has merits, carefully constructed to achieve an emotional response and most hitting the right buttons. Maines courts the ire of her hometown with *Lubbock Or Leave It*, which has the classic line "...this is the only place, where as you're getting on the plane, you see Buddy Holly's face..." Others worthy of multiple plays are *Favorite Year*, a wistful look back at love gone wrong, and *Bitter End*, which eloquently dissects the true meaning of friendship, but really, they're all pretty good. The Chicks have consistently improved with every album, and this is their best offering yet.

Unafraid to experiment, unafraid to steer their own path, the Dixie Chicks deserve a hearing. Forget the country tag and your own prejudices, this is a band at its peak; tune in or miss out.

Paul Woodgate



Elin Ruth

Elin Ruth

Korova

★★★★

You've heard of love at first sight, right? Well, how about love at first chord? This international debut by 24 year old Swedish singer-songwriter Elin Ruth Sigvardsson is so well crafted that from the first strum to the last, I could barely restrain myself from rapidly skipping from one track to the next, purely to experience the entire album at once, obeying some kind of hedonistic song addiction. It's hardly surprising really. This is practically a greatest hits, as Ruth (or Sigvardsson, depending where you come from) has been around for quite some time and these eleven songs have been cribbed from her best-selling, award-winning domestic releases *Saturday Light Naïve* (2003) and *Smithereens* (2005) and spiffed up a little for a wider audience.

Take first single *When It Comes To You*, for example. A massive airplay hit in her native land, it's a perfect summer singalong that should have set alight the Radio 2 playlist and established Elin as a star. It didn't, but with its affirmative and empowering lyrics, that shouldn't stop you from giving it a whirl. Even better is second track *Paper Cup Words*, in which she mines the depths of solitude with beautiful piano and mournful cello as she brings to life the conscious decision to outrun a person, a place, a life and everything that it means. It'll break hearts.

It doesn't stop there, as Ruth maintains the quality throughout. Each song forges a snippet of insight into the human condition, the interplay of emotions and the realization that every person undergoes but feels is their own unique journey. Musically, it won't be everyone's cup of tea. There's a slight MOR sheen that glistens over some of the songs but they're never drab. The ability to combine melancholic messages with joyous beats (albeit with minor tones) is a particularly appealing feature of the album, particularly on *Contradictory Cut* and the introspective *Yellow Me*, a track

that in other hands could well have been rather self-indulgent, is tempered by Elin's healthy dose of realism, giving an unexpected gravity to her questioning.

Elsewhere, *If Love Can Kill, I'll Die For You* comes with a lush nagging refrain that could well sneak into your brain and force you to sing it repeatedly with nary a glimmer of mercy, while the universal imagery of solidarity and love found in *Song For Anna* gives the song a poignancy that makes it ideal to turn to for solace or perspective and insight into myriad situations. More than anything else here, album finale *Porcelain* exemplifies a gentle musicality intermingled with discordant notes that suggests the accompaniment has been specifically crafted to accentuate rather than merely accompany the vocals.

This may seem like an obvious statement, but pop writers too often fail to accurately portray a song's identity and mood before even a syllable has been sung. Not so Elin Ruth. With (or indeed without!) the endorsement of her fellow countryman José González, she could still manage to make a name for herself outside of her Nordic base, and certainly deserves to make some kind of splash. Take the edge off the heat and sip on this sophisticated folk-pop. Or if, like me, you fall for her charms, gulp it down and get yourself a refill.

Gem Nethersole



Mark Knopfler & Emmylou Harris

All The Roadrunning

Mercury

★★★★½

The illustrious career of Emmylou Harris has been marked by a series of creative collaborations with other singers and musicians. From the first, now legendary, Gram Parsons duets through her work with Linda Ronstadt and Dolly Parton as one third of Trio to her partnership with Daniel Lanois on *Wrecking Ball* (1995), Harris has sought out (and been sought out by) a range of diverse collaborators. In the meantime, she's also continued to raise

harmony singing to new artistic heights on records by Lucinda Williams, Neil Young, Willie Nelson, John Prine, Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith, Patty Griffin, the McGarrigles and just about anyone else you care to name.

The most significant of these collaborations have served an important function for Harris, allowing her to explore all kinds of areas of the country-folk-rock palette and keep her own particular brand of "cosmic American music" fresh and vital. Crucially, however, even her most experimental work has always retained a distinctive personality, a kind of purity, elegance and poise that justifies Lucinda Williams's description of her as "the Grace Kelly of country music."

We haven't heard much from Harris since 2003's *Stumble Into Grace*, a record that saw her continuing to wed her own newly-discovered songwriting abilities to *Wrecking Ball*-esque sonic atmospherics. Once again demonstrating once again her ability to inspire and engage with new generations, she turned up on Bright Eyes' *I'm Wide Awake (It's Morning)*, adding some genuine country-folk ache to Conor Oberst's sometimes strained musings, and also made a distinguished contribution to the 'Brokeback Mountain' soundtrack with *A Love That Will Never Grow Old*. *All The Roadrunning* finds her in collaborative mode once again, teaming up this time with Mark Knopfler on a set of twelve new tracks, ten penned by Knopfler, two by Harris herself.

Knopfler and Harris first appeared together on the 2001 Hank Williams tribute album *Timeless* and *All The Roadrunning* has been in the pipeline ever since. Reviewers of the album so far have focused to an almost indecent degree on the singers' respective ages, as though a record made by two people over fifty must inevitably be less 'hip' than 'hip replacement'. That said, even the most cursory listen to *All The Roadrunning* reveals a degree of class and style that only experience can buy.

Indeed, as soon as the album opens, with sturdy drums, mandolin and Knopfler's distinctive guitar licks, we know we're in safe hands. *Beachcombing* is a joyous song of homecoming on which Harris and Knopfler's voices combine with disarming ease and grace. Surely it can be no mere coincidence that their first shared vocal line is on the lyric "We had a harmony". The often-used 'silk and sandpaper' analogy has never been more apt, and on *This Is Us* they duplicate the feat achieved by Harris and Willie

Nelson on *Gulf Coast Highway*, sounding like a long-married couple leafing through a lifetime of intimate memories.

Repeatedly, the album's songs strike a balance between regret and resignation, mixing melancholy with a sense of possibility and hope for the future. Knopfler's atmospheric guitar work makes *I Dug Up A Diamond* truly sparkle, accordion and fiddle turn *Red Staggerwing* into a rootsy reel, and the pensive verses of *Rollin' On* give way to a rush of hope and optimism in the choruses.

The delicate *Love & Happiness* resembles *Fields Of Gold*, while *Donkey Town*, with its small-town adultery and escape for one of the three protagonists, wouldn't have sounded at all out of place on Springsteen's *Devils & Dust* (2005), with Knopfler taking the lead and Harris joining him on the hushed but resolved choruses. The chiming *Beyond My Wildest Dreams*, on the other hand, could be arena-rock Springsteen, as Harris and Knopfler unashamedly celebrate a love that has endured beyond either of the protagonist's imaginings. The beautiful title track — a warm and moving song of time and travel — is the undisputed standout.

As a whole, however, the album is not an entirely smooth journey; *Right Now* is something of a dull generic plod and *Belle Starr* never quite achieves lift off. But the finale of *If This Is Goodbye* features Harris's ghostliest, most enchanting vocal and makes for a supremely graceful closer.

With its smooth, easy arrangements and comfortable Seventies country-rock ambience, it's fair to say that the album breaks no new stylistic ground. The Harris record it most resembles is *Western Wall*, her 1999 collaboration with Linda Ronstadt, and while it's ultimately just too conventional an album to rank up there as one of her most memorable collaborative efforts, it's an undisputedly lovely one nonetheless. Tender, quietly inspiring and surprisingly addictive. **Alex Ramon**





Psapp

The Only Thing I Ever Wanted

Domino

★★½

I have absolutely no idea how to define what I just listened to. Psapp ingeniously use every instrument and kids' toy available to make a stupefyingly odd yet very intriguing mass of noise. *The Only Thing I Ever Wanted*, the follow-up to 2004's debut *Tiger, My Friend*, is loosely based around the band's obsession with soothing electronica, tribal music and cats. Imagine if The Arcade Fire were to be translocated to an as yet undiscovered African village and forced magic mushrooms; the music of Psapp embodies the resulting hallucination.

Most of the songs, particularly *Hi* and first single *Tricycle*, have an uplifting and childish beat, and although the songs are simply performed and can seem repetitive, they carry a charm that redeems the album. Having said that, *Hill Of Our Home* and *Make Up* are chillingly attractive and sharp little ditties, with a quirk not too dissimilar to that of Regina Spektor. If the whole album was consistently like this, there's little doubt that it could well be commercially hailed an instant classic, but the rattles and clanking prevent a sense of cohesion. It's as if the band have split their wares into two distinct piles that awkwardly cohabit the disc: one enjoyable to any kind of music fan, the other meant for those who like experimental jazz and general madness, which to the majority is far from accessible.

Unlike many second albums, the problem with *The Only Thing I Ever Wanted* is not that the album is half-baked or incomplete, it's that they've seemingly attempted to condense too many ideas into one. What is sure, however, is that Psapp have not been wasting their time. A clutch of beautifully edgy songs are to be found within, lovingly hinting at brilliant things to come. We'll just have to wait for album number three to hear them. **Tiffany Daniels**



Peaches

Impeach My Bush

XL Recordings

★★★★

Vilified in some quarters of the music press as an infantile pottymouth and celebrated in others as a genuinely subversive interrogator of gender/sex roles, Peaches demonstrates yet again that it's possible to be both things simultaneously. Though thematically similar to previous releases, *Impeach My Bush* marks a more complete marriage between electroclash and rock than ever before — Josh Homme of Queens Of The Stone Age provides a few riffs, while The Gossip's Beth Ditto and archetypal rocker girl Joan Jett guest — with most tracks an addictive mix of minimal beats and powerhouse guitars.

Peaches herself describes the record as “an album for the masses, a social album — to challenge, educate and encourage”. Her manifesto as such is based upon a refusal to willingly accept the rigid representation of gender and sexuality found in mainstream cultural products, in which hetero/homosexuality is presented as a binary opposition and male and female gender roles are clearly demarcated. And so we find the former music teacher continuing her quest to challenge traditional (and predominantly

male) notions, or, in the case of *Two Guys (For Every Girl)*, flip them on their head entirely.

As she did on *Back It Up, Boy* from 2003's *Fatherfucker*, her aim is to open straight male eyes to the taboo of anal sex. Brushing away the guy-girl-girl fantasy threesome that blares out from the pages of every *Loaded/Maxim/Zoo*-style rag, Peaches calls on men to be more adventurous, with Ditto's help on the chorus. Gleefully firing out demands, she paints an explicit picture as she directs the action on her own terms: “Just one thing I can't compromise / I wanna see you work it, guy on guy”, and later, “Just remember, an ass is an ass / so roll on over, have yourselves a blast”. It's gloriously filthy, funny and just what parental advisory stickers were made for.

Despite the suggestion of *Impeach My Bush* that Peaches has extended her reach outside of gender politics to encompass matters of national political importance, this proves to be a little misleading. Only on the 48-second opening track *Fuck Or Kill* is the president really in her sights. The album's opening salvo — “I'd rather fuck who I want than kill who I am told to” — is suggestive of the Bush administration's aggressive military politics and its ultra-conservative sexual outlook. But even if she hasn't really changed the

spots on her leopard print thong, the record at least demonstrates an awareness on Peaches' part that she's in danger of being — or perhaps already has been — stuck with the label ‘that filthy lady’. On *Stick It To The Pimp*, she toys with these expectations, playing the role of an indignant prostitute sick of male intimidation and fighting back. It's a rousing end to a rousing — and sometimes arousing — album.

Of course, as with most politically and/or sexually subversive artists, Peaches is preaching primarily to the converted. That's not to say, for example, that all Peaches fans are into M/M/F three-ways, but she is the artist of choice at alternative queer nights the world over and her support slots have tended to be with like-minded alternative/electro artists (though there are some exceptions, like Marilyn Manson). However, if the former Ms Merrill Nisker can get even one avowedly hetero guy looking at his “nasty little brother” (*Two Guys* again) in a new way, or one young voter wondering about the sexually oppressive policies of the Bush administration, then she has succeeded in her aim. As for those of us who don't need convincing that sex is fun and Bush is bad, we can just dance to the beats, laugh at the jokes and get lost in the glorious racket.

Danny Weddup

The Fiery Furnaces

Bitter Tea
 Rough Trade
 ★★ ★★



Their PR will tell you that The Fiery Furnaces are a “quirky indie-pop duo”, but quirky doesn’t really even begin to cover the bases. The opening track of this fifth album in three years gives the listener a very good idea of what is to come, i.e. anything and everything. So while Eleanor Friedberger’s vocals on opener *In My Little Thatched Hut* conjure up a repetitive, incantatory chant reminiscent of the sinister fairytale aura of PJ Harvey’s *Down By The Water*, her brother Matt’s musical mélange tells a whole different story. Tribal drums vie with bursts of electronica, while gentle acoustic guitar is stomped all over by squealing feedback. It’s Underworld meets Natalie Merchant and the resulting scuffle is noisy, unpredictable and thrilling; both parties surface bruised and grinning.

The synth on *Darling Black-Hearted Boy* grates like the theme tune of a Seventies kids’ TV show, but somehow in a good way, while the title track that follows morphs and warps the previous melody into a frantic Space Invaders-esque sonic landscape of frenzied bleeps and glitches.

This is an immediate and exciting record with unpredictability as its buzzword. Eleanor’s spoken word vocal delivery is often reminiscent of Patti Smith, particularly of her *Land* trilogy, and the mystical overtones present on several songs also recall some of the punk poetess’s vintage tracks. Like Smith’s, songs like *Oh Sweet Woods* mix everyday settings — parking lots, anonymous hallways — with a simmering threat of violence and an otherworldly, almost religious presence, invoked here by the presence of the nameless figures pursuing the poem’s central character and the backwards vocals they speak in. It’s an undisputed album highlight, a disturbing narrative set to a funky handclap beat.

Matt played everything on the record, apart from drums, and the music here is so dazzlingly varied that the lyrics occasionally get lost in the maelstrom. But it won’t be long before a line like “till the bulldozers turned us into whole-fruit fruit bar stix and china markers” (*Borneo*) pulls you out of your musical reverie and boggles your brain even further.

The band’s inventiveness has its downside, although it’s a small one — the jagged textures and sudden changes in time signature can become somewhat wearying and you may find yourself longing for a consistent melody, though you’ll struggle to find one across the record’s epic 75 minutes. However, to criticise a band for being too inventive is perhaps unfair; I know who I’d plump for given the choice between the Fieries and any number of the formulaic radio-friendly unit shifters that flood commercial radio stations.

The Fiery Furnaces are a highly prolific band who are still brimming (overflowing even) with ideas. And though they may bewilder and occasionally frustrate, they more than compensate for this with their sheer originality and experimental verve. Those searching for classic pop song structure will find it (nearly) on *Benton Harbour Blues*; those searching for pretty much anything else — Seventies punk meets the Grange Hill theme tune anyone? — will probably find it here too. See, everybody’s happy!
Danny Weddup



The Weepies

Say I Am You
 Nettwerk

★★

Mellow folk-pop duo The Weepies claim to have touched on “a more complex sort of joy” with their second album, *Say I Am You*. That may be true on a personal level, but there’s little evidence of the real-life lovebirds going that extra mile to impress. There are so many bands out there doing this sort of folksy pop that gone are the times when a few guitar strokes, predictable drumming and some harmonious vocals, albeit quite lovely, warrant much attention.

Not all of their contemporaries have such a sweet background, however; independent singer-songwriters and mutual admirers Deb Talan and Steve Tannen first met four years ago at a show in Boston where Tannen was playing in support of his debut album. They clicked immediately and consequently fell in love, moved in with each other and formed The Weepies. An independently-released album brought them to the attention of Nettwerk, who set them to work on this follow-up.

Whilst there is nothing specifically inaccurate with the PR blurb implying “lush meditations”, “sunny hook-laden tunes” and “dark charmers”, there’s a distinct lack of an original angle. The instrumentation barely varies; *Take It From Me* and *Not Your Year* in particular are drearily uninventive, while *Slow Pony Home* falls short of being great due to a distracting arrangement that detracts from the vocals. Talan is definitely a talented singer but the album doesn’t really allow her the space to show it off. A few calm moments in *Citywide Rodeo* and *Stars* hint at what The Weepies could have achieved if the songs had been given more depth.

There’s potential here, certainly, but you may well find yourself longing for more varied and natural sounds. The almost raindrop-like piano motif in *Nobody Knows Me At All* may be subtle and barely audible, but it’s touches like this that The Weepies should make a much bigger deal of next time. Not everyone falls in love so neatly
Anja McCloskey



Immaculate Machine

Ones & Zeros

Mint

★★★★

It seems like they've started putting something in the water in Canada, as the last year or so has seen bands like Wolf Parade and Broken Social Scene come to the fore and begin to erase memories of Bryan Adams and Celine Dion. Another recent export receiving both great critical acclaim and popular attention is Vancouver's The New Pornographers, to whom labelmates Immaculate Machine are inextricably linked. Not only is IM's keyboardist and vocalist Kathryn Calder the long-lost niece of New Pornographer's frontman Carl Newman, her voice and piano skills can be found littered across his band's recent offering *Twin Cinema*.

But, whereas The New Pornographers' sound is created by anything from six to ten musicians at a time, Immaculate Machine need only three: Calder, guitarist/vocalist Brooke Gallupe and drummer/vocalist Luke Kozlowski. Not that you'd know it from listening to their debut album. *Ones & Zeros* boasts a sound as full and as rich as any five-piece can manage, helped in large parts by the multi-instrumental talents of the band members, most notably Calder herself, who not only sings but plays lead keyboards with one hand while making up for the lack of a bassist by providing accomplished bass lines with the other. It seems perfectly possible that she's also providing additional percussion with her feet.

All of this results in a thoroughly wholesome album of likeable, power-pop tunes littered with scratchy guitars and adroit harmonies combined with lyrics that, if not exactly inspired, are intelligent and well crafted. There's an overriding sense of joy carried throughout *Ones & Zeros*, even when the song's subject matter is less than joyful (such as instantly catchy opener *Broken Ship*), that makes it easy to enjoy right from the opening chords. That's not to say that they can't drop into touching melancholia at a moment's notice, it's just that

they somehow manage to remain uplifting while doing so.

Each song seems to have been invested with every ounce of enthusiasm and desire to entertain that the band could muster, and because they succeed in that desire almost every time, it's hard to pick out a standout moment. That said, the aforementioned *Broken Ship*, and the track whose lyrics provide the album title, *No Such Thing As The Future*, would make for brilliant singles. However, it seems that that honour will go to *You're So Cynical*, a simple and powerful song that draws the ear for having a chorus that sounds a bit like Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, though thankfully far less brain-wrenchingly discordant).

Although it's hard to see this being anyone's favourite record of all time, it's almost impossible to believe that anyone could dislike the industriously wrought, energetic and beautiful indie pop of this, almost, immaculate piece of engineering. **Scott Millar**

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The Hot Puppies

Under The Crooked Moon

Fierce Panda

★★★★

After a few years paying their dues on the indie circuit, gently hyped Welsh quintet The Hot Puppies finally appear to have the literate, stylish pop thing down to the finest of arts on this, their debut album. But it's not just the quality music you need to watch out for, there's some tales to be told as well. For example, former single *Terry* could have stepped right out of a rock 'n' roll movie; it's sassy, classy and boasts a chorus that's equal parts Pipettes and Patti Smith and pretty damn wonderful too. *The Bottled Ship Song* is a woozy lullaby of the sort that Rilo Kiley specialise in, with a chorus that muses on life before relinquishing control and conceding that what's in store is "anyone's guess".

Indeed, it's anyone's guess why some of these songs weren't bigger hits when first released. Debut single *Green Eyeliner* dates back a couple of years but casts its musical net even further, dragging into the present a keyboard motif that's

reminiscent of Inspiral Carpets as singer Becki Newman vamps it up as a painted temptress of the easily led. Recent single *The Girl Who Was Too Beautiful* steps things up with beats right out of a Seventies disco and an uplifting pop tune set to lyrics that namecheck agony aunt/broadcaster Mariella Frostrup as a paragon of knowledge and relationship advice. It veers a little closer to adult-alternative pop than most other songs here but comes down on the right side of the fence in the end.

Under The Crooked Moon is full of nice little touches. For example, the youthful regret of *Bonnie & Me* sees Newman's passionate vocal neatly accentuated by Bert Wood's drums and Beth Gibson's wailing theremin, while *The Drowsing Nymph* comes complete with a rockabilly rhythm, whip-cracks and gunshots adding to the western feel.

There's more effervescent organ pop on *Love Or Trial*, some Sons & Daughters-esque art-rock on *Baptist Boy* and a dose of lovely acoustics on the sweet and girly *Heartbreak Soup*. There's even room for a short cover of the Ink Spots/Ella Fitzgerald number *Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall*, which is given a doo-wop duet makeover with Newman and Gibson cooing beautifully in unison.

Best of all, however, is the delightful *Love In Practice, Not Theory*, which started rather inauspiciously as a B-side to *Terry* but more than deserves its place on the album. It's a smouldering ballad in which Newman emotively bemoans the standoffish attitude of her man, but when guitarist Luke Taylor chimes in to duet on the chorus, there's a distinct suggestion that not all is quite as it first appears.

When indie pop this intelligent comes along it's always a pleasant surprise and The Hot Puppies (who, incidentally, were named after a Dorothy Parker poem) have a good chance of making a real impression. **Russell Barker**

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Howling Bells

Howling Bells

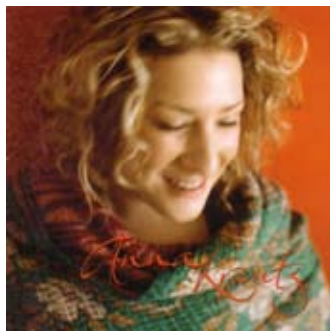
Bella Union

★★★★

Who exactly are Howling Bells? Many a column inch has been dedicated to them but what are they really about? To put it simply, they're a sexy, sultry Australian quartet who've come a long way to turn us all on with their strangely erotic slant on loneliness. Frontwoman Juanita Stein's vocal delivery is firmly set to haunt mode whilst her brother Joel, bassist Brendan Picchio and drummer Glen Moule create enough dark atmospheric to keep things brooding along in the background. Opening with *The Bell Hit*, Howling Bells ease the listener in gently with a laid back, woozy Sunday morning tune that showcases perfectly their country-tinged melancholia. *Low Happening* kicks the pace up a gear and shows the band at their sexiest — instantaneous, poppy, but with blackness at its heart.

Debut single *Wishing Stone* is thrown in midway through the album; initially a rather sparse, cold and uninviting tune, it soon grows into a coolly decadent, gloriously dark heartwarmer. And therein lies the oddest thing about this stunning record — though it lacks upbeat rhythms and golden sunshine hooks, it never feels too cold, empty or lonely. The influences at work here at times seem obvious — PJ Harvey and The Velvet Underground to name but two — but Howling Bells are far from derivative. They uniquely soundtrack a brooding urban wasteland, and whilst that may sound pretentious, the band have a truly unique quality that sparks off beautiful images in the listener's mind, transporting them to a different world. Listen to this album with the lights off. Atmospheric doesn't even come close to describing it.

Not to bring this review down with negatives, but in the interest of fairness, here they are. Occasionally, the songs are repetitive and with summer supposedly in full swing, this album is not one for the barbeque. At times you might be wishing for the album to pick up some kind of pace and songs like *Across The Avenue* and *I'm Not Afraid* are a little too sparse to strike a chord with the listener. These are, however, minor points that should not take away from what is still an astonishing record. Howling Bells are unique, they have an untouchable air of class — cool, calm and devastatingly sexy like a Forties Hollywood actress. In a world of identikit bands, Howling Bells are emerging from a smoky corner with a look on their face saying "Come join us on the dark side, you might just find you like it". **David Renshaw**



Anna Krantz

Precious Time With You
Glad

★★★★

A reassuringly old-fashioned affair, this debut album from London-based singer-songwriter Anna Krantz is chock full of quality songs, beautifully performed and expertly produced, a reminder of a time when music was less about product and ProTools and more about performance. With a songwriting knack that belies her relatively tender age, Krantz draws deep from a well of inspiration that burrows all the way down to the legendary Brill Building era. Indeed, producer Peter van Hooke's comment on first hearing Krantz — "Well, fuck me! It's the next Carole King!" — was as apposite as it was profane, before they headed into Abbey Road Studios to lay down the smooth soul-pop sounds that inhabit the album.

But despite the similarities with King, a better (albeit closely related) comparison can be made with James Taylor. Like much of Taylor's recent work, the songs on *Precious Time With You* move between tender vignettes, four-minute kitchen sink dramas and internal musings on love and loss. In fact, any of Krantz's songs could be seamlessly transplanted into these records, and I can't think of a higher compliment for a songwriter.

The performance, too, matches the high compositional standards. Krantz's soulful vocals invariably wring just the right amount of emotion out of songs like *We Still Love You* and *Bruises* without descending into schmaltz. It helps that she has a stellar band in the form of Steve Pierce (bass), Neil Wilkinson (drums) and former Pretender/Paul McCartney cohort Robbie Macintosh (guitar) to bolster her skilful piano. These aren't cynical session players on autopilot, and there are several moments when their pure joy of playing the music simply pours right out of the speakers. In particular, the Fifties jazz and Motown-tinged *Pick Me Up* has the quartet kicking up their heels and ripping through the refrains with abandon. Hooke's inspired

decision to, wherever possible, use the live room at Abbey Road to record the backing tracks as an ensemble to pre-recorded vocals reaps real dividends. The playing grooves in a way that lifts the performances above the sum of their parts, ensuring that the feeling in the vocal is nicely mirrored in all the other elements of the recording.

Precious Time With You should have no problem finding favour with mainstream radio playlists across the UK; it's classy, unashamedly "adult-oriented" and emotionally literate and none the worse for that. In this case, phrases like "mainstream" should not be confused with "bland", "formulaic" or "boring". On the contrary, these are beautifully crafted songs delivered by an artist with a voice perfectly suited to this soulful brand of pop. More than that, it's conclusive proof, if proof were needed, that piano-driven pop, when properly done, remains forever relevant and deserves to be appreciated whatever the prevailing fashions of the day. **Trevor Raggatt**

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Leigh Nash

Blue On Blue

One Son/Nettwerk

★★★

First things first, you'd be readily forgiven for not actually noticing that Christian folk-pop two-hit wonders Sixpence None The Richer had split. After all, mainstream success had eluded them long before the likes of *Kiss Me* and *There She Goes* (their contentious cover of The La's classic that so infuriated many an indie purist) eventually troubled the charts, and they soon slid back into relative obscurity thereafter. They even separated quite amicably; where's the fun in that?

Despite some prettily arranged songs, their true trump card, the thing that really made you sit up and take notice, was the pristine, almost twee vocals of frontwoman Leigh Nash. So it's with interest piqued that many a listener should approach *Blue On Blue*, Nash's first solo venture, a more mature, more careful, if brightly polished collection than the works

of Sixpence NTR. Now a doting mother, Nash's life has developed since the band's demise and so has her musical sensibility and direction.

In recent times, Nash has devoted no small amount of her energies to the Movement Nashville project, spearheading a campaign to show the world that there's much more to Nashville than Christian adult alternative and country. But whilst she shies away from some of the more overt religious imagery of Sixpence NTR (burning bushes etc.), her beliefs shine through in subtle ways that shouldn't be off-putting to anyone fearing unwitting evangelisation. Instead, it's up to the music to ensnare you and it gets off to an excellent start with *All Along The Wall*, a song that boasts one of those elusive refrains that can keep you humming and whistling for days. It might take a few listens to truly appreciate its message, but for someone who could all too readily be dismissed as light and fluffy, Nash is endearingly earnest and occasionally profound.

As was the case with Sixpence NTR, Nash walks a fine line between excessive commerciality and endearing everywoman appeal. *My Idea Of Heaven* is certainly single worthy with its sunny beat and joyous lyrical schtick but it's a little cloying. Indeed, the album's first half is dangerously sugary, though *Ocean Sized Love* does pare things back to a simpler arrangement. It's up to Never Finish to return us to more nuanced territory — a declaration of eternal love that's remarkable in that it doesn't overwhelm to the point of unrealistic overstatement.

It's the little observations and combinations of unusual images that perhaps provide the album's greatest asset. For example, *Between The Lines* finds Nash exploring the realms of what goes unspoken in our relationships, singing of the hidden depths "between hello and I would give you the moon". *Cloud Nine's* lovely piano motifs actually do sound like someone skipping from cumulus to nimbus, leading nicely into the ethereal closer *Just A Little* that leaves us with the simple message that "you can't have rainbows without rain." Ain't that the truth!

Blue On Blue is a work of Nash's own in every sense and is clearly the result of much soul-searching and personal observance. There's talent and moments of magic from beginning to end, though these are sometimes obscured by the arrangements. Even so, it lovingly unfurls its secrets and, given the right push, could well eclipse her other achievements.

Gem Nethersole



Nina Gordon

Bleeding Heart Graffiti
Warner Bros.

★★½

Previously famed as one half of the creative force that made up the moderately successful grunge-pop cross-over band Veruca Salt, this second solo album sees Nina Gordon continue to reinvent herself and draw a firm musical line beneath her indie-tastic past. For where Veruca Salt would churn out fast-paced rock with alternative cred and a tuneful, energetic formula, Gordon's lone singer-songwriter schtick could hardly be more different. It's as if she's morphed from early Nineties Liz Phair into Liz Phair nowadays, or even Sheryl Crow. With heavy production that's much too big on niceness, gone are the kickass power guitars and in their place comes an almost easy listening, coffee table atmosphere where the only truly sweet stuff to be found is disappointingly coated in sticky mainstream saccharine pop.

Despite coming a full six years after her first solo venture, *Tonight & The Rest Of My Life*, *Bleeding Heart Graffiti* carries on almost precisely where that album left off. There's a sense that she's more confident in her direction and the tunes are certainly stronger than before, but mostly it's more of the same. The theme of loves gained and lost permeate throughout with lyrics that are bittersweet and honest, and it's clear that she's had to suffer some bad times to get as far as she has. In that respect, Gordon seemingly wants to be taken as a serious pop artist in the vein of Aimee Mann; however, in some places she comes across more like Natalie Imbruglia with chart-friendly songs that could easily soundtrack your weekly shop at Tesco or your Monday morning Starbucks skinny latté with soy milk.

There's some nice touches though. For instance, the sequencing lets you imagine that there is something of a concept at work here. From the upbeat beginnings where Gordon sings of relationships in bloom to the overwrought emotions of the ending where love's beyond redemption, the songs gradually get more and more melancholy.

Still, whilst everything's perky, songs like *Suffragette* and first single *Kiss Me 'Til It Bleeds* are winning pop tunes that will lodge in the memory, for a while at least. But then there is heartache, with presumably cathartic, open-wound tales of trying to make sense of it all. Indeed, there is perhaps a little too much of the downside of love and it's a shame that there isn't more of the gleeful poppiness of the openers. Indeed, many of the sadder songs were recovered and re-recorded from Gordon's aborted 2004 release *Even The Sunbeams*, written during a phase in her life that she has since "snapped out of".

With a baby on the way and a new-found focus, who knows where her next record will take her. For now though, despite having a clutch of well-written songs to its name, *Bleeding Heart Graffiti* can only be chalked up as something of a disappointment. Still, given its history, it's fair to say that Gordon has been paying up on those duets and deserves some solo success. Just don't look back in anger.

Stephanie Heney



PlanningToRock

Have It All
Chicks On Speed
★★★★

PlanningToRock is better known to her family as Bolton-born wander-woman Janine Rostron who, like many creative types before her, left her English-speaking homeland and decamped to Berlin, the spiritual homeland of electro and techno and a city bustling with artists seeking a less corporate environment in which to develop their talents. Peaches, perhaps the city's most famous musical ex-pat, recently moved to Los Angeles, leaving Berlin's electro-hip-hop sovereignty very much open for Rostron to capture the throne.

That's not to say that the two artists are especially similar; *Have It All* is sexy but doesn't fixate on it, telling instead a fascinating story of taking unknown steps into and among a foreign environment, subtly hinting at the desperate times that factored such a leap. It's about Berlin and

the strange balance of belonging and being an outsider. Musically, it's impressively diverse, mixing Elizabethan ballroom, Berlin-style hip-hop, dark icy electro in the vein of *The Knife*, and full-blown out-and-out techno — a dizzying concoction in the hands of lesser artists, but one that's held together beautifully here by Roston's unique and affecting vocal.

As any self-respecting hip-hop album should, *Have It All* opens with a short self-referential intro number in the shape of *The PTR Show*, an atmospheric minute-long hello with tuned percussion and staccato beats that wastes no time in setting up the soul-searching theme of the album. *Bolton Wanderer*, one of several standout tracks, continues this theme with a twisted, sexy slump of a tune complete with slow beats and haunting background vocals that give it a surprisingly soulful edge. This kind of chilling vocal layering is also present on *Changes*, an ambient ode to figurative metamorphosis based on a striking arrangement of plucked strings.

If that doesn't get you, *Never Going Back* will almost certainly stop you dead in your tracks. It's as if Rostron is channelling the type of muse that visits Kate Bush or Patrick Wolf in their sleep; a folk-inspired slowie with warm inviting strings and emotional chord after emotional chord, it deals with the romance of running away and finding who you are among the masses, married to an idiosyncratic but nonetheless heartfelt vocal delivery. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the title track provides *Have It All's* dance floor filler-in-chief. It's an energetic blast of creepy techno-pop that would fit just as well at a seedy Berlin warehouse party as it would in a whip-smart London indie club. The true intensity at work here doesn't only arrive on the pounding beats and immense wall of synthesizer sounds, but is also conveyed by elements of desperation and urgency that lurk deep down in the mix.

Have It All is a thoroughly satisfying piece of work in that it feels very much like a project followed all the way through to completion; the sequencing is perfect and even the artwork (also by Rostron) reflects the original and evocative music within. The contribution of Rostron's visual artistry to the finished product cannot be underestimated; it's evident throughout, in the thematic thoroughness and clarity of the music, the conscious awareness of even the subtlest conditions around her. A truly inspiring album.

Robbie de Santos



Justine Electra

Soft Rock
City Slang
★★★★

There's nothing like laying it all on the line up front, and with such a watery title, *Soft Rock* doesn't leave much to the imagination. But getting past the immediate subconscious associations (that are, incidentally, wrong and mostly unfounded), there is something truly sincere about these recordings. That's not to say that they don't run the gamut of the good and bad, or that their appeal isn't wholly subjective, depending on the willingness and mindset of the listener, but there is something about them. First track *Fancy Robots* is a prime example, where the cut and crazy synth rumblings could be construed as brilliance, or, alternatively, a little bit bland and lacking the requisite punch to pull the entire song through. Luckily, this here listener feels it to be the former.

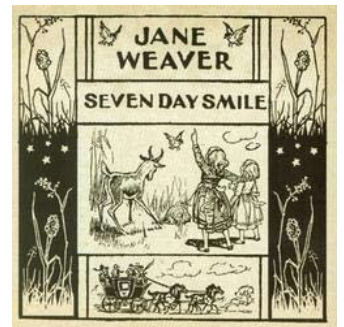
As a whole, *Soft Rock* succeeds as a near masterpiece of patchwork. *Killalady* boasts an offbeat groove, heavenly chimes and delicate harmonies that could make an angel's cheeks turn beetroot, combined with just enough roughness to keep up levels of intrigue and lyrics that sound familiar to the lives of those you know. All that accompanied by social commentaries that make a mockery of the bloated, predictable industry standard (e.g. "hip-hop guys showing their underpants") make this an undisputed highlight. Similarly, the airy blues stylings of *Blues & Reds* skulk their way into the depths of your memory as the song burrows itself a nice little nook that it refuses to get out of. Elsewhere, the fantastic *Calimba Song* is reminiscent of a Tom Waits minimalist classic, with an almost childish marimba motif that's carried forth by the sort of saddened vocals that would suit the back porch of a crumbling South Carolina farmhouse (she's actually Australian but lives in Berlin).

At the opposite end of the spectrum lie the repetitive, keyboard-based *Autumn Leaves* and *President*, both of which scrape and haul their way to the finish. There's

something distinctly terrifying and disturbing about the execution of the latter in particular. The worn radio sound, the whine of a pacemaker, the basic drum programming, the lyrics — feelings of desolation and hopelessness aren't exactly helped by Electra's singing of genital death.

Soft Rock is so chock full of quirk and choreographed madness that it would be extremely interesting to see how the songs might transcribe to live performance. Its crazy bass sounds, scrapings against junk for percussion, stark acoustic riffs and Tori Amos/Fiona Apple-esque backing vocals all add to the appeal; it would be a crying shame to lose the fragments of instrumentation and subtle effects that elevate Electra above her more predictable peers.

Put simply, *Soft Rock* is like one of those close friends you only seem to see once every couple of years, in the summer. The attraction is there, but it's something that will be nice to lose just to come across again later so the love for it stays ever faithful. **Gary Munday**



Jane Weaver
Seven Day Smile
Bird/Cherry Red
★★★½

It has been four years since Mancunian Jane Weaver last charmed our ears with the unjustly ignored mini-album *Like An Aspen Leaf*, a record that nonetheless made an indelible impression on those who actually heard it. Since then she's released an album under her 'girl group' alter ego Misty Dixon and continued to tour with Andy Votel and members of his Twisted Nerve label collective.

However, despite the long gap, *Seven Day Smile* is not to be mistaken for a brand new album. It was actually recorded way back in the early Nineties when she was signed to Hacienda co-founder and former Joy Division manager Rob Gretton's label Manchester Records. Also affiliated with the label were dance outfit Sub Sub, who later blossomed into acclaimed indie rock band Doves, and it's with these esteemed collaborators that much of *Seven Day Smile* was

committed to tape. After Bretton died of a heart attack in 1999, the label went down with him and the songs remained unreleased, until the bright sparks at Cherry Red Records allowed Weaver to release them on her very own imprint.

So was it worth the wait? On balance, a definite yes, though Weaver herself will be the first to admit that there are moments that could have been bettered, but as a statement of a time and place it's more than adequate. Various tracks have cropped up elsewhere (most notably *Starglow*) but none have been easy to find and all still sound fresh and appealing. Weaver's instrument of choice, the Farfisa organ, pipes up throughout and lends a slightly kitsch feel to the otherwise highly personal and sometimes serious goings on.

Weaver might sound sweet but there's a dark streak at her centre for sure, and rather infectious it is too. *You're A Riot*, for example, is a meaty, mostly acoustic beauty that exemplifies her special brand of unsettling tranquillity (see also *Once You'd Given Me Up*). The rising and falling notes of *In Summer* are effortlessly lazy yet suck you in completely, but one true standout number is saved for last in the form of *Gutter Girl*. Collaborating with Votel, Weaver allows his electronic bleeps, burps and trickles to run free all over the place as she tells an anguished tale of unrequited love and passion. The song's second half has her singing as if she were underwater, which sounds silly but works well.

Despite its long shelf-life and slight imperfections, *Seven Day Smile* is a highly listenable album. The better tracks are musically diverse and interesting, mixing lush melodies with Weaver's head-mess of lyrics. It's a real pleasure that these songs have finally had a chance to see the light of day as a proper, if somewhat brief album, to stand alone as something truly original. If you're looking for music that seriously messes with the singer-songwriter status quo, then look no further than this

Helen Ogden



Julia Harris

These Days EP

Redcase

★★★★

When *Wears The Trousers* chose Cardiff-born singer Julia Harris as one of our picks for '06, it was on the basis of a couple of homemade live albums, a growing buzz about her on the singer-songwriter circuit and a nagging hunch that the UK had finally found its answer to Ani DiFranco. *These Days* is Harris' first nationwide studio release, so were we right to hype her?

Glad to say but of course! With *These Days*, Harris restores our belief that a grass roots buzz really can be the product of hard work, originality and sheer talent, rather than calculated media spin (Miss Thom, I'm looking at you). Of course, the DiFranco factor is writ large throughout these four wonderful songs, but Harris stamps so much of her own individuality on them that any notion of facsimile is summarily dismissed. Her vocal is rather more smooth and soulful than DiFranco's sometimes abrasive rasp, an asset best displayed when she lobs an unexpectedly brilliant folk scat into *Sticks & Stones*, or the soaring, pure falsetto she pulls out the bag for *Your Love*.

Her muscular and funky playing style is individual too, energetically propelling both the songs and your shuffling feet. The sympathetic production allows Harris' energy to shine through the mix rather than languish beneath a veneer of compressed homogeneity. Keeping to a rhythm section of drums and acoustic bass allows a degree of jazziness to permeate the songs, picking up the natural funky flavour of Harris' writing and delivery. Indeed, one of the most refreshing things about her is a lightness of tone and spirit. That's not to say she doesn't dwell on some of life's more important issues, simply that she actually brings insight instead of just handwringing angst.

Kicking off with the celebratory title track, with its funky rhythm, singalong chorus and quirky arrangement, it's apparent from the off that this is one song that you'll keep coming back to. The almost tribal woo-hoos and insidious hooks are undeniably engaging and just get better and better with each listen. In the hands of another, *Sticks & Stones* might seem a little clunky, topically at least, with Harris pointing fingers at those who don't consider the knock-on effects of an off-hand put-down on a more fragile spirit.

But it's not in the hands of another and Harris delivers her message with a cheeky wink and sassy sense of self-reliance. The reggae-styled verses of *Your Love* contrast nicely with the acoustic rock chorus and avoids the lovestruck clichés

so many tend to rely on. Closing number *Leave* belies its 'live studio jam' appellation by serving up a lean, well-structured ditty on getting the hell out of a destructive relationship. Aside from a few, er, 'jazzier' notes on the bass, you'd be hard pressed to notice that this was a live cut, it's that well done.

With the promise of a proper full-length debut some time in the winter or early 2007, Harris will be one to keep an eye on for a long while yet. There's plenty more there this lot came from and you won't want to miss it.

Trevor Raggatt



Abigail Washburn

Song Of The Traveling Daughter

Netwerk

★★★★½

For someone who never set out to be a musician, let alone a bona fide recording artiste, Nashville resident Abigail Washburn has created a spectacular debut in the wistfully-titled *Song Of The Traveling Daughter*. A beautifully layered, heartfelt ode to well-trodden American folk traditions, it is nevertheless just as surprising and quirky as one might expect from an adventurous, Mandarin-fluent, banjo-playing political activist.

Born in Illinois, rather more than a stone's throw away from the Appalachias whose music infuses this record, she took her time in finding her calling. Unusually, a college trip to China was the catalyst — "It had a profound effect on me," she explains, "I discovered a Chinese culture that was so deep and ancient; it changed my perspective on America." Sure enough, on her return from Chengdu, she invested in a banjo and began a journey that led her back to her native country's traditional roots.

Okay, so it was a fairly long journey. She barely touched the banjo for years until fate intervened and she found herself performing at short notice on an Alaskan tour with friends. Later, she joined the string band Uncle Earl before finally inking a deal of her own. Encapsulating the spirit and grit of the journeywoman, *Song Of The Traveling Daughter* positively

sparkles with jewel after jewel of song. *Red & Blazing* and *Deep In The Night*, for instance, may seem simple on first audition, but listen back and they reveal layer after layer of emotion and astonish with their sheer expressiveness. The more unusual *Eve Stole The Apple* is packed with longing, folksy strings searching for meaning in an ever-evolving travelling rhythm. It is broody and full of character and texture, Washburn's vocals tearing right through the dramatic arrangements.

Co-produced by banjo supremo Béla Fleck, this is an album that focuses on the singer and the song in the purest sense. Washburn's voice is showcased in all its extraordinary versatility — sometimes soothing, sometimes overwhelming and often childlike, full of hopes and dreams — while the clever arrangements support rather than interfere with the simple song structures. It's a moving tribute to America's traditions that also takes things one step further, blending roots and building bridges. As Washburn says in her own words: "I want to learn more about Chinese folk traditions, so I can integrate them into my music and continue to be a part of the development of a more universal language" — a noble sentiment indeed.

Anja McCloskey



Allison Moorer

Getting Somewhere

Sugar Hill

★★★★½

Unbeknownst to all but the most discerning and curious of UK music fans, country star Allison Moorer has quietly constructed an impeccable back catalogue, never compromising her values for mainstream success, remaining stubbornly loyal to the one thing that makes people return to her, album after album — the music. Each album has witnessed a distinct progression in her sound without losing one iota of her individual styling and wonderfully expressive voice. Having carved out a niche in the country/pop genre, Moorer is now much in demand for Hollywood soundtracks and a firm favourite on the live circuit,

where in 2004 she recorded a live album with her older sister, the equally uncompromising Shelby Lynne. Now, in 2006, newly married to Steve Earle, it seems she finally feels as if she may be *Getting Somewhere*.

Moorer has created no shortage of gems since 1998's debut album *Alabama Song*, immersing herself in the southern soul of 2000's *The Hardest Part* before delivering 2004's harder-edged *The Duel*. Her appeal owes a great deal to her ability to get beneath the skin of human relationships without lazily ambling down Cliché Street. Moorer takes the road less travelled, telling stories through anything but rose-tinted glasses. Just a short while into the album, however, it becomes clear that married life may have taken the edge off somewhat — Allison's happy, and here's a snappy, concise 39 minutes of mostly upbeat music to prove it. It's refreshing to see an artist unafraid to say all she's got to say in songs that rarely climb over the three minute barrier. When music's this good, quality beats quantity every time. Though her husband's production has left the drums a little leaden and tinny and the guitars a touch more grungy than anything she's done before, the catchy melodies remain.

Opener *Work To Do* unveils her newly positive outlook — "I've got a lot of work to do / got to give you back your point of view / it suits you fine / it's just not mine..." — while *You'll Never Know, Take It So Hard* and the beautiful *Where You Are* are all fine examples of her invigorating craft. That's not to say there isn't an undercurrent of doubt and anxiety, but the pop stylings and a cappella intro of *Fairweather* make for an interesting contrast. Where the old Moorer would have sung this song of finding post-break-up freedom from the viewpoint of a wronged woman, here we have instead a liberated female looking forward to the single life.

It's a subtle distinction, but an important one nevertheless. More importantly, it's also (whisper it quietly) single material, one of a couple of songs that feel like they've been written with a more commercial slant. Another highlight and a nod to her previous output can be found in *If It's Just For Today*, a realistic look at the reasons why two people get and stay together and reminiscent in feel to *Can't Get There From Here* from 2002's *Miss Fortune*. It's dedicated (perhaps a little bravely) to Earle; presumably his famously tough exterior took it in the way it's intended.

Whether or not Moorer will continue to allow this honeymoon

period to influence her writing remains to be seen, but for the moment we should be happy for her and happy that she can still produce work of this quality. There's a classic album in her somewhere; this isn't it, but the summer would be worse without it. **Paul Woodgate**



Skye
Mind How You Go
Atlantic

★★★★

Most people will already be familiar with Skye Edwards from her days fronting trip-hop heroes turned coffee table adorners Morcheeba and, inevitably, your liking or loathing of her origins will prejudice opinions of this, her debut solo outing, right, left and middle of the road. But wipe away those preconceived ideas, for now is Edwards' time to at last be appreciated as an artist in her own right. A richly layered musical approach gives *Mind How You Go* a sublime, multi-sensory texture that, when combined with Skye's distinctive voice, produces an album with highly individual characteristics. With its prevailing sense of the hazy dog days of summer, not explicitly expressed until the closer *Jamaica Days*, Skye makes the most of the contrast between inherently grey urban environments and sprawling, idle, sun-drenched days. Guaranteed to effectively enrich your day, it's ideally suited to life in the city for those with escapist tendencies.

Love Show is a perfect introduction, allowing you to gently descend into Edwards' world, cushioned by her light and breathy but infinitely listenable vocal. Love is usually unrequited, tumultuous or passionate in song, so when Edwards sings "it's painless letting your love show", it's a minor revelation. By *What's Wrong With Me*, these refreshingly unusual insights are a regular feature but not all are effective. Mentions of mortgages and emails are hardly the kind of thing that most of us would relish being reminded of when indulging in idealism. Elsewhere, *Stop Complaining* contains a jarring reference to driving "down to the rodeo". But for the occasions where



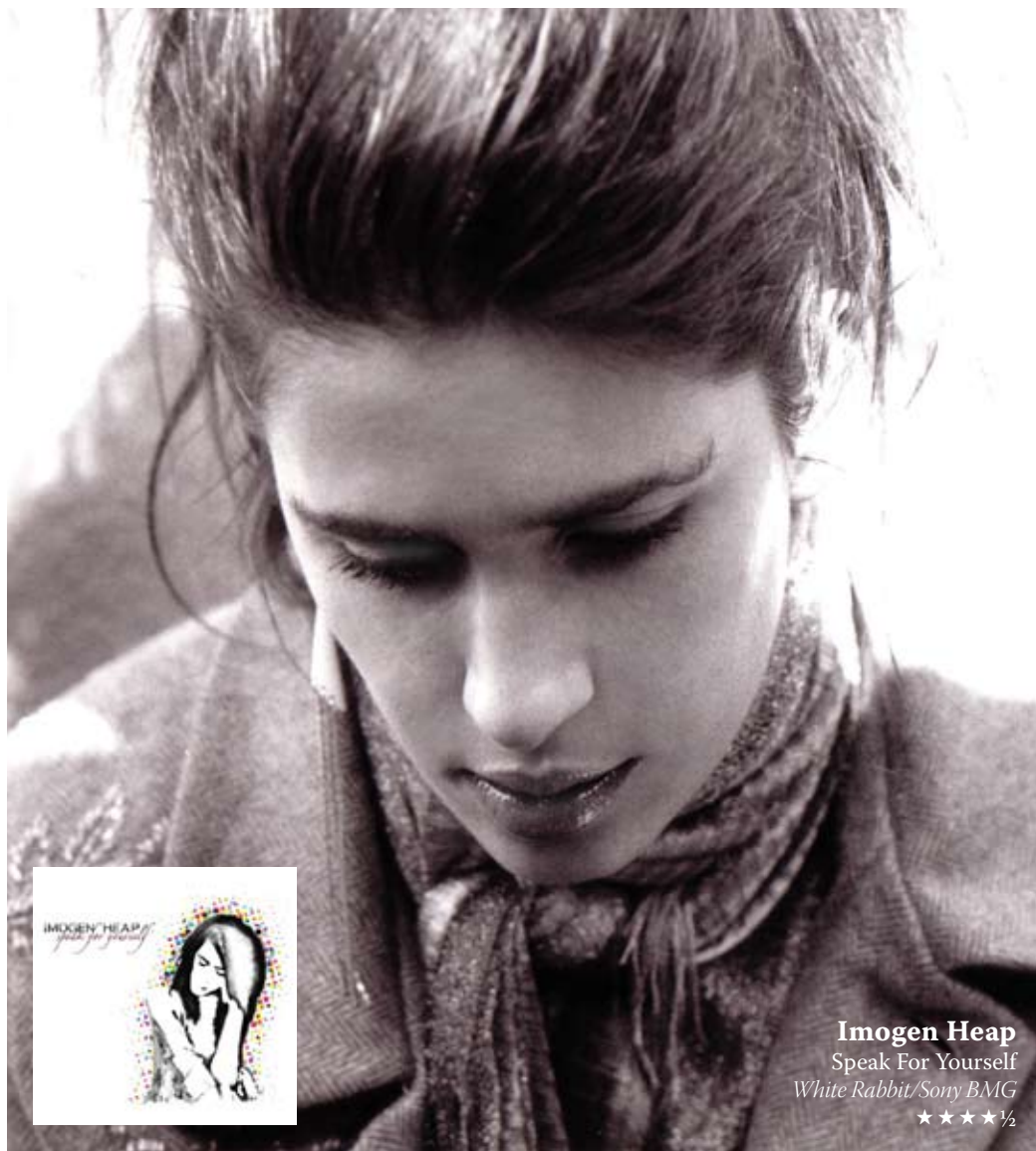
things don't quite work, there are just as many where her slightly left of centre worldview makes you listen harder and appreciate the work all the more.

Gossamer-light and gorgeous, *Solitary* jostles into the memory with a well-executed staccato approach and is a nice example of when the more synthetic sounds at work on the album are at their most effective. *No Other*, on the other hand, could perhaps rely less heavily upon them as the exotic beach-inspired sounds seem unnecessarily fake. The conversational *Tell Me*, with its Disney-esque introductory motif, is reminiscent of a postcard or phonecall home in which the overall message is positive but there are moments when the realisation hits that "all the distance spoils the view", that to be sharing the experience rather than trying to live and re-tell the adventure would make the journey more authentic.

Certainly, what makes *Mind How You Go* that little bit special is Edwards' way with a lyric. So while

on the first listen you may be fooled into finding superficial similarities with Dido or Katie Melua — the vocal tone is comparable — the more you listen, the richer and more unique it becomes. *All The Promises* is the definitive song in that respect, with unusual snippets like "we broke the chain and left the cross behind" and "love's a stain on a shirt like old red wine" that haunt you long after the song has ended. Rather than reinterpret a traditional perspective, she'll take each subject and give it a personal twist, sharing the benefit of her own experience.

The island voices feel to *Jamaica Days* complements nicely the lyrical hymn of desire for sunshine, propelling the album towards that which it and perhaps Edwards herself has been seeking from the beginning — an entwining of the new and traditional, an identity carved from many influences and a sense of individuality that allows for fresh starts and beautiful changes, the most enduring part of which is that Skye is taking us all with her for the ride. **Gem Nethersole**



Imogen Heap
Speak For Yourself
 White Rabbit/Sony BMG
 ★★☆☆½

First the facts: *Speak For Yourself* is Heap's second solo effort. Her first, *I Megaphone*, was released in 1998. Somewhere in between, she achieved a degree of success through her collaboration with Guy Sigsworth in the form of Frou Frou, releasing *Details* (2002), an electronica album with hidden depths and the first hint of what was to come. After the party, however, it seems everyone else went home, so what's a girl to do? Easy! Re-mortgage the flat and spend a year of her life writing and recording an album and issuing it under her own label, Megaphonic. What's that you say, sounds like a rubbish idea? Hardly!

Through word of mouth alone in the UK and 'The OC' effect in the States, Heap sold 100 000 of *Speak For Yourself* off her own back. Now, Sony BMG have bought the distribution rights and re-released it behind some heavyweight promo. Cross your fingers the big boys know what to do with her, because Heap has crafted a thing of beauty. You can hold every minute of this album up to the light and it sparkles. It's all Tiffany, no Ratners.

It's not immediately obvious why it's so good. A busy sound, conjured from banks of computers and organic instruments, presents itself as the modern equivalent of early Eighties synth culture, with added orchestra, guitars and, for all I know, the kitchen sink. Eno beeps, Trevor Horn synths, fuzz bass, multi-layered vocals — you name it, *Speak For Yourself* has got it; there's value for money here, but given bold brush, a sense of space and warmth. This isn't a cold record; the melodies are beautiful.

And then it hits you — it's the lyrics. The words are worthy of Neil's Tennant and Finn and all the songwriting geniuses who know that pop works best when it doesn't treat its listeners like idiots. They capture perfectly the way our emotions play and are played with, in a contemporary language that pulls no punches. For example, on *Just For Now*, Heap dissects a long-term relationship with bruised resignation over the space of one afternoon's dinner party and three minutes of haunting music: "How did you know? It's what I always wanted, you can never have too many of these."

You've heard that before, right? How about: "Bite tongue, deep breaths, count to ten, nod your head... whoever put on this music had better quick sharp remove it, pour me another, and don't wag your finger at me". Is that affecting enough for you? On the a cappella *Hide & Seek*, a vocoder'd hymn to betrayal, Heap sings "Mm what d'ya say? Oh, that you only meant well, well of course you did, that it's all for the best, of course it is, mm that it's just what we need, you decided this?" — I can't do it justice in a review, you have to hear it to know she's lived it.

Superlatives are bandied around far too often. Each new find is the next big thing and then a future footnote in the gossip columns. Heap won't win everyone over — that's the beauty of opinion, but this lifelong music obsessive is happy to go on record and state that *Speak For Yourself* is the most consistent, wonderfully inventive and stick-it-on-repeat record he's heard in the last eighteen months. Speaking for myself. And I've broken my word count to try and convince you.

Paul Woodgate



The Gossip

Standing In The Way Of Control
Backyard

★★★

Meeting The Gossip would be quite an experience if their everyday speech is as riddled with clichés as their unfortunate lyrics. Though certainly both beautiful and powerful, it's hard to appreciate lead singer Beth Ditto's vocals when she's wrapping her tongue round bothersome blandness like "fight fire with fire", "I'm a fool for you" and "as pure as the snow", all of which should really be reserved for anodyne boybands. Worse still, the band sees fit to commit the heinous crime of rhyming "crying" and "lying". Who do they think they are, Oasis? This grumble aside, there are other problems. At first the album seems fairly unremarkable, a little too reminiscent of your average local don't-give-up-your-day-jobs who manage to sound quite similar to the music you actually like but leave the nail's head decidedly un-whacked. The ballad *Coal To Diamonds* may gloriously showcase Ditto's vocals, which for my money are unrivalled in the genre, but it's rather monotonous all the same. Situated midway through the album, *Eyes Open* is the first real gem, just as upbeat as you'd expect from The Gossip but with added bluesy soul. *Keeping You Alive* is also a standout, boasting a chorus that would easily fill any self-respecting dancefloor with hand-clapping disco fans.

Okay, so it seems a little unfair to review this album having only listened to it in the comfort of my home. It clearly needs to be accompanied by some alcohol-fuelled shape throwing, somewhere with an audience that doesn't give a shit how trite the lyrics might be. By all accounts, The Gossip's live show is an experience not to be missed and it's easy to see how these songs might come alive. Concurrently, they are immediate and rousing, despite one or two unforgivable blips, and at least half are destined to be favourites of your average dance-punk DJ. Perhaps most exciting when viewed as a pre-show taster, it's worth a listen, but standing in the way of control? Hardly. **Lynn Roberts**



Liza Minnelli

Liza With A 'Z'

BMG

★★★

Originally released in 1972 to coincide with the film release of Kander and Ebb's musical 'Cabaret', this was a televised showcase for Liza Minnelli's stage credentials; talents that would see her run away with the Best Actress gong at the following year's Oscar ceremony. The release of this remastered Grammy Award winning album was issued as a prelude to a full DVD.

Guided by 'Cabaret' director, the legendary Bob Fosse, this audio recording of the show remains an intriguing journey through traditional standards and modern compositions, although even the contemporary tracks, infused with wah-wah guitars and funky basslines, still show their age. Such television specials are a staple of the US networks, and each number is an all-singing, all-dancing affair.

Son Of A Preacher Man is a song of such excess, but falls somewhat short of Dusty Springfield's definitive version, while *Bye, Bye Blackbird* is given the full Fosse treatment (click, tap, heel, tap) though, again, the staging of the number is somewhat incongruous with the gently sanguine lyrics. A demanding director, Fosse would control every affectation, ad lib and aside and the note-perfect songs, while impressive on screen, leaves the recording a little bit flat.

There is no doubt that Minnelli puts on a good show, and even on record you can imagine the clenched fists and theatrical gestures that accompany the vocal octave leaps and key changes. *Liza With A 'Z'* serves as a reminder of Minnelli's impressive vocal range and the *Cabaret Medley* is a perfect trailer for the full-length versions. From *Wilkommen* and the sublime *Money, Money* to the emotive *Maybe This Time* and the high-kicking title tune finale, each audio vignette evokes the divine decadence of Weimer Berlin so evocatively captured on film. Even the lines "the day she died the neighbours came to snicker / well, that's what comes from too much pills and liquor" have acquired added prescience in light

of Minnelli's public recovery from alcoholism.

Perhaps the biggest shame of Minnelli's career is that she possessed enough unique talent to transcend mother Judy Garland's success, but chose instead to live in her shadow, almost as if Garland left the stage and Minnelli returned for the encore. Clinging to a lost era of Hollywood razzmatazz, these days Minnelli is a grand high priestess of camp by proxy, replaying her mother's on-stage dramatics, effortlessly gliding between tragedy and survival, before sending those "happy little bluebirds" to tug at the heartstrings of her audience.

Here, *Mammy* provides the less than oblique nod to her famous mother, while *God Bless The Child* is yet another reminder of her Hollywood royalty credentials (her father was director Vincente Minnelli). "Momma may have / Poppa may have / but God bless the child that's got his own" she trills, and for a few years in the 1970s, Minnelli truly did have it all. Equal parts actress, singer and dancer, Minnelli's versatility made her hot property and her maternal genetics ensured further success in Martin Scorsese's 'New York, New York' (1977).

You can't make a star without some edges, and even if Minnelli is more of a tabloid curiosity these days, remnants like this from her heyday are testament to the last stand of Hollywood's golden era, but this live recording lacks dimension and is perhaps best experienced on DVD. However, the ambition is admirable and you get the feeling that even if she wasn't topping the bill, Minnelli would still steal the show.

Stephen Collings



All About Eve

Keepsakes: A Collection

Mercury

★★★½

It is a universally acknowledged that truth a record company in possession of a good back catalogue must be in want of a career-spanning 'best of...' compilation. All too often the process of compiling such a package bears all the hallmarks of a minor Jane Austen character's

courtship — more to do with expedience, contractual obligations and financial security than any great level of passion. The formula is well established; gather together all of the hits, sprinkle in a few album tracks and bung on a couple of songs that weren't really good enough even for B-sides, labelling the latter as 'previously unreleased' to ensure the established fans will buy in to the party. Exceptions to this rule are few and far between. Fortunately, *Keepsakes* happens to be one of them.

Credit for this is down to All About Eve frontwoman Julianne Regan's determination to make it more than a mercenary exercise. Consulting the fans on the band's official website unlocked the power of informed opinions and interesting choices, all of which make *Keepsakes* a worthy addition to the band's canon.

This double-disc set follows the band's career in chronological order, and all the expected hits are here. However, there's still plenty to engage the hardcore fan. In some cases, the obvious choices are made more interesting by choosing a rare extended 12" mix — such as for the opener *Flowers In Our Hair*. Elsewhere there are live recordings or radio sessions alongside modern reworkings.

CD1 blankets the band's early years and their most commercially successful phase. Cherry-picking Regan's tracks from their eponymous 1988 debut and the excellent follow-up, *Scarlet & Other Stories* (1989), it serves to demonstrate what a good band they were and how sadly underrated they've been. Certainly, there are depths to All About Eve beyond the hauntingly beautiful acoustic compilation staple, *Martha's Harbour*. Their songs retain a certain timeless quality, making them as accessible to new listeners today as they were when first released nearly twenty years ago. Of course there are sonic elements that peg them to the late 1980s — heavily chorused guitars, big gated reverbs on the snares — but the strength of the song-writing and Regan's never less than heavenly vocals lifts them beyond that.

Actually, it's hard to praise the quality of Regan's pure, clear singing highly enough. In interviews she has often referred to her diffidence towards live performance and her struggles with stage fright; however, the live tracks included here belie any timidity, showing them to be an impressive live act, capable of rocking far beyond their twee Goth-folkie stereotype.

The second disc launches with *Farewell Mr Sorrow*, marking a watershed in the band's history —

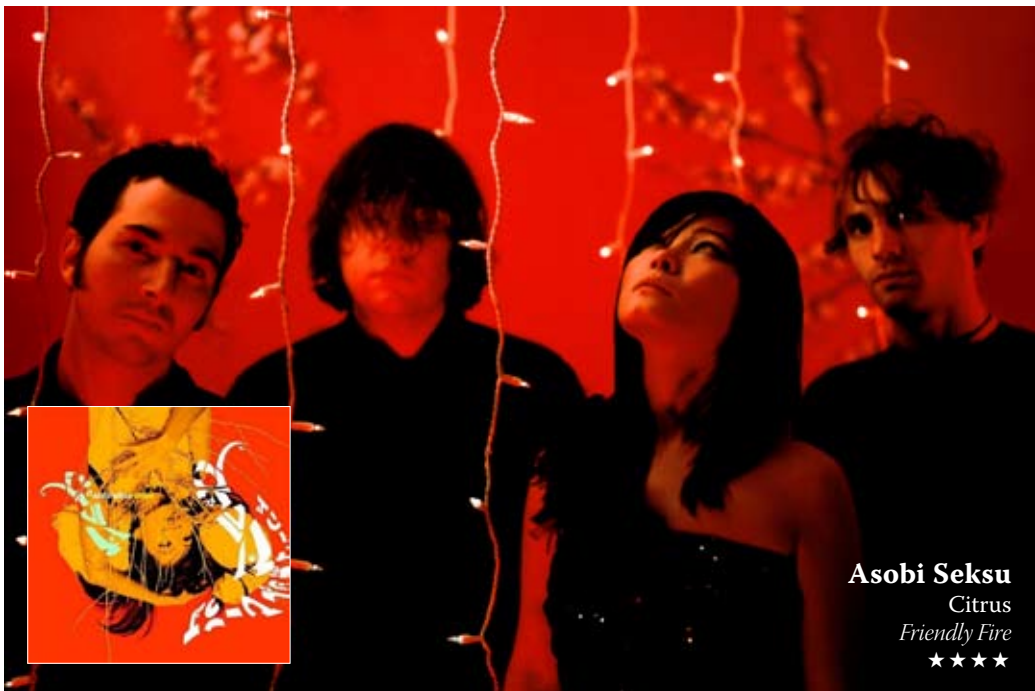


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the departure of founder member, guitarist Tim Bricheno, who was replaced by Marty Willson-Piper from The Church. The change in personnel was accompanied by an altered sound that shifted towards a more commercial, pre-Madchester indie-pop. The songs from 1991's *Touched By Jesus* show a record label-encouraged move away from folky acoustic noodlings towards a harder, electric feel. Although not a huge commercial success, it did produce some dividends. *Farewell Mr Sorrow*, a stinging riposte to Regan's former guitarist/lover, remains a perfect slice of jangle-pop that, if justice were served, should be hailed alongside contemporary songs by The La's et al.

There is much to admire from this section of All About Eve's history, particularly *Wishing The Hours Away*, which benefits from a liberal sprinkling of Dave Gilmour's unmistakable guitar sound. Ironic, then, that the band's subsequent move to a more psychedelic, electro-tinged sound on 1992's *Ultraviolet* is marked by a previously unreleased version of Pink Floyd's classic, *See Emily Play*. Even here, though, the chord structures, guitar sounds and Regan's always beautiful voice retain the band's hallmark.

The album closes with 2004's abortive comeback single *Let Me Go Home* and two new tracks, *Keepsakes* and *Raindrops*, that fittingly avoid any foolish attempt to rehash their early days. All in all, *Keepsakes* is an effective summary, full of gems for casual and avid listeners alike. Also available is a limited edition run containing an additional DVD with videos of all the band's singles and a range of live/TV studio appearances, including the famous Top Of The Pops taping of *Martha's Harbour* where no one thinks to cue in the band or provide them with music to mime to — oops! Despite a muddy sound quality that betrays the age of these films they make a satisfying addition to the CD and are guaranteed to bring out the inner pre-Raphaelite in anyone.

Trevor Raggatt



Asobi Seksu
Citrus
 Friendly Fire
 ★★☆☆

Currently garnering lots of rave reviews in America and recently selling out a string of shows at the Bowery, Asobi Seksu are super hot property and most definitely in vogue.

Never heard of them? Never fear! Here's a few factoids for you: Asobi Seksu means 'playful sex' in colloquial Japanese; there's four of them; frontwoman Yuki Chikudate sings in both English and Japanese; and the band's 2004 self-titled debut earned them a reputation as modern-day shoegazers, a pigeonhole that they try hard

to break out of on this rockier follow-up.

So keen are they to hammer this point home that their press release emphatically states that the band "have outgrown the comparisons to My Bloody Valentine and Lush", but to these ears that's not altogether the case. There are several parallels with Lush's *Lovelife* in particular, but Asobi Seksu are more sonically and structurally adventurous and pack a more powerful and insistent punch, ratcheting up the noise level more than Lush

ever did. Come the midpoint of *Red Sea*, for example, Mitch Spivak's frenetic drumming and James Hannah's guitars are creating such a maelstrom of curiously melodic noise that you wonder where on the earth the track can possibly go from there; the answer is into a plunging sea of reverb and feedback. Fantastic! *Exotic Animal Paradise*, on the other hand, is every bit as beautiful as its title would suggest, for the first two minutes at least, shimmering languidly and recalling Yo La Tengo at

their most perfectly poppy before going off on a tangent with a sudden and exhilarating twist of manic energy.

Listeners not au fait with the Japanese language might find it a little more difficult to engage with some of the songs, but the impassioned soundscapes and squalling guitars carry more than enough emotional charge to render this minor concern practically irrelevant.

New Years, for example, is one of the album's highlights; a soaring wall of guitars is overtaken towards the end of the song by feedback that sucks in the sounds around it like a black hole, only for the melody to re-emerge even more powerfully. Even if you don't understand what Chikudate is saying, her voice lends meaning to the words with vocals that are sweet but edged with a knowing tone, sometimes reminiscent of The Cardigans' Nina Persson.

Citrus is very much an album for these times. If Asobi Seksu can be lumped in with the footwear fixated crowd, it's only because they're the most forward-looking shoegazers of 2006 — how's that for a paradox? — and certainly not looking to retrace the steps of their predecessors. Even if they were, you could guarantee that the shoes on their eight well-turned heels would be oh so terribly chic.

Danny Weddup



Lavender Diamond
The Cavalry Of Light EP
 Self-released
 ★★☆☆

When the lovely Dévics name-dropped this Los Angeles-based quartet in last issue's interview, *Wears The Trousers* knew we had to investigate further. What we found was this sparkling jewel of an import — sixteen minutes of some of the most evocative music ever committed to disc.

Fronted by Seventies songstress throwback Becky Stark and featuring former Young People singer/guitarist Jeff Rosenberg, composer Steve Gregoropoulos and percussionist/visual artist

Ron Regé Jr., Lavender Diamond make pastoral chamber-folk with a spiritual bent that steers away from being fiercely didactic, just gently inspirational.

Stark in particular is a keen advocate of the healing power of music and making every second sacred. The daughter of a would-be minister mother (she was kicked out of ministerial school for rock 'n' roll tendencies), Becky and her sister would often attend their mum's own 'Church of Popular Culture' where they would debate the metaphysical meanings of songs by Madonna and Culture Club, before graduating to the likes of Fugazi and Chisel. None of which really give you any idea of how heavenly this EP is, so moving swiftly on...

The thing about singing of a broken heart is that everyone's doing it. The theme is so prevalent, so universal that it's hard to really give that much of a damn unless it's being done with fresh invention. Clearly, Lavender Diamond have collectively pre-empted such a jaded, grumbling worldview, and with a sense of

humour too. If anyone had told me last week that I would soon become obsessed with a song as bluntly named as *You Broke My Heart*, in which it takes a full sixty seconds before any other lyric is uttered, I never would have believed them. Yet here I am with the song on its umpteenth repeat thinking it could well be the greatest piece of music since, well, almost anything on Joni Mitchell's *Blue*.

Rarely has anyone sounded so simultaneously mortified and overwhelmingly thrilled at getting the boot. Stark's angelic, escalating vocal soars and swoops like a repentant bird of ill omen over a janglefest of acoustic guitar, tambourine and radio-friendly staccato piano riffs. It's an ecstatic revelation that works far better in practice than it ever could on paper.

While just as brilliantly conceived, nothing else is quite as good. The sleepy, weeping strings and plaintive piano of *Please* touch on a rainy-day Carpenters vibe and would sound perfect if it were played as the credits roll on some devastating

indie flick (that is, if Aimee Mann were too busy).

In Heaven There Is No Heat starts off like a subdued Josephine Foster outtake then suddenly there's sunshine — irresistibly bursting through the gloomy repetitive verses comes the biggest, shiniest, multi-part harmony chorus this side of *The Magic Numbers*. Inspired!

Then, like Vashti Bunyan on valium, *Rise In The Springtime* arrives a fully-formed mini-Britfolk epic that's so airy and gossamer-light that not even its worshipful lyrics can cloy. It's sweet, strange and a little bit squidgy, like aural Turkish delight for slimmers.

Herbalists claim that extracts of lavender can be used to soothe headaches, to aid your sleep and even to help cure acne. I'm making no promises on that last one, but *The Cavalry Of Light* seems equally potent. Seek it out on editor's orders.

Alan Pedder

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 If you can find it, check out Becky's solo CD *Artifacts Of The Winged* for more beautiful tunes!



Mia Doi Todd

La Ninja: Amor & Other Dreams Of Manzanita

Plug Research

★★★★

This latest full-length release from Californian singer-songwriter Mia Doi Todd is both new and not new. Three new songs appear (including a haunting cover of The Beatles' *Norwegian Wood*) but mostly this is a remix album, with versions of tracks from her 2005 collection *Manzanita* given a treatment from her Plug Research labelmates and others. Oftentimes, a remix of a song can drown out the essence of the original, revealing more about the remixer than the song. It can be argued that a truly good remix (like good production) has the purpose of adding to the fundamentals, interpreting while enhancing rather than swallowing up. Luckily, this is largely what we have here. For an artist who predominantly performs with sparse accompaniment — her first three albums were solo acoustic — it seems an obvious move to invite some outside musical interpretation, and the result is quite interesting.

The treatment of the songs has fortunately been mostly minimal. A true and tangible beauty lies in their stripped-down nature and in the raw quality of her impressive voice. Indeed, it's this that makes her music so moving. The songs' ethereal and poetic qualities have generally been preserved and the remixing done with a gentle rather than heavy-handed approach. Only on *Amor* does it seem to flounder completely, the additional sounds adding clutter and confusion. There are other moments of unexpected distortion, but these are used to good effect. Todd's unique resonance and deep tones enable her to create distinctive atmospheres extremely well, and a spooky Portishead feel gives an additional edge to her melodic traditional folk.

There are three remixes of *My Room Is White*, and while the Reminder edit corrupts the vocals beyond recognition, the Flying Lotus effort creates a quite inviting ambience, complete

with submarine echoes and far-off whalesong. Here, instead of drawing away from the vocals, the effects enhance them and Mia reaches near-operatic perfection — she's classically trained — full of ghostly feeling and chilling restraint. *Muscle, Blood & Bone* evokes a hint of Natalie Merchant but with a matchless mysticism and warmth, and elsewhere, as on *Deep At Sea*, we are reminded of Kosheen's quieter moments. All in all, Mia's vocals are utterly unique and warrant only the lightest of treatment.

The only untouched song, the new *Kokoro*, is conspicuous in its lack of production, yet its bare bones nature makes it both heartbreaking and perfect, proof that sometimes, less is more. However, what shows through on *La Ninja* is that the music of Mia Doi Todd has great possibilities and works both accompanied and bare. Like Björk, her strong vocals always manage to retain the listener's focus, and as Beth Orton has shown in the past, a sensitive remix of a folksy tune can be extremely effective and quite quite beautiful.

Stephanie Heney



Cibelle

The Shine Of Dried Electric Leaves

Six Degres

★

The thrill of retail therapy is a potent little thing and is cleverly designed to ensure you keep returning for more. It's anticipation and control and material reward all in one quick fix. Often, of course, the thrill is momentary, the bell curve of desire flattening quicker than you can say pancake. Such is the deflating experience of listening to São Paulo-born Cibelle's (pronounced see-BELL-ee) second album, suffering as it does from trying much too hard to be cerebral. Here, she is to Bebel Gilberto what Oasis are to The Beatles, but the comparison is an appropriate place to start. *The Shine Of Dried Electric Leaves* copies Gilberto's *Tanto Tempo* blueprint by mixing slow electronica and Latin acoustics to a collection of very laidback torch songs. But where Bebel succeeded

in finding a trade-off between the crossover elements of both genres, in part due to some excellent variations in tempo, an amazing voice and, perhaps most importantly, some cracking songs, Cibelle unfortunately fails.

The album starts pleasantly enough with the hazy summer swell of *Green Grass* (tellingly, a cover of an old Tom Waits song), but you'll have forgotten it completely halfway through the meandering follow-up, *Instante De Dois*, which sets the benchmark for the remainder of the set by outstaying its welcome by at least two minutes and overplaying the use of 'novel' instruments and sounds, until the original melody is a distant memory. Ditto *Phoenix*, *Minha Neguinha* and, well, just about every other song.

It's a shame because Cibelle's voice is a fine instrument, but too often she crowds it with unnecessary percussion and ill-judged electronica. *Mad Man Song*, featuring French rapper Spleen, is a particularly poor example of someone seemingly offered a 48-track studio and feeling obliged to fill each one with a different sound. When those sounds are, to quote from Cibelle's website, "... voices, spoons, sugarcubes, cups and coffee", the phrase 'trying too hard' springs to mind. I'm all for experimentation, but based on the premise that it's being conducted with goals in mind, rather than for the sake of it. There's a lot of repetition, too much stopping to talk/whisper sultrily (sing woman, it's what you're good at!) and the tempo hardly ever shimmies above a slowly trudging stroll. Unless you're paying strict attention, you won't even know which song you're listening to, or even if it's still the same day of the week. I actually felt like rewarding myself for being able to listen to all of *Flying High* without pushing fast forward. It just goes on and on and, well, you get the picture.

Ultimately, Cibelle's efforts to diversify her sound suffer from the modern malaise of throwing everything at the proverbial wall and hoping that all of it sticks. There's a startling lack of variation, both in ideas and tempo, very little thought given to the pacing and no quality control; fourteen songs, only two of which clock in at under four minutes — perhaps someone has a little too much time on their hands, hmm? This is the kind of record that will make you long for a return to the limitations and boundaries of analogue and vinyl, ensuring that the obvious filler and vanity projects are culled. *The Shine Of Dried Electric Leaves* will pass you

by in a blur of nothingness — the aural equivalent of a tranquiliser tablet. **Paul Woodgate**



Scanners

Violence Is Golden

Dim Mak

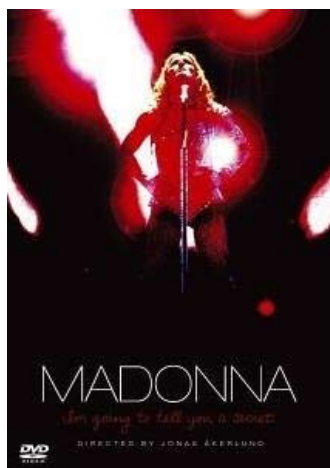
★★★

Though having a name that's pretty much Google kryptonite probably hasn't helped Scanners' cause, it's hard not to feel this fledgling London quartet have been dealt a slightly unfortunate hand. A domestic deal hasn't been forthcoming, and while US indie Dim Mak snapped them up Stateside some months ago, doubtless thanks to the magic of the internet, this isn't as rosy as it sounds. A couple of LA showcase gigs aside, Scanners are in the somewhat Catch 22-ish position of being too skint to tour the only country their record is out in, instead gigging almost exclusively in London where no bugger can buy the album.

This deserves to change, as said album, *Violence Is Golden*, is as invigorating a record as you'll hear all year. The lynchpin is singer Sarah Daly, whose vocals lie somewhere between Polly Jean Harvey and glam-era Bowie — eerie and off-kilter, but delivered with too much arch panache to ever drift into woe-is-me territory. But it's the music that really makes the album; on a budget of what must have been about 5p, the band appear to have compressed all the best bits of the Seventies and Eighties into eleven slick, tuneful blasts. From the faintly ribald electro-avalanche of opener *Joy*, through the New Order-esque melancholy of *Lowlife* and the rabid camp of *Air 164* and *Raw*, *Violence Is Golden* smacks into you like Zinedine Zidane on happy pills, a Technicolor beast gleefully devouring glam, new wave, punk and a half-dozen other genres.

That it occasionally lacks depth and is generally a touch incoherent does little to diminish the album's appeal — after all, lack of depth and shallowness are classic signs of a good time, and *Violence Is Golden* is more fun than snorting a tequila slammer.

Andrzej Lukowski



Madonna

I'm Going To Tell You A Secret
Warner Bros.

★★

"I have a cage / it's called the stage / when I'm let out, I run about / and sing and dance and sweat and yell / I have so many tales to tell."

Yep, Madonna has decided to share with us her latest poetic exploits. One can only speculate on why nobody stopped her. Perhaps it was yet another attempt to portray a sense of edginess and spontaneity, and once again that's probably the biggest problem. This is her second behind-the-tour documentary so you might have thought she'd know by now that grainy film stock and showy lenses don't really fool anyone into thinking that they're getting real insight.

Covering her 2004 Reinvention tour, *I'm Going To Tell You A Secret* is not actually a documentary in so far as Madonna's editorial control ensures that there is nothing shown that falls outside of her patented spiritual mum persona. So instead of getting moments of her infamous strappage we're dished up yet more supposed 'edginess' rehearsed to within an inch of its life. Madonna talks about being caked in sweat! Madonna's going to the loo! Madonna's costume smells! This is the story of life on the road, edited and acutely contrived for your fanboy/girl-watching pleasure. Well, you didn't want warts, did you?

There is certainly a message amidst the mediocrity, though. You almost want to give the lass a break after the over-nauseous rabbiting on about her religious choices in the press. Surely she's not going to try and convert us? Actually, yes, she is. Bring forth 'teacher' Eitan to share vague spiritual truths; observe how she reads the Kabbalah text Zohar in bed; and so on. You can prove anything with platitudes: "I always thought it was my job to

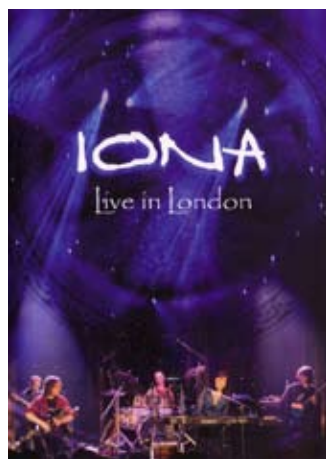
wake people up," she muses, "but it's not enough to wake them up. You have to give them direction." Blimey, stop the presses!

But it doesn't stop there, oh no. See the montages of war-torn children from across the ages, set to thumping dance beats and over-laid with cod-religious pronouncements. By the time Michael Moore comes on screen to sing her praises, you just might want to throw your TV out the window. On the plus side, we're offered pleasing insights into family life — see Daddy Ciccone in his vineyard and a neat pay-off to *In Bed With*'s scenes of his disgust at her live show. The Ciccone children, too, are surprisingly unprecocious, frolicking around with only mild hints of premadonna antics to come, while Guy Ritchie comes across in a peculiar manner; impish and playful one moment, a walking stereotype the next. All Cockney men have lock-ins at their local so they can whip out a guitar and chant folk songs? You heard it here first people.

But what of the music, for some the preferred occupation of Madonna? We're shown nattily-edited performances that prove the stage is where she still knows her stuff. *Like A Prayer* is updated to an electro stomper, *Holiday* rocks the house and *Oh Father* ratchets up the teariness mechanically. Duff single *American Life* comes off worst with a dance routine that's more reminiscent of 'Springtime For Hitler' than anything remotely worthwhile. Think skimpily-dressed marines and faux-explosions with a real war footage backdrop. Even so, why anyone would want to listen to these performances without the aid of visuals is a cause for concern; the bonus CD may be a smart commercial move but, artistically, it's an absolute dud.

Oh well, it could be worse — it could be Geri Halliwell. Madonna is no world thinker, but her explorations into personal enlightenment are much less crass than you might imagine. She does at least have the sense to show us the universal side of the message, keeping the brush strokes nice and broad. This is not a documentary. It's a two-hour long coffee table book. About the only true insight one can newly glean is that she's clearly witnessed enough nightclubs at closing time playing *Come On Eileen* to know how to shift the punters — her attempt to finish with John Lennon's *Imagine* had me reaching for the stop button with alacrity.

Ian Buchan



Iona

Live In London
Open Sky/Voiceprint

★★★★

It's been a long time coming but this double-disc live DVD set from Celtic rock band Iona has been well worth the wait. In fact, it has been six years since fans of the band have had any new Iona product to get their teeth into — 2000's studio album, *Open Sky*. This partial exile, during which the band has made only occasional live forays, has been partly self-imposed since it allowed, amongst other things, time for lead singer Joanne Hogg to start a family. However, with new studio album *The Circling Hour* due for release in the autumn, *Live In London* serves to whet expectant appetites, not least because three of the songs here (namely *Wind Off The Lake*, *Strength* and *Factory Of Magnificent Souls*) are new and tasty entrées.

The remainder of the songs are culled from the band's five studio albums, with all phases of their sixteen-year career represented, with a few cuts from Iona's multi-instrumentalists Dave Bainbridge and Troy Donockley's duo project that has kept them busy during the down-time.

Filmed in November 2004, the concert is presented as something of a comeback, and it's a joyous affair; the mixture of party atmosphere and adrenalin-fuelled nerves are in evidence, all of which add a sense of energy. The music is presented in two sections — the main programme providing over ninety minutes of the band in full flow and a half-hour acoustic set. It's crowd-pleasing too, as is clear from the vociferous reaction.

The music and visuals are both well presented, with only a few digital artefacts on the faster motion betraying the fact that the budget for the project was

hardly that of Kylie or Robbie's latest DVD. The producers make very good use of the five-camera film crew and all the angles available, with occasional monochrome fades and inserts adding a touch of class. That it comes in proper widescreen format is simply an additional bonus, but an excellent one. Why so many music DVDs still seem to come in 4:3 ratio is beyond me, but that's another story. The audio, too, is exemplary with both the stereo and 5.1 surround sound mixes vibrant and lively.

As ever, Hogg is in fine voice, dishing up a bewitching concoction of crystalline purity and rich, breathy intimacy. The range of instruments shared between Bainbridge and Donockley is staggering, from the conventional rock armoury of electric guitars and keyboards to more traditional instruments like bouzoukis, acoustic guitars, low whistles and uilleann pipes. This more antiquated arsenal may seem to peg them in the ambient Celtic and folk-rock categories, but comparisons with Clannad at one extreme and Fairport Convention at the other fail because of the other elements Iona bring to the table.

Many of these songs possess definite prog rock leanings with their extended instrumental passages in which duetting uilleann pipes and electric guitar is something of an Iona signature. However, a keen pop sensibility never allows them to regress into the sort of navel-gazing self-indulgence that has so often marred music of this type. The playing is never anything less than tight and the music is always accessible and focused yet multi-layered and textured. It's a heady but satisfying mixture that draws deep from both traditional and modern music and infuses that with a soaring Celtic spirit.

All told then, *Live In London* is an excellent record of a supremely talented band relishing the opportunity to share a passion for their music on stage. It succeeds as both a memento for existing fans and a great introduction for those who are new to the band. If your taste for Celtic music stretches beyond the MOR ambient washes of Enya and the like, or if you're a fan of classic rock who's willing to go beyond familiar constructs, there is much in this set that will reward your attention.

Trevor Raggatt

To hear preview clips of all the songs on the forthcoming album, visit www.iona.uk.com.

Andrea Corr in
Richard Raymond's 'The Bridge'
Rating: 12
★★★★

In her office, late at night, Mary (Andrea Corr), a psychologist, takes a voicemail from the father of a girl who has committed suicide whilst under her care, urging her that it's time to 'let go'. Having lost her position through this unfortunate event, Mary finds it very hard to do so, and scribbles down the man's number only to see it vanish beneath the remnants of a teacup, upended by her friendly cat. An attempt at remembering the number leads to a call to an elderly man, Simon (Leonard Fenton), who only moments before was poised, barefoot on a snowy ledge, about to leap to his death into the dark waters below...

Against the shadowy silhouette of the bridge, blue-tinged and feathered with falling snow, director Richard Raymond elicits a magical and haunting sense of other-worldliness, the stylised

heightened reality an escapee of a Tim Burton landscape, demonstrating all of Burton's delicious dark melancholy but devoid of his black humour. However, this is no triumph of style over substance: Raymond gently unfurls his tale, Mary at first still as she receives the message, her agitation growing as she takes the call from Simon and realises he is on the brink of killing himself, and then her flight into the night as she attempts to lay her own ghosts to rest by saving another, all leading to a taunt and chilling climax.

Whilst an interesting combination, there may not be the highest of expectations for the pairing of the lead singer of a pop group with Doctor Legge from Eastenders. In that case, be prepared for a most pleasing surprise. The pacing of the film is dependent on the camera exploring the performers' actions and gestures and, within their dialogue, to linger on their expressions. As such, any mis-timing or errors would be magnified to the audience. That they both deliver convincing, gripping and moving

performances is a credit to both actors and Raymond as director. Corr, previously seen in 'The Commitments' and 'Evita', the Madonna vehicle in which she was criminally allowed only one line of what should have been her character's own song, has her sights set on an acting career and the evidence on display here leads one to suspect she'll be most successful. Underplaying rather than overplaying is a most subtle skill and Corr demonstrates this with aplomb. Fenton, meanwhile, ranges from pathos to simmering rage, as his anger at his life erupts and, his face a close-up of crevice shadowed contortion, bores into the viewer. The interplay between seasoned thespian and fresh-faced newcomer is nicely balanced, and the unlikely two-hander deftly explores a range of human emotions. As the falling snow is by turn luminescent white in the lamplight, or midnight blue against the darkened night, it reflects how the film's themes of regret, guilt, blame, loyalty and redemption are rarely black or white but instead change, Monet-

esque, dependent on the light in which they're seen.

Are there flaws? One or two, but even these are debatable. The plot is stretched slightly and could be shorter, but to lose the slow-burning build would almost certainly detract from the atmospherics of the film. The ending, too, is not as dramatically climatic as one has been led to suspect, but it is satisfying and quite haunting, resolving itself and yet is ambiguous enough to leave the viewer revisiting the tale in the mind's eye.

'The Bridge' has already attracted a considerable fanbase and plaudits from home and abroad. It's legacy will be as a beautiful, melancholy calling card that heralded the beginning of a most promising career for both its director and its leading lady, but one which will remain a favourite in its own right in any viewer's personal film collection.

Jean Lynch

'The Bridge' is out now on DVD or as a digital download exclusively from www.digitaldeli.co.uk.



Cerys Matthews

The Scala, London

July 26, 2006

★★★★



Barely ten minutes after the doors are flung open at the Scala, Californian songbird Becky Stark quietly glides to centre stage to kick off the evening. Wearing a striking aqua ballgown and, bizarrely, a matching blue cape, she resembles an intriguing blend of Supergirl and Cinderella. In keeping with this image and her earnest songs of love and fairytale dreams, Stark also believes in saving the planet, provocatively, yet sweetly declaring that “peace has finally come to planet Earth”. Given the notoriously indifferent, if not downright rude, reception that London audiences commonly afford a support act – usually spending more time supporting the bar takings than paying due attention – Stark commands an unusually reverent silence.

Clearly nervous and feeling rather exposed without her Lavender Diamond bandmates around her, she soon warms up, gleefully telling us that her father was an escaped convict and that her mother used to ask her to lie to the FBI, before pondering aloud whether this is the reason for her lack of respect for authority. Against all odds, her uninhibited ramblings and timid giggles come across as genuinely endearing and the volume of appreciative noises soon racks up among the amassing throng.

Between her affable anecdotes, Stark even finds time to treat us to four beautiful compositions from her solo album *Artifacts Of The*

Winged. Her voice both warms and haunts, the unaffected tenderness of her soaring falsetto revealing one of the purest, most honest vocal talents this side of a certain Vashti Bunyan. Saving the world may be out of her reach for now, but if Stark can get a bunch of hardened Londoners eating out of her hand like puppies, persuading world leaders to just get along is not all that far-fetched.

Second support act Richard James – formerly the guitarist for Welsh rockers Gorky’s *Zygotic Myncci* – may have hit all the right notes musically, but his introspective tone fails to cut through the oppressive heat inside the venue. The temperature was indeed rising, but whether this was from the clamour of bodies still radiating the day’s onslaught of sunshine or from sheer anticipation I couldn’t say; up in the balcony a Welsh flag unfurls itself to announce the impending arrival of tonight’s main attraction.

In her days as Catatonia’s outspoken figurehead, Cerys Matthews would often bound (and sometimes stagger) onstage, but today she tentatively sneaks on alongside her band. Armed with a cherry red guitar, she deflects the sea of expectant eyes before her and bursts straight into new album track, *Streets Of New York*. Visibly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of her band, Cerys’ trademark lungs struggle at first to compete with the reverberating power

chords and driving beats, and she nervously admits to the crowd that she’s “shaking like a leaf”.

But if the last few years have shown anything, it’s that Matthews is a fighter and by the third song – a low-tempo run-through of early Catatonia classic *Lost Cat* – the up-for-it crowd begins to have an effect. Given the parallels between her new material and some of Catatonia’s less populist efforts, a song like *Lost Cat* fits snugly into the set; even The Guardian’s gig writer failed to spot the nod to her past, despite it being greeted with one of the night’s biggest cheers.

Open Roads, the instantly memorable first single to be taken from her new album *Never Said Goodbye*, also gives the album its title, and when Matthews sings “it’s like we neh-ver said goodbye”, it’s easy to recall just how much fun Catatonia were in concert, counterpointing the pre-millennial navel-gazing of their contemporaries with fuck-off power chords and anthemic choruses. Somewhat inevitably, Matthews’ lyrics have become more introspective since her departure, picking apart human foibles and personal frailties, disguised Trojan-horse style by sweet melodic pop.

But don’t be fooled into thinking she’s gotten stuck in a mid-paced groove; her latest musical gear shift heralds the re-emergence of Cerys’ bona fide rock star qualities. Even the most cotton-pickin’ moments from 2003’s country jamboree *Cockahoop* are given a shot of pure rock adrenaline. During the traditional *All My Trials*, for instance, Matthews dispenses with her guitar and unleashes memories of the days when she would lead thousands of fans into dance. When she follows this up with *The Good In Goodbye*, everyone merrily bounces along as if it were 1998 again; but this is 2006 and her triumph tonight is surely all the more sweeter on her own terms.

Befitting her rock icon status, Matthews later treats us to an enjoyable cover of David Bowie’s *Soul Love* from his seminal *...Ziggy Stardust...* album. It’s an apt choice for the moment, too, proving that there can be an epilogue for rock ‘n’ roll stars who take the well-worn road to self-destruction. With her fall from grace at last in reverse, the crowd’s affection for Matthews is palpable and everyone is grinning. When she comes back for an encore, a moment’s dread that some drunken idiot might field an inappropriate request for *Road Rage* or *Karaoke Queen* soon passes. Tonight, Matthew, it seems that Cerys is happy simply being herself. **Stephen Collings**



fields.

Fleece & Firkin, Bristol

June 25th, 2006

★★★

Warm-ups, I have realised, are not supposed to be heard by outsiders for a very simple reason – bands invariably sound awful. The singer(s) will undoubtedly be out of tune. Indeed, early on in the evening, heard through the ancient industrial walls of Bristol’s Fleece & Firkin, fields. sound like shrieking banshees in the middle of a massacre of shouty East End market stall holders. This, perhaps, is why half of the audience leave before they’ve even entered the venue. A few manage to convince themselves that it was only the roadies testing the equipment, while fans of the band wonder if singer Thorunn Antonia is in possession of a hideous cold.

So far, not really that good, and the bar staff haven’t even served a drink yet. Fortunately, all is rescued when, taking to the stage ahead of headliners Larrikin Love, fields. launch into *Songs For The Fields* and a hundred ears prick up in an instant – “wait a minute, I’ve heard this”. It’s one of those songs that you can’t work out whether they’ve half-inched an opening chord from Bob Dylan or from some indie club classic. People sitting down at the back begin to lean against the walls instead and gradually the whole audience moves towards the stage. At times, Antonia’s voice can seem screechy and at odds with fellow fields. vocalist Nick Peill, but generally the pair have good chemistry. After a seven-song set, including some of the new tracks on their forthcoming EP, notably *Roll Down The Hill*, the band depart to the genuine applause of the majority.

From tonight’s performance, it’s clear that fields. are destined to be more than just another support band; they’re fast becoming headline material for smaller venues like the Fleece. With just a little more practice and perhaps a careful eye on the watch so as to ensure the audience hear only what they’re supposed to, fields. may eventually turn into acres.

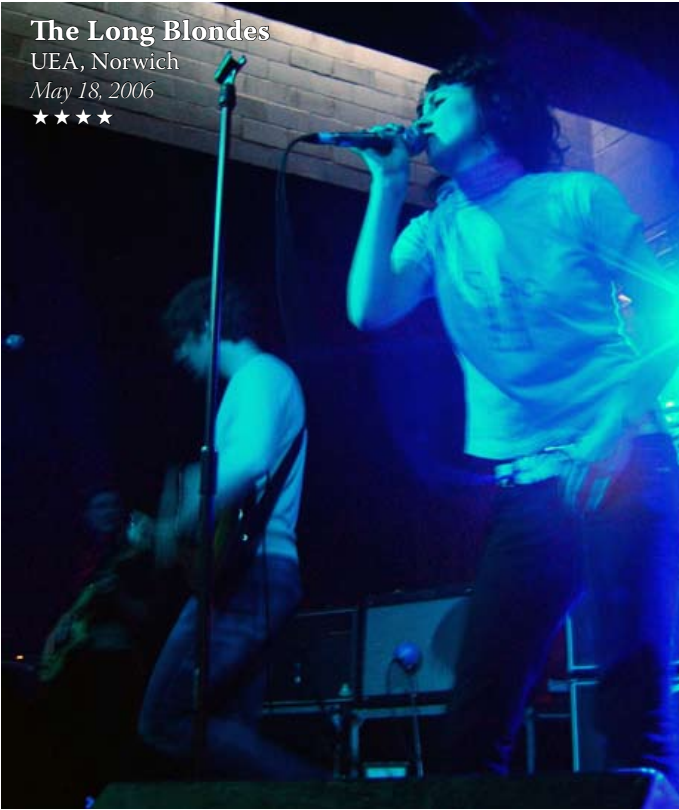
Tiffany Daniels

The Long Blondes

UEA, Norwich

May 18, 2006

★★★★



With a little help from Rough Trade, The Long Blondes have recently blossomed from Britain's best unsigned band to Britain's best signed band and are finally able to give up the day jobs and start touring the length of the country, spreading their perfect escapist pop. Having won the Philip Hall Radar award for new bands at February's NME ceremony awards (and been the only band with a single female, let alone three, to win an award), The Long Blondes have been waiting in the wings for long enough. They were subsequently invited to open up the NME New Music Tour while three identikit emo-indie bands secured the more coveted later slots, but you've gotta start somewhere, right?

Daylight was still shining through the upper windows as The Long Blondes elegantly took to the stage in the University of East Anglia's gym-like student union. Their quirky, second-hand glamour rested uneasily in the cavernous setting, the MySpace teens who comprised the sell-out crowd still blathering away. But as the opening bars of single *Appropriation (By Any Other Name)* chimed out and singer Kate Jackson started her now trademark stiletto-and-drainpipes angular shimmy, the crowd were transfixed. During their half-hour set, the band churned out would-be-hit after would-be-hit and many of their strongest songs didn't even get aired in a performance that should leave any band three albums into their career feeling more than

slightly insecure. They embody the escapist songwriting spirit of Burt Bacharach mixed with the British realism of Pulp and the classic dancefloor/rock club versatility of Blondie, and they're prolific at it too.

They played three new songs, all of which received the same excited response as by-now cult classics like *Separated By Motorways* and *Once & Never Again*, most notably the new B-side, *You Could Have Both*, which features a spoken-word breakdown between Dorian and Kate detailing the post-university crisis that hits us twenty-somethings so hard, admitting "I've only got a job so I don't disappoint my mother" before chanting "What about us?". The crowd may not yet have taken their AS-level exams, but the universality of The Long Blondes' themes, clever lyrics and classic tunes ensure that their appeal is widespread.

It's the penultimate song, *Giddy Stratospheres*, that best sums up what The Long Blondes are about; it's an epic 4:54, but so completely perfect you'll wish it wouldn't end. With its soaring choruses and Shangri-la-esque chants from guitarist Emma and bassist Reenie, the song has a certain snotty charm and a middle-eight so yummy you won't know whether to laugh or cry. As they walk off-stage thirty minutes after their humble entrance, they can sleep soundly in the knowledge that they have once again shown the boys that their hegemony won't last forever. **Robbie de Santos**

**The Dresden Dolls**

Spiegelzelt, Berlin

May 14th, 2006

★★★★

"We were so excited when we heard we could play in a mirrored tent" exclaimed Dresden Dolls singer Amanda Palmer as she took to the stage of the Spiegelzelt, erected temporarily for a nomadic mini-festival taking place all over Germany. But as the sunset glowed through the stained-glass windows of this curiously decadent, wood- and velvet-laden construction next to the railway tracks at East Berlin's former main station, what place could be more suitable? After all, The Dresden Dolls describe themselves as 'Brechtian punk cabaret' and are clearly thrilled to introduce their new album, *Yes, Virginia*, to the country that gave them their name, as well as Bertolt Brecht and his weird and wonderful theatre.

Since the release of their eponymous debut, the Boston duo has accumulated a dedicated, passionate and numerous following without attracting too much hype or mainstream press, mainly on the back of word-of-mouth praise and blistering live shows. Tonight was no exception. Though the sun was still illuminating the tent from all sides and The Dresden Dolls are a band best served in eerie, smoky darkness, Palmer and drummer Brian Viglione conjured up such dark intensity that it could have been on a Caribbean beach and still been just as impressive.

Like The Kills, the sparseness of the arrangements (i.e. only keyboard and primal drums against Amanda's rich and frantic vocals) makes the drama so much more affecting and severe. As they look at each other across the stage, all the fierceness that's found in a band of five members is concentrated into a single, manic gaze. As with all things cabaret, however, it's not all entirely serious. Early single *Coin-Operated Boy* is a cheeky crowd pleaser and their cover of Grauzone's *Eisbär*, a Swiss new wave band's ode to the polar bear, had the crowd waving arms and singing at the top of their voices. Perhaps fittingly it was not one of their own songs that captured the evening, but a cover of Jacques

Brel's *Port Of Amsterdam* — a wistfully sexy black-hearted tale of a long gone time of swashbucklin' filthy cabaret bars frequented by a shady clientele. The Dresden Dolls romanticise and capture this decadent and dangerous world and their concerts make it real for people disillusioned by their oversaturated, modern existence.

Robbie de Santos**Ladyfuzz**

Carling Academy, Bristol

June 30th, 2006

★★★★

As is usually the case with Bristol's indie-funk-electro night Ramshackle, the band that is playing have not been promoted well. In fact, I'd go so far to say they've not been promoted at all. I'm a fairly loyal Ladyfuzz fan and the first time I heard of this gig was when I was half-walking, half-falling down the lethally slippery steps in the venue. My friend in front of me stopped dead, stared in disappointment and exclaimed, "oh no, a band are playing!"

You can forgive the reaction; a live act is the last thing the sweaty, intoxicated audience want right now. It's 11:30pm and everyone is ready to dance. The arrival of a band would usually mean hardcore supporters cheering at the front, drunk misplaced souls falling over themselves in the centre of the dancefloor wondering where they are, while the majority of the crowd sulk and wait for the performance to end. But hallelujah! The venue is comfortably empty, the drunk people are slumped against a wall, and the sulkers? There are no sulkers, because Ladyfuzz are fantastic!

Launching into *My Summer Of Fun* and *Monster*, singer Liz Neumayr rocks the electro look and it's not long before the large crowd that's gathered to watch these unexpected guests are dancing like mad. The addictive chorus of single *Oh Marie* is adopted and repeated at random intervals by those present throughout the night and the band look genuinely pleased. Rightfully so, this was the night a small three-piece band conquered an area of entertainment few other bands have conquered before; they pleased a Ramshackle audience.

Tiffany Daniels