

wears the trousers

shelly poole

flowering out of the attic

diane cluck

antifolk's latest
next big thing

rockin' the cradle

how kids' music
is growing up

plus:

pooka

beth hirsch

rickie lee jones

& kamila thompson

welcome to...

wears *the* trousers

wears the trousers

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“The only way that we’re going to get a good album from [Tori Amos] in this day and age is if someone has the decency to abduct and kill her daughter.”

So wrote *Stylus Magazine*’s associate UK editor Dom Passantino earlier this year when ‘reviewing’ **The Beekeeper**, sparking off a furious reaction from fans and non-fans alike. It also expedited the birth of this, the very first issue of *Wears The Trousers*. Though such a profound lack of respect or compassion might be considered extreme by anyone’s standards, the existence of a misogynistic ethos in the music press is difficult to deny. Of course, there are always exceptions, particularly in the US where publications like *Venus*, *ROCKRGRRL* and a number of others are setting things to rights. In the UK, however, the coverage of female musicians in the press is limited at best.

Wears The Trousers therefore doffs a jaunty-angled cap to its US cousins and takes a resolutely Anglocentric peek at the world of women in music. It is our answer to those who fail to realise that rock and credible music is not naturally a male concept, but is actively produced as such in line with some ancient misconception that proliferates the belief that what’s a correct or incorrent behaviour for a woman is different to that of a man. We believe that female artists, and British female artists in particular, go under-represented in the media and this is our way of celebrating their music, regardless of genre.

This launch edition of *Wears The Trousers* comes to you courtesy of many a late night and relentlessly tugged at hair follicle. But now it’s here, we’re utterly proud to bursting to share it with you. Read on to find out why Shelly Poole has made the weirdest album of her career, why children’s music is all of a sudden so cool, why a man fed his daughter to a ravenous horse and, in case you too were wondering, what the hell ‘antifolk’ actually means. All that, plus much much more. Enjoy!

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diane cluck

interview by alan pedder photos by luca etter



diane cluck is telling stories but giving nothing away. so far, so journalistic cliché you may think, but there are precious few better ways to describe the emotional snapshots that constitute her uniquely and unflinchingly poetic songs. from her coolly narrative early work to the electric internalising of this year's **oh vanille/ova nil**, cluck has a way of sequestering secrets and smuggling them into your heart. stylistically, her origins lie closer to the circumference of the new york antifolk movement, a seemingly boundless reservoir of the offbeat and arty, than to the lilith generation – her assorted satellites and contemporaries include cocorosie, regina spektor, julie doiron, the moldy peaches' kimya dawson and newcomers jana hunter, rachel lipson, and marissa nadler. but ask diane if she feels like a part of something cohesive, a unit of sorts, and you'll get short shrift. in fact, ask her anything and you'll rarely get a fully-formed, straight down the middle, neat as you like packaged response. i warned you in the first sentence, remember.

integrity, it seems, is her plot device, the thing that keeps her going, delivering truths and unconventional homilies in a revelatory and queerly clipped vocal. though she describes herself simply as “seamstress, songstress, cook and wife”, she does still parade a minor artistic conceit – when i catch up with her over email she instructs me not to rearrange her sentences, or add punctuation or capital letters because she finds them “sort of depressing”. what the heck, conformity is the refuge of the imaginatively challenged anyway. punctuation be damned.

there seems to be a definite rural and worldly quality to your lyrics which makes me wonder if you've always been a new yorker? does the city influence your music?

i grew up in lancaster county, pennsylvania it was quite rural then, less so now tho it still has a noticeable amish population city life seemed to bring on or at least

speed up my need to make music tho i don't feel the city as an influence anymore

rumour has it that you're a nutritionist by trade. any top tips for staying in good voice?

i often drink sage tea with honey before and during shows it helps to open up my voice and ward off infection

is there a story behind the title oh vanille/ova nil?

there is a story i actually just deleted it after typing it out and reveling in its cuteness i was walking over the williamsburg bridge last night thinking about how when i was a kid i had this bossy habit of telling my little sister what the 'right' lyrics were to the pop songs she was singing she'd have her own language and associations all worked out happily singing away then i'd come in telling her she was wrong i still remember the look of hurt and bewilderment on her face then i was like 'why should i tell people what things mean?' i don't enjoy it i feel like i'm robbing someone of the experience of standing in the wonder of their own interpretation i mean, i could tell you exactly what the title meant, to me but i'd be more interested in hearing what the title means to you *[when i later offer her a somewhat convoluted explanation involving juxtaposition of the vital and the mundane, ignition and extinguishing, she sweetly thanks me for my opinion and says no more about it]*

do you consider yourself a feminist? does it hold any meaning for you?

i don't consider myself a feminist the word or concept has never interested me i know it's loaded for some people so it's better left to them

what made you first pick up a guitar/sit down at the piano?

i have early memories of being fascinated and shy around pianos like i was in love or had a crush

i don't know what made me pick up guitar for the first time i picked it up for the second time

when i began losing interest in piano guitar felt more mutable and subtle i like the way guitar works with my body

how hard has it been for you to sell your music? are illegal downloads really harming independent artists?

i haven't been trying to sell music so it hasn't been hard sometimes i sell cds or get paid for shows and sometimes i don't

i've never been harmed by an illegal download people should do what they like upload, download, freeload it doesn't bother me as an artist

what does the term "antifolk" represent to you? do you think it's a true reflection of your songs?

okay a n t i f o l k to me at this point if it means anything means people who don't give or get points for having technical chops without an open heart to back it up

basically, you could be all heart and no technique and you would be respected the antifolk crowd i knew was very keen and discerning on this point in some ways it's the only identifying characteristic behind a widely diverse group of individuals i don't call myself antifolk tho i don't fight the label

what's next for you? are you playing in europe any time soon?

next i am going to go to sleep i thought too much about these questions and it made me tired thinking uses up lots of energy if i'm going to be interviewed again i'd like to be more thoughtless about it

next i am moving house to live with my friend lauren luloff who makes amazing paintings

next i am finishing work on an album and then another one and then i would like for there to be a break from next

i made a six-week tour of europe and the u.k. (sic) with herman dune this past spring that was by far the longest tour i've done i was glad to find myself falling apart and holding up along the way now my belly feels full of touring for awhile what's soon? what's awhile? ■



If You See Her, *Say Hello...*

As the daughter of seminal folk pairing Richard and Linda Thompson, 23-year old Kamila Thompson has had a firsthand (not to say unavoidable) education in music and the challenges of making a living as a performer. As with the other fearsomely gifted and emerging offspring of renowned singers, songwriters and instrumentalists of days gone by, the question remains whether these kids – who include Eliza Carthy and Rufus and Martha Wainwright to name but a few – merely pulled a lucky number in the eternal sperm lottery. **Gillian Masland** begs to differ. This second generation of artists knows what the job entails; endless months on the road, long hours of rehearsals, the agony of a show or a note that misses the mark. It's a very public story of stepping up and taking your place in the family business, observed and absorbed since birth... ►►



The first time I saw Kamila perform was in May 2004, opening for her brother Teddy at an intimate show in London. Accompanying herself on what appeared to be a bright pink guitar – which may or may not have had her name emblazoned across it, hardly the mark of a shy folk troubadouress – the talented Ms Thompson belted out a half dozen songs with a fresh, confident style, pausing briefly to quiz the audience, “Hands up, who here *wasn't* at school with me?”

She recently took some time to enlighten us all on the finer points of growing up in a musical family, her summer reading list and the perils of pre-marital sex in Greek mythology...

Can you describe your sound in five words or less? Unfussy, melodic, bluesy, roughly-tuned.

Have you ever rebelled stylistically as the result of coming from such a famous musical family? I don't think so, I got tattoos instead. I don't really write folk music, but I'm sure there are hints of it here and there.

What was the first concert you attended (not including those of your parents)? I can't remember – that's terrible, isn't it? I saw The Eagles play a massive stadium gig in Boston when I was really young and that was an early lesson in how tight a band really can be. They're so slick.

Who do you feel really wrote the book with regards to live performance? The Band. They were stupefying, I wish I could have seen them.

Who are your greatest musical influences? It's the musicians I grew up around who were always playing, always telling stories. Old duffers who've never entertained the thought of doing anything but make music. I think that's how you should feel about it, ideally. I'm taking an IT course in case it all falls through, of course.

Who was your childhood idol? Do you have any regrets, or still carry a torch? I had a massive thing for John Lennon when I was about nine. I thought he was the second coming.

If you could adapt any story to song or concept album form, which would you choose and why?

There's a story from Ancient Greek folklore about a young girl called Leimone. Her father caught her having a romantic tryst before marriage and consequently fed her to a ravenous horse. I think that could pack a punch.

The guilty pleasure in your record collection? I've still got my Snoop Dogg records from before I understood what a pea-brained, unsavoury woman-hater he is. I wouldn't buy it now on those grounds. You couldn't get me to chuck it, though...

Can songs that refer to a specific set of circumstances have a universal appeal, or is it the responsibility of the songwriter to omit certain details so the lyrics are accessible to a wider audience? I think if you mean what you're saying, it'll resonate with people. The less meaning behind a song, the more performance you need to bring it to life. I don't think that's a bad thing at all, it's just a different thing. Some of my songs mean absolutely bugger all, but they're fun.

What's on your summer reading list? I just started [Bob Dylan autobiography] *The Chronicles*, which I'd been saving. I just read James Frey's two heart-shaking-novels one after the other and loved them. Next on my hit list is *The Time Traveller's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger. ■

Following her show-stealing support slot for Marty Willson-Piper (yes, he of The Church fame) at London's legendary 12 Bar Club in August, Kamila will be playing at the Lark In The Park pub on Copenhagen Street, Islington on September 7th. Catch her if you can, it might be your last chance before she goes to New York in October to start work on her debut album. You can keep tabs on her progress through her all-new official website, which you'll find at www.kamilathompson.co.uk.



in search of...
Pooka

interview by Alan Pedder

When half-Welsh, half-Irish artist Natasha Lea Jones met singer and multi-instrumentalist Sharon Lewis in a Nottingham comedy club in 1992, each knew they had found a kindred musical spirit. A spirit by turns as enchanting as it was mischievous, which lent itself more than a little conveniently to their chosen stage name, Pooka. Look it up in the dictionary and you'll read that the pooka of legend is a shape-shifting pixie creature that can turn on a pinhead from something adorable to a small thing possessed. Within a year, they had secured a five-album deal with WEA, and in August of 1993 released their acoustic eponymous debut. Just one problem. The world at large was too busy popping club drugs and tripping out to appreciate the extraordinary vocal arrangements and unique textures of their double-barrelled aural assault. Although the album was critically acclaimed by critics and fellow artists alike, a change in the label's management soon left Sharon and Natasha in the cold. Their second album, **Spinning**, was issued in September 1997, three years after work began on the record. During that time they were briefly signed to Rough Trade for two 7" singles, but that too fell through before they were rescued by former Rough Trade founder Geoff Travis with his new imprint, Trade 2. After an extensive tour in support of the album, the duo parted company with that label too and began working on the 5-track



Monday Mourning EP, which was released in October 1999 through the French label Telescopie. They subsequently worked simultaneously on two very different albums – one orchestral (**Fools Give Birth To Angels**) and one comprising dark and twisted electronica (**Shift**, produced by Brian Duffy). While the former was independently issued, **Shift** got a commercial release in July 2001 by none other than Rough Trade Records, risen phoenix-like from its own ashes. Not a little ironically, the listening public had by then woken up once more to the charms of the acoustic movement, but the duo decided to finally call it a day.

That was four years ago, and in the meantime both have independently released their own solo records – Natasha’s beautifully rousing **The Morning After** was issued in 2003, while Sharon’s spell-binding **The Hour Lilies** arrived in 2004. By the wonders of modern technology, I was able to catch up

with both of them; Natasha at her treasured stone cottage in Darwen, Lancashire, and Sharon on the last date of her Transatlantic Tales tour with US singer-songwriter Rose Polenzani at London’s historic 12 Bar Club.

It seems to me that you’ve had some really unfortunate luck with record companies over the years. Did that have a damaging effect on the band, your morale and friendship?

Natasha: It’s interesting that some people have a perception that we had bad luck. Other people perceived us as the luckiest kids in the country. We were signed during the recession in the 90s, how lucky is that?! We had a really strong attitude to rebel against all the cheesy pop crap that was going on at the time and we succeeded. We paved a path for bands like Coldplay, and even U2 were inspired by some of our music. Okay, so we weren’t Kylie Minogue

Top Ten chart knockers, but we were just as sexy in our own tenacious, daring, “fuck you” way. and we came out with some great equipment and means to do our own art, without having to answer to anyone. The people who talked about us failing were the bureaucratic managers and heads of record companies who didn’t have a clue what a good record sounds like. They just wanted us to go anorexic and show our tits. This is what caused the tension in our friendship. Sharon and I had a really go for it positive attitude, which we still have. We were kids but we didn’t like being controlled by the adults with all the cash. We knew what we wanted to give musically. and that’s what we did.

Sharon: We had good luck and bad luck. I think the bad luck was probably due to the time that we released our record. A lot of acoustic music wasn’t being played on the radio, it was just not what everyone was into. Just working in-

tensely with someone is really hard on a friendship, whether you're really successful or you don't meet the goals you set. But we're still friends, we have a really special connection. I'm always amazed by bands that have really long-term relationships and friendships. I think Pooka went on as far as we could but perhaps we'd have more luck now. Being a bit older, I think maybe our friendship and our working relationship would have been better.

Your electronic album *Shift* seemed to baffle some of your fans and critics alike, but I loved it. What inspired you to make it?

S: Well, the whole concept of Pooka right from the beginning, why we chose the name, was that we wanted to be the sort of band that would be really open and experimental. So that's why with each album we tried something different. The first album was acoustic, the second more rocky, the third album electronic and the fourth, **Fools Give Birth To Angels**, was orchestral. We never wanted to be pigeonholed really. Maybe that held us back in some ways, but it was what we were striving for. I think we fulfilled that goal. We met Brian Duffy when we living in Birmingham. He's just such a talented man so it was really exciting to have the chance to work with him.

N: We always strived to explore all aspects of our creativity. We weren't afraid to be electronic. We weren't acoustic guitar folkie snobs. and we didn't give a shit if people called us "folkie" ether. We loved folk music but we thought computers were shit hot too. Why have one when you can have both?

What's your favourite memory of the Pooka years?

S: I'd say, musically, making the **Monday Mourning EP**. I felt we really worked together in producing that. A lot of the time we had our own ideas, but on that one we really came together. It was really nice and that didn't happen often. It got a bit divided towards the end, like this person did this and this person

did that. Actually, on **Fools Give Birth To Angels**, half the songs were recorded, produced, written and arranged by Natasha in Manchester and the other half by me in Brighton. I used my musicians and she used hers. So it was quite a strange album to make.

N: For me, It has to be at a gig at The Borderline. We did this gig using in ear monitors. It was our first time with them and there was this glorious moment where Sharon and I could hear absolutely everything, all the band playing and each other. and when I looked at Sharon she was smiling at me and we just knew we were together because we could actually hear each other. Unfortunately the ear monitors were so loud I couldn't hear a thing after the gig for a whole week. Another moment has to be recording *Higher* for **Spinning**. The producer Joe Leach, who was also a good friend, decided he was going to cover me and him with a duvet and record the guitar while under it and sitting in a wardrobe lined with even more duvet covers. It took five takes for me to focus on the delicate guitar part and then we went for a full on take. It was getting very hot, and right in the middle of the take Joe began to let out silent yet really stinky farts. So the whole take on the album in the background has me laughing under my breath whilst trying to breathe and play without making any mistakes, all at the same time. It all added to the performance. Every time I smell a fart I hear *Higher*, and every time I hear *Higher*, I smell fart.

Is there any one Pooka song that means the most to you now in hindsight, and why?

S: The ones we wrote together like *This River* and *Rubber Arms*. I also really like *One Day We Will See* on the **Monday Mourning EP**. That's one of Natasha's songs, it's really beautiful.

N: I was really happy with *Higher*, *The Insect*, *Spinning* and *The Rocking Chair*. My favourite Sharon Lewis track is called *This Is Like*, and it's on a CD by Sophie Moleta.

When did you both decide to do your own solo albums? Was it something you always intended?

S: I think I decided pretty early on. I still had loads of songs that hadn't been recorded so I was pretty determined. We both have our own studios so there was no reason why not. It took a while to build my confidence up as a solo artist, and I feel like I'm still doing that now. It's been really inspiring being on the road with Rose, because she's always been a solo artist. Some musicians you work with are just playing their part and not really feeling the music. I think the difference really shows with Rose.

N: For me. it wasn't so much a decision, more an occurrence. It just happened. I feel very lucky that I have a life where that can just happen. It took a lot for Sharon and I to gain the equipment to nurture our musical fetishes, and we relish it all the best we can! Rose is fantastic. It's great to see females show the lads how it should be done.

What did you enjoy most about recording your own solo albums?

S: It's been really liberating actually. Although we actually produced **Fools Give Birth To Angels** ourselves because we took total control over the arranging, recording and production, engineering and mixing. So I guess doing my first solo album was like an extension of that. Being in control again. There were definitely times where you go through creative highs and lows, but Rose was just saying on this trip that I've been teaching her perseverance. When you're involved in the industry, it's all about when you're gonna get played on Radio 1, and if you don't get played on Radio 1 you're a complete failure and y'know, when you're in control of your own music, you have your own goals and your own beliefs and you follow through with those.

N: I can't really remember recording **The Morning After** now, I'm too busy focusing on the next album. I think Sharon's record has a really unique delicateness about it. It's great for me to put on some Sharon Lewis music and to be able to

PORT ISAAC VILLAGE HALL





just enjoy it without thinking, “Oh I could have sung that harmony a bit closer there” or “That bit’s out of tune, let’s do it again.”

Anything you’re most proud of on those albums?

S: That’s really difficult. I guess I really judge my songs on what effect they have on other people [Rose later tells of how Sharon’s dad cried when they played the tremulously poignant *Lost Soul* from **The Hour Lilies** together earlier in the tour] and the ones that, y’know, get the most feedback. I like the songs where I feel like I can be really honest, but I’m also a bit afraid of them as well. It’s a very personal album. It’s a bit scary to release an album like that, but then when I get feedback from people about what the songs mean to them, it’s really reassuring.

N: Sometimes music is a calling card to reach out to someone and explain something deeper, and reach people in a way that eliminates our inevitable impending threat of loneliness. If someone says “that one” then it goes down in my book as “I possibly reached someone today.” Sharon and I always have a

lot of love to give people. Musically, I’m really pleased that I’ve got my head around arranging songs. And learning to play the piano (e.g. on *Birthday*), I’m happy about that. Proud of it all really. Not done too badly for a working class lass from up North. However, there is always the next challenge.

What’s that then?

N: At the moment, I’m campaigning to save people’s homes from demolition by the Government and money mad planners (see www.savebritainsheritage.com for more info). Other than writing and recording the next album, I’m also working on some dance tracks and writing songs with kids, as well as teaching guitar which I’m really enjoying.

S: I’m going to record some new songs for the second album [she later plays three of these – *Sweetheart*, *Waiting Time* and *Interrupted Angel* - all of which are understatedly majestic]. I’m also working with other musicians in Brighton. I really like collaborating with people. I’ve got a friend in Brighton called Paul Chi and we sing together a lot. We might do something together.

Have you ruled out any chance of a Pooka reunion at some point in the future?

S: [laughs] You missed it! It’s happened already. That was actually Rose’s favourite moment of the tour, getting to meet Natasha for the first time. She wanted us to sing together for her, so we did. She actually got up on stage with us and did a three-part harmony [Rose later describes the experience as a fantasy come true]. It was lovely, but I don’t think it’ll become a permanent arrangement, sorry. ■

The Pooka album **Shift** is available from all good music shops. **The Hour Lilies** and the **Monday Mourning EP** can be ordered directly from www.sharonlewis.net. **The Morning After** is available through www.natashajones.org. The secret album **Fools Give Birth To Angels** can be purchased through either website. Pooka’s first two albums are currently out of print.

left: Sharon and Rose Polenzani on tour in Cornwall, taken by Paul Johnson. See more photos from the tour at www.rosepolenzani.com. top: Sharon doing yoga on Brighton beach. inset: Natasha Lea Jones.

je m'appelle **Michelle**

Shelly Poole has struck out on an unusual tangent. Out of the smokescreen she is walking, her head held high, green eyes softly blazing, leaving the modern miasma of mechanical studio pop behind and drowning in the slick of its own production. Behind her comes a small and shuffling army of the UK's finest musicians, content to let their newly-blonded trailblazer front up for their collective cause. Her mission: to bring honesty, beauty and homespun truths back into the fold. Her weapon: one of this year's most beguiling albums of finely crafted pop. Her tactic: shameless incubation! Er, come again? A puzzled **Alan Pedder** caught up with Shelly on a balmy late summer's eve to ask her what the devil she thinks she's playing at. Along the way, she showed him how to work the world's weirdest instrument, revealed who inspired her first ever naughty thoughts and explained why her debut solo outing is the strangest album she's ever made... ►►

portraits by Ally McErlaine

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Keeping it real is something of a preoccupation with today's pop megastars. Cynics would say it's simply the oldest PR trick in the book, that the way to a consumer's heart is to provoke them into thinking they are special, no matter how ordinary or modest their lives. The principle relies on the malleability of those who will follow the merest sniff of authenticity, believing it holds a passport to a world where someone like Jennifer Lopez will hoist off her diamond-encrusted bidet and descend like Aphrodite to disperse the glittering prizes of love and understanding. Oh, and of course world peace. In truth, reality is more complex, running the gam-

ut of our emotions. It's lonely, sad, painful, glorious and happy. Reality is domestic, reality is dull, and, as Shelly herself has so succinctly put it, it's a bloody hard time for us cloud-headed dreamers.

At 32 years old, Shelly Lena Poole is in the enviable position of doing what she loves, what she has always loved ever since she was a little girl growing up in glamorous Dagenham. Her father Brian was once the lead singer of British invasion superstars The Tremeloes (whose later frontman Chip Hawkes sired 1980s also-ran cheesy Chesney), and by age 13, she and big sister Karen had already cut their first side as a duo. The single, *Sug-*

ar Daddy, was a saccharine slice of pure Europop as it used to be, before the genre became post-modernly self-referential and achingly ironic. Though it has since obtained a degree of notoriety among aficionados of all things disco fromage, 'Keren & Chelle' were never heard from again, aside from an obscure but equally snappy track on Japanese compilation *That's Eurobeat Vol. 33* in 1992. Other jobs came and went, including a spell spent teaching in a Montessori school in London, but the music never left. Re-emerging from a tuneful cocoon in 1996 as Alisha's Attic, the sisters released three albums, had eight Top 40 singles and were alternately

lauded and vilified by the press before calling it quits in 2001. “The good thing is we were pushing buttons either way,” says our ever pragmatic heroine, “we were never just liked. We were either fucking hated or really really loved.”

So is she at all bitter? “Absolutely not! We were what we wanted to be and that’s exactly what we did. I don’t believe we were meant to be bigger or smaller than we were. I really do think that we created what we meant to create. We were really bloody lucky actually.”

With their debut single *I Am, I Feel* released just two weeks after the similarly feisty but musically stunted Spice Girls were unleashed upon the planet to such immense success, a lesser person would perhaps harbour some regret of being so narrowly pipped to the post. Then again, when were the Spice Girls ever nominated for an Ivor Novello award in honour of their songwriting? In 1997, *I Am, I Feel* was short-listed for Best Song, Musically and Lyrically, but was improbably and inexplicably edged out by Brian May’s schmaltz-ridden *Too Much Love Will Kill You*. Go figure.

That year also saw them nominated for Best British Breakthrough Act at the Brit Awards, this time narrowly missing out to Kula Shaker. Still, regardless of the industry’s failure to reward their talents with silverware, the girls’ songwriting was rarely called into question. Their knack for constructing quirky, hook-laden pop music and layering on thick washes of sororial harmonies won them legions of fans. As it turns out, they have had many a last laugh over their former chart rivals. Both Karen and Shelly have enjoyed huge success as behind-the-scenes songwriters, working with Kylie Minogue, Massive Attack, Janet Jackson, Will Young, Rachel Stevens, the Sugababes and many more. Tellingly, one of Shelly’s latest projects has been to help former Baby Spice Emma Bunton tackle that most dangerous of all Spice projects – the third solo album. So far, not one of them has escaped unscathed

from this critical watershed, but with Shelly on her side, Ms Bunton could well be the first.

I ask Shelly what it is exactly that she gets out of these sessions, to which she replies with uncharacteristic guardedness, “It’s really hard work. It’s rewarding as a writer to experiment with different styles, but if you’re doing it for soulful reasons, it’s an awful lot of work. It’s like a nine to five, very rigid. To me, because I’ve never worked like that, it was sometimes difficult. But at the end of the day it’s all good, it’s pop music. I don’t think there’s anything better than talking about music. I could sit and talk about it all night.”

She’s not kidding either. Our allotted hour somehow becomes three, noticeable only by the darkening cloudless sky as we sit in the garden of a North London pub facing out onto Hampstead Heath. I get the feeling that her relaxed chatter is not just a reflection of our vague acquaintance but a rare and incredible openness. She is unafraid to speak her mind and be frank where others would shield themselves away, but she also knows when to invoke the gods of tact, a reflex built up over years of press interviews.

“When we first started out in Alisha’s Attic, there were lots of rumours about me going out with Michael Hutchence. Every time we did an interview they’d ask me about it. We never, I bloody wish! Actually, no I don’t, but he was quite a soulful boy, really musical. I used to love rock music, guys with big hair and tight pants on. Why wouldn’t you?”

These days, Shelly is happily married to Ally McErlaine, one of the industry’s most sought after slide guitarists. After much debating, she chose to continue performing under her maiden name, mostly because even she once had trouble pronouncing the other and didn’t want to confuse anyone else. Though most of the guitar on the album was played by Shelly herself in cahoots with her songwriting partner Paul Statham (who some may remember from 90s indie-pop-

pers Peach), Ally’s talents were occasionally called upon. “He’s awesome,” she gushes. “Really! The best slide player I’ve ever seen.”

I ask whether working with Ally was more or less fractious than working with her older sister. “Probably equal,” she giggles. “Actually, I think it can be a really bad move to work with your partner, being brutally honest. I have become this weird hideous monster I didn’t know existed. I am so bossy!”

But when you’re so passionate about something that you want it to turn out perfectly, that’s okay, right? “Oh god yeah, that’s exactly what it is. But try to explain that to someone who loves you for you, outside of that stuff. Karen is my flesh and blood so we’d just forget about it. We’d say vicious things and just say oh ok, well, that happened. Whatever. So I don’t think we’ll work together again unless I ask him to guest on something.”

“Actually, this was the weirdest album I’ve ever made. Completely different because I could do what I liked. Usually there’s other people to please, especially with a sister. With Alisha’s Attic, although the songwriting was very easy and came really quickly, the rest of it took ages. This we played live. All live. Really vibey. I’d go home at night after doing the track with Paul, put it in my computer, have a couple of glasses



of wine and do all the vocals in one take. We got a nice fluid sound. Oh, and of course I got to do my own backing vocals as well.”

That must’ve been odd, I reply, given that you’ve always built up your songs through the use of harmony. “Yeah, I used to do a lot of the planning of the backing vocals but I never got to sing them. So this was quite weird I’ve got to say.”

Good weird or bad weird? “Oh, so much easier. Even though you don’t have someone to feed off, it’s so much easier because you can please yourself. And that’s really what you do it for isn’t it? You think that someone out there is gonna like what I like so hopefully I’ll bring it to those people, that they’ll want to hear what I’ve done. So if you please yourself that’s a good start. I wouldn’t really ever go back to the other way, that’s the trouble.”

So no more Alisha’s Attic, ever? “Well we will make another CD for our fan club [*their first, The Attic Vaults 1, contained twelve pop nuggets equally as loveable as any of their previous offerings*] and we might possibly do another tour one day. So you know there’s always room for that, because we both loved it. It’s just got to be right of course.”

In the meantime she’s got her own album to promote. Signed to the fledgling Transistor Project label, a new digital development initiative sprung from the grey matter of Blur’s Dave Rowntree and Queen manager Jim Beach, everything is in its right place for Shelly to take her rightful position in the canon of classic singer-songwriters in the vein of Carole King and Rickie Lee Jones. I ask her whether her new songs have a common thread, a central theme. “Actually I think there’s loads. Discovery’s a big one. It’s a really personal album. Put it this way, everyone knows which song is theirs. The people I’ve written about know and probably feel very uncomfortable when they look deep down into it, but I’ve done it in a way that, for me, it’s lovely just to get it out, but for them it won’t be too hideous. Only I’ve said what I’ve got to say. I’m putting it to bed.”

“The stories came first, but not in any shape or form. Then it was the melodies, so I’d write the music, sometimes with Paul, and then sit at home and la la la along to it before putting the lyrics to the melody. But I got all the stories first. You can find different ways to say things. I don’t need to actually say ‘oh, you let me down’, I can say ‘ooh err, you don’t own me any more’, stuff like that.”

Was there ever a time where she thought she’d never make it to the end product? “Yes! I’m rubbish at finishing stuff. I can’t finish anything. For me, the song will be like that forever and revisiting something once you’ve put it to bed is not good. It should be of the moment in time. It was really hard but it’s good, I’m glad it’s done. When we finished Alisha’s Attic, Karen and I sat down and she said ‘y’know, I think we’ve taken it as far as it can go. I’m gonna go off and write’. And I was thinking I’d go and sing with a piano, you know, do some jazz or something. But then I thought no, I’ll just write. And then I was like, no, I’m just gonna sing. I went to and fro for ages and then one night I sat down and wrote *Totally Underwater* in about five minutes and I thought, you know, that’s really good therapy.”

The rest, as they rarely say, is history in the making. But is it repeating I ask? “No! I don’t wanna compete with Girls Aloud, I’m 32! And I can’t dance. I’m the most rubbish dancer in the whole world. You know I would have been happy really singing in a bar if I could’ve just sung. And earn enough to pay my mortgage. That’s the trouble. Our strategy is a soft release.”

A what? Is that an official industry term? She laughs, “I don’t know! We might have made it up. We’re incubating this album because we don’t believe it’s a major label thing. I would be completely lost in the big scheme of things and I don’t want to be. My record label are good enough and believe in it enough to incubate it in this way, to try and build it to a level where we can then take it to the next phase. If you’ve made a good album in your own mind and you get the chance to try to take it to the next

level, there’s never really a limit on it because as a musician you never really fail. This is an album that we’re hopefully gonna grow and people who like it will buy it. People who don’t like it won’t. And I get to sing it and that’s what I want. It’s very back to the way things should be, actually nurtured. The music being fully from the artist and not about a good marketing budget. It’s gonna be very low-key.”

“My life is very simple. I do what I do, I don’t have any other hobbies. I don’t watch Big Brother, I don’t like celebrity things. I do the music I love, hang out with my friends. I don’t get cross about stuff on the telly. It is what it is. If people wanna be led by image, fucking great. If you look fabulous, go for it! If you don’t want to be led by that stuff, don’t do it.”

But what about artists that are fixated on money and material wealth? The relentless pursuit of ‘keeping it real’, does it have any value? She seems a little surprised by the question. “Some of that music I absolutely love. I don’t care where it comes from. Before, when I was young, I would have hated the fact that someone like Natalie Imbruglia made it because she was from Neighbours, whereas actually now I like her voice and some of her songs I love. I’m not a musical snob, I either love it or I don’t, and if I love it, I’ll listen to it no matter where it comes from. I’m not bothered about stylistic stuff. I care about what I hear. A lot of people don’t even listen to lyrics.”

Speaking of Ms Imbruglia, her former manager was responsible for introducing Shelly to Italian New Yorker, Jack “he’s so gorgeous” Savoretti, a 19-year old singer-songwriter who refers to her mainly as ‘the crazy lady’. Initially drafted in to help him construct songs for his forthcoming debut album, Shelly quickly realised that their voices made for a tasty combination and invited him to guest on her record.

“He’s a Bob Dylan type of writer. He writes travelly, been-on-the-planet-for-years type of songs, but he’s not old enough to know those things, I don’t get it. He’s an old soul, you know. When he sings,



“I’m the most rubbish
dancer in the whole world”



“A woman always wins!”

you'll see it in his face. He means every word. He's very sure of what he is and what he's doing. There's no manipulating this boy at all. It's very impressive, I was dumbstruck. I've worked with loads of people and for once I was like, great."

"We sat down and wrote *Hope* as a duet, only we had a big jokey argument about it because I wanted to be the woman who says you really broke my heart and you have to be the one to make up with me... because I want all the boys to fancy me and all the girls should hate you. And he said no, it's gotta be the other way round. I wanna be the one to say 'oh, she's such a bitch'. But a woman always wins!"

Savoretti also duets on *Anyday Now*, a track that Shelly says was based on the Kleenex-endorsed Meryl Streep/Robert Redford movie, *Out Of Africa* (1985). She tries to explain it to me but I'm lost by the first sentence. Meryl gets syphilis? Clearly that bit just whizzed right by me as a child. I try to pull my best confused face but she's hit her stride and then some. There's absolutely no doubt whatsoever in my mind when she finally exclaims, "God, that part of the film really stayed with me forever!"

Suddenly, I feel desperately uncultured and hurry to the next question before she realises. Sadly, bullshitting is not one of my fortes and she grabs my arm and says, "Watch it again! It's the most romantic thing ever! It kills me that film. Robert Redford's just gorgeous." Still? "Absolutely, I like old men. Have I got it all wrong?"

Actually, no. Johnny Depp is 16 years my senior but I definitely would. Does that count as old? Probably not to Shelly. She counts 64-year old singer Neil Diamond among the three sexiest men alive. "I went to see him three times on his last tour!" she beams and digs out her souvenir keyrings to prove it. "I've never met him though. Although I really don't want to now. I might spoil it because I do actually love him. It's so ridiculous when I say it out loud. Age is only a number though isn't it? I totally love him, proper."

How does Ally feel about it? "Oh he doesn't care. We've got a written

rule that I can sleep with Prince or Neil Diamond or Al Pacino." And who does he get to sleep with? "He doesn't get to sleep with anyone. Of course."

But of course! "Do you remember the Prince song, *Let's Pretend We're Married*?" she asks. Not really, I say. "That really changed my life. It gave me my first sort of pervy moment and from then it just went downhill. I started thinking wrong things! That was probably 1983... I was only 10 or 11, something like that. I was young and foolish. Paul Simon was a big influence on me too. *I Know What I Know* from **Graceland** (1986) was really important to me. It's quite worldly."

There's a similarly worldly feel to her own album, not just in the lyrics borne of experience and regret, but also in the finely detailed instrumentation. "We used quite a few weird instruments," she says. "Paul's got a big basket of strange bits and pieces that you can buy in Camden really cheaply. We didn't know their names, we just kinda made noises with them. There's a moon lute on *Totally Underwater*. That's quite unusual. We played fingernails too."

She leans over, forms a heart shape with her hands and starts rubbing her fingers together. "It's quite good percussion. Put it through a microphone and it's gorgeous. Try it!"

I quickly conclude that I must be calcium deficient or something; mine sound more like a vague and muffled chaffing than the clickety clack of hers, lacquered and strong. Still, there's the potential for a Matthew Herbert or Matmos remix in there somewhere.

Two days later, Shelly is playing her most high-profile solo show to date at The Borderline in London in support of labelmates, The Wire Daisies. On stage, kitted out in one of her many vintage dresses, she comes across as every bit the folk-pop sensation that the album suggests. Ever the fearless entertainer, she even tackles one of the duets alone and, naturally, it goes off without a hitch. It's no surprise; Shelly has practiced and made perfect her live chops over the years, including a stint on the inaugural Lilith Fair

tour across the United States. "That was probably one of my top top moments," she grins. "All the people on it were amazing. We met everyone – Emmylou Harris, Susanna Hoffs – she was my idol when I was younger. I was so impressed with every woman on that bill. It was great to be included. Anything to do with getting artists together and out on the road is a good thing. I think the music industry is pretty equal sex-wise, but I think any way to get music out there to the masses, whatever tour it might be, whatever unique theme you use to get the people in, is good."

So she doesn't think that women get a harder time of it? She shakes her head, "It's always going to be the way that men who write tortured stuff get hailed as sensitive types, while women who do the same get labelled as moaners. If women say what's actually going on, we moan. It's just the way of life."

But do people treat her differently now she's gone solo? "Hmm, I've never thought about that before," she says and takes a sip of wine. "In a band, you've got someone to lean on when things get harsh. Someone to bounce off of, to take half the heartache. On your own, it's better because you're doing it for yourself. If they don't like me, they don't like me. Usually I would feel bad for Karen or I'd have some kind of pang for us as a unit. Whereas with me, I can take whatever, I'm very hardened to it. They can come see me about it if they don't like it. Do you know what I mean?"

So there you have it. Shelly Poole has laid out her manifesto and will take no prisoners, shortcuts or handouts. Armed with organic pop hooks big enough to dangle your dreams on, she'll reel in your senses and outrageously flirt with them. In her own way, she's declared a quiet little war on the prefab and the generic, the fake and the plastic. One thing's for certain, keeping it real never sounded so good. ■

*Shelly's album, **Hard Time For The Dreamer**, is released in the UK on September 26th. Visit her official website www.shellypoole.com for more info.*

Baby Boom

A tiny revolution is afoot and its growing by the day. Worried? You shouldn't be. After all, if quiet can usurp the old loud, then who's to say that nappies can't be the new black T-shirt or nurseries the new moshpit. Kids music has never been cooler and today's artists are practically queuing round the playpen to get a piece of the action. Where the likes of Paul McCartney and Donovan got it so hideously wrong, bands like Saint Etienne, Erasure, Belle & Sebastian, Ida and The Innocence Mission are flying in the face of convention like pureed food from a spoon. A nervous **Alan Pedder** donned protective clothing and went in search of the why...



illustration by Mark Stevens

My first encounter with children's music as an adult was a fraught and unpleasant experience. It was Christmas, 1997, and my mum had just handed me a tantalisingly CD-shaped package. After briefly scanning the label and nodding my thanks, I tore off the paper to reveal [drum roll] *The Best Mr. Men Album In The World... Ever! 43 Original Pop Songs For Children*. Now, a lesser audiophile may have run right then and there but I was, in fact, a big Mr. Men fan and if this was the best... ever! I was damn well determined to love it. In the end, I just couldn't. Every 'song' was unspeakably scandalous, a white knuckle pile-up of as many musical styles you can crowbar into five inches of plastic, all clumsily buttered with voices so sickly that I wanted to shred the speakers. No genre was left unscathed, from shoddy cod reggae to outlawed country and western. Hell, even Mr. Tickle let me down. I was disillusioned to say the least.

Fast forward seven years and I'm stalking the aisles of HMV (older though not convincingly wiser) searching for my next circular fix when something different caught my eye. Maybe it was the cutesy illustrated packaging that reeled me in, or just that it was something unexpectedly new from a favourite artist, but finally I felt ready to put Hargreavesgate behind me and usher in a brave new world. That epochal album was Lisa Loeb and Elizabeth Mitchell's **Catch The Moon**, an endlessly endearing acoustic gem for children that ambles charmingly between Bob Dylan's *New Morning* and *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, via French, Spanish and Japanese folk songs.

As if to underscore the family theme, Mitchell's husband Dan Littleton and their daughter Storey also chime in, the youngest most adorably on the crowd participation pleaser *Stop & Go*, a slyly funky little song with a nagging guitar riff. Family friend and 4AD's His Name Is Alive head honcho Warren Defever was also involved, as was Liz's mother Bonnie Brooke Mitchell who lovingly illustrated the accom-

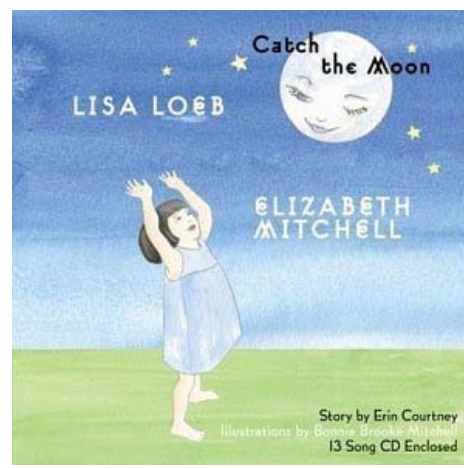
panying storybook. Collaboration had never been so wholesome and it demanded repeated plays.

While this was Loeb's first full-length foray into children's music (she had previously contributed songs to the soundtrack for *Rugrats The Movie* and a *Lilo & Stitch* tie-in), Mitchell and Littleton, both founding members of US indie luminaries *Ida*, have form for such things. During her many years as a nursery teacher in New York, Mitchell would sing the folk songs of Woody Guthrie, Elizabeth 'Shake Sugaree' Cotten and the Carter Family to her charges – a wholegrain alternative to the fun but often artistically anaemic Disney soundtracks so many were overexposed to.

The story goes that while on the road with *Ida* in 1998, Mitchell was heavy with cold when she and Dan dropped by Defever's home in Livonia, Michigan, and ended up taping these songs and others on a whim. The result, **You Are My Flower**, was wrapped and mastered in one day using single takes only. It was never originally intended for sale, and yet even now, Mitchell receives letters and emails from a mind-bogglingly diverse range of enthusiastic listeners – from young parents to teenage *Ida* fans and punks. These days, all sales from the album are donated to a children's charity, as are those of its follow-up, **You Are My Sunshine**. Recording for that collection began in 2000 while Mitchell was in the early stages of pregnancy with Storey, and the album was eventually released two years later to similar acclaim.

"Children's songs are such an exciting medium," says Mitchell. "There's such a meeting ground of very old music and bringing it into the present, while having a dialogue with the past. Kids music frees you up to be a beginner, to do things in a less precious, less pressured way."

Loeb concurs, saying "We wanted to be in touch with the classics. We tweaked them, personalized them a bit, and then tried to create a lot of variety. [*Catch The Moon*]

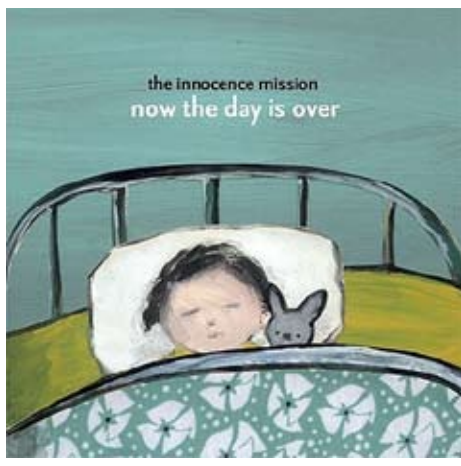


has enough simplicity and variety that it stays interesting to listen to, and doesn't talk down to kids. The instruments, sound of voices, and the arrangements I think will appeal to every age."

In fact, the process seems so enjoyable that Mitchell is already planning a third kids' album. "It's easy to be super zany, or to make sleepy lullaby music, and there is a place for both," she says. "But I like to find something in between, and to bring in unexpected sources – on the next album, we're recording songs by Yoko Ono, Vashti Bunyan and Françoise Hardy, as well as folk songs from Korea, Portugal, the Philippines and Japan. We play Velvet Underground and Bo Diddley songs at the shows all the time, and those are some of the best 'kids' songs I know."

While the impetus for Mitchell's albums came from many years spent around young children, most arise from the simple fact that the artists become first-time parents themselves and discover first-hand the horrors of the genre. In November, perennial pop





heroes Saint Etienne will release **Up The Wooden Hills**, their first album aimed squarely at the preschool set. But what makes London's finest feel qualified for such a daunting task? "Two of us have had kids in recent years and we got particularly fed up with nasty kids music, where it's nasty keyboard sounds and nasty voices," explains singer Sarah Cracknell, whose son Spencer was born in 2002, "There's quite a lot of it about."

Indeed, it's hard to think of a voice less nasty than Cracknell's soft and creamy vocals, while bandmates Pete Wiggs and Bob Stanley have exiled any mention of tacky horrible synths with a more sympathetic instrumental background. The joyous *You Can Count On Me* sounds like Stereolab in training pants, and, like several songs on **Catch The Moon**, contains laudable cultural references with Cracknell counting to ten in English, French and Spanish. Elsewhere, *Let's Build A Zoo* is a riotous romp through the animal alphabet ("Rachel rode a



rhino" etc.) and the David Essex-featuring *Bedfordshire* (as in 'up the wooden hills to') charms as a sweet and woozily woven tale. Add to that the obligatory song about trains, complete with booms and whistles, and it would seem that all the boxes are ticked. "It was actually a lot easier than making a normal album, it was really quick," says Wiggs. "It allows you to give free rein to your daft side."

Indeed, and they don't come much dafter than 44-year old perma-bedhaired Dan Zanes, a man on a mission to bring "the world of 21st Century all ages family music" to the masses, music that allows kids to sing along with mother without the matriarch having a meltdown. He's not alone either; the likes of Aimee Mann, Sheryl Crow, Dar Williams, Suzanne Vega, Debbie Harry, Angelique Kidjo, Rosanne Cash and even sadly neglected Eighties eccentric Sandra Bernhard (her last album was 1998's **I'm Still Here... Damn It!**) have all featured on his strangely engaging records. Seriously, listening to Crow's appealing duet on a dancehall version of *Polly Wolly Doodle*, it's hard to believe it's even the same person.

Zanes, who was once a member of the successful Eighties roots rock twosome, The Del Fuegos, was first inspired to create children's music following the birth of his daughter in 1995. Enlisting the help of some of the people he'd met while in the band, he set about recording **Rocket Ship Beach** (2000), which the New York Times described as "kids' music that works because it is not kids music; it's just music – music that's unsanitised, unpasteurised, that's organic even."

When asked how he sees his records in the context of other albums aimed at the younger generation, Zanes is generously tactful, saying "On a lot of kids' records I can hear the recording studio – all the gizmos and gadgets. I understand the desire to make things sound professional, but I wanted to get away from that. Why not let it sound like what it is? People in a room playing and singing."

US folk-rock band The Innocence Mission would agree. When they started recording 2004's **Now The Day Is Over**, a collection of jazz standards, traditional folk songs and new compositions sung as lullabies, the album was wrapped in under two weeks, mostly recorded live to guitar and later embellished with piano, pump organ and an upright bass. Dedicated to the children of singer Karen Peris, who has worked with Natalie Merchant, Joni Mitchell and Emmylou Harris, and her bandmate and husband Don, **Now The Day Is Over** is a rare and shy breed, inducing a soothing bewitchment that's hard to shake off. Karen's hypnotically fragile vocals even lend poignancy to *Over The Rainbow* and *Moon River*, songs so often mutilated by lesser artists. She even carries off *Edelweiss* without the need to reach for a bucket. Remarkable, really.

This concept of lullaby-ifying (or should that lullabicing? Why isn't there a word for this?!) pop, rock and jazz classics, or indeed music from any genre, has in fact become rather popular over the past few years. A cursory glance at Amazon reveals titles like Dance Baby (witness the murder of Björk's *Venus As A Boy*), 80s Baby (*Karma Chameleon* soporific-style anyone?), Rock Baby, Punk Rock Baby, and even Elvis and Beatles For Babies (relax, it's all pre-*Frog Chorus*, phew!). Sadly, no sign of Rave Baby yet, but I'm sure that it's only a tiny matter of time.

This year's best antidote to such derivative brand extension comes in the form of the self-titled album by mysterious collective, Ansty Cowfold. Featuring the vocals of one Kerry Shaw, formerly of Wiiija-signed band Whistler whose most famous song was the laugh-a-minute *Don't Jump In Front Of My Train*, **Ansty Cowfold** goes from Hendrix to Elvis via The Beach Boys, Bill Withers and The Handsome Family. Even gruff and scary Tom Waits gets the lullaby treatment on *Underground* from his surreal 1983 album, **Swordfishtrumpets**.

Days to Remember

A household name of sorts but still a contemporary hidden gem, singer-songwriter Beth Hirsch has a voice with which many will be familiar without even realising it. As the key ingredient to Air's *Moon Safari*, co-writing and singing on the breathily beautiful *All I Need and You Make It Easy*, Beth firmly proved her worth as an artist. But the mainstream success that had seemed so imminent never quite arrived. Now, five years on from her debut, she talks to **Rod Thomas** about the hopes and inspirations that infused it...

Beth Hirsch's **Early Days** (2000), remains one of music's better kept secrets. Released in the remnants of Air's globe-conquering success with **Moon Safari** (1998), it beggars belief that this smouldering collection of songs didn't make her profile go stellar. Bravely avoiding the obvious route of producing an album that repeated the sounds of *All I Need*, Hirsch chose instead to deliver a set that was stripped down, gently decorated with minimalist percussion, but driven by perfectly constructed acoustic guitar riffs, haunting piano and the arresting power of her voice.



When thinking back to the making of **Early Days**, as well as to how she is approaching to her new material, Hirsch is very aware of her position as an artist. "At the time I had discovered music", she recalls. "I had done the Air album when I was 28 or 29, I had just started singing at 25, so everything was very new to me. I didn't have a style or a technique as much as I just had a need to express. It was this new channel for me to express myself. My only intention was to write whatever emotion was so strong that I needed to express it, to turn it into something as beautiful as I could."

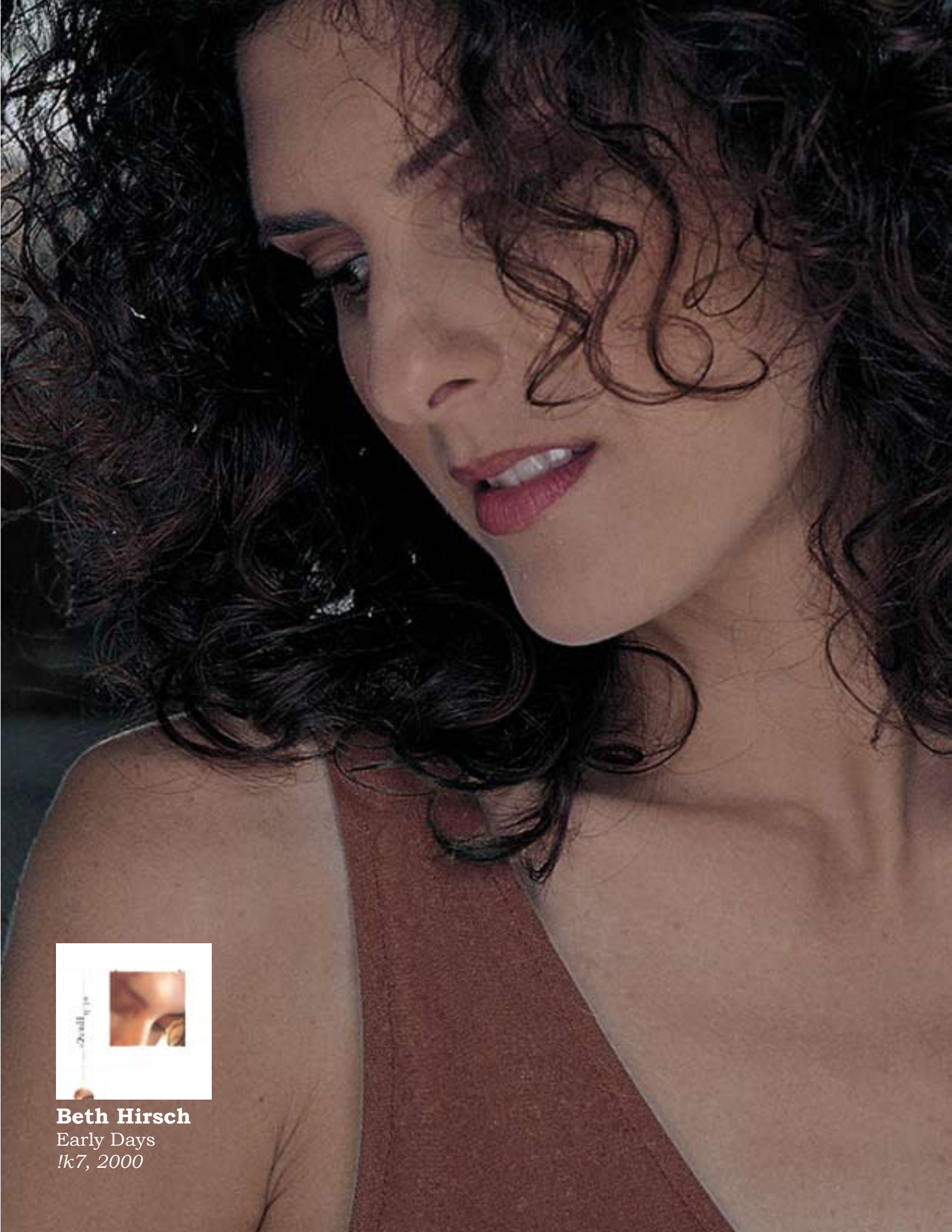
She clearly has an ear for beauty; each song is a delightfully subtle testament to the skills of a much more established songwriting talent. As it turns out, from her formative years in Tampa, Florida onwards, Beth has enjoyed a diverse and exciting musical journey. "My early childhood was influenced by soul and R'n'B. I loved The Stylistics, who've done *You Are Everything, You Make Me Feel Brand New...* just gorgeous harmonies, they were very lush. I had an autographed 33 by them and I was like, oh my god! It was amazing. I never met them and never saw them in concert, but that had a big impact on me. I saw the Jackson Five when I was very small, like 5 years old."

But it was more her transition from childhood to adulthood that seems to have influenced the crafting of **Early Days**. "As I got older I liked pop rock. I liked Todd Rundgren, then I got into... I don't know

how you'd categorise them, but like Genesis and Yes... they were my stoner years you know?" she laughs. "Talking Heads too. Then when I got into college, I discovered folk music. I'd never heard Joni Mitchell before. Or Crosby Stills & Nash. Kate Bush too. Then later, jazzier singer-songwriters like Rickie Lee Jones."

It's this discovery that seemingly colours the record. Tracks like the light and romantic *Somebody Dandy* gleefully catwalk Beth's jazzier and more flirtatious side, while the rest of the album, from the optimistic and assured attitude of *Come A Day* ("just about no matter how hard things are coping with adulthood, I had faith that was greater than me, some kind of... something leading me") to the yearning, gorgeous closing track, *Silent Song* ("I had very strong convictions about society and the human race. The cellist, Laura Fairhurst, brought the song to another level. It's about how strong and important silence is in our daily lives") show a rounded and competent musical knowledge, despite her professions to the contrary. "You know, I'm not that prolific. I don't crank songs out like a lot of people do," she laughs. "I'm not like that!"

To return to **Early Days** now is to experience something like an intimate dinner with a friend. It's a low-key, personal affair, totally seductive. The songs unfold gracefully and seem to reveal every shade and sparkle of her character with an entirely natural rhythm that seems almost conversational. As a whole, the album



Beth Hirsch
Early Days
!k7, 2000



becomes a collection of stories told between friends. It seems to have a very direct projection. She agrees, but this is where the move to her new material begins. "It does have direction, but as far as the craft goes, it's a very particular listener it aims for. Now I see writing much more as a craft, not necessarily any easier, but I see it as not so much about me anymore. It's about the listener and communication with the listener. I feel my songs are becoming much more accessible to people."

"A couple of very instrumental shifts have taken place," she explains. "Back then I felt so out of water in the business end of things, and I wanted to find a home in a record company that my music could fit into a niche. Even though **Early Days** was an independent thing that !k7 picked up, when I signed with them they wanted to merge two styles. So on **Titles & Idols** (2001) [her second album, produced by cutting edge dance knob twiddlers Black Dog], some of the writing may have

been better but the label wanted the production more conceptual than organic to fit into their own genre. I learned that the live aspect is tantamount to my music working. I am not an electronic solo artist."

So what does the future hold in store for Beth and fans of her music? Well, she's recently completed the writing for her new album, and the producer has just come in to put the final touches to the writing. "I'm looking at the song list now, it's on my wall," she laughs. "You know, they're all very confessional, but the way they're crafted renders them more accessible to the third party, to the listener. I think that is the major difference, they're just a more mature sound."

In her new musical incarnation then, Beth Hirsch is a more experienced and wiser storyteller. But, even from her own earliest days, she had music in her blood. When asked her favourite TV show as a child, what more fitting than "...the MONKEES! That was my absolute favourite. Oh my god, I loved that show! I liked the drummer Mickey, he was so funny. He was my favourite by far."

But what are her 'hidden gems'? "Well my seminal albums would probably be Yes' **Fragile** (1972), Joni Mitchell's **Court & Spark** (1974), maybe **Harvest** (1972) by Neil Young, but hidden gem?... the first thing that comes to mind is a track on a Todd Rundgren album, **A Cappella** (1985). It's called *Pretending To Care*. He must have fifty harmonies going on, this really lush choral sound. No one listens to that song, I always have to explain it, it's so gorgeous..." ■

*Beth's song Arrival, written with Pale 3 (best known for their soundtrack to Run Lola Run), has just been released on the Superb Records soundtrack, **Crash: Music From & Inspired By The Film**. As of press time, **Early Days** is criminally out of print but **Titles & Idols** should still be available and easy to find in all good record stores.*



a buyer's guide to... Rickie Lee Jones

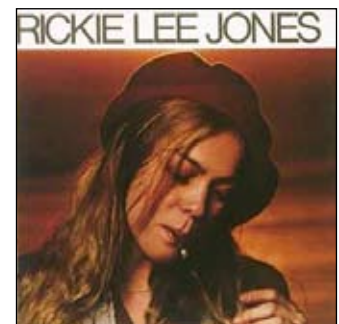
In these times of diluttantes (*sic*) Norah, Catherine Zeta and even fictional Bridget, you'd be forgiven for wondering whether the devil has packed it in with the Miss Joneses of today. Keeping up with them now means nothing more than propping up a cheap IKEA coffee table, flicking through the pages of *OK!* or wearing enormous greying knickers that even your granny would gladly see torched.

How different it all seemed just a quarter century ago, with not one but two iconic purveyors of the surname. We're talking Grace and Rickie Lee people! – although the former, a statuesque and slightly unhinged 70s disco diva turned 80s new-waver,

was cheating somewhat having changed her name from Mendoza.

It follows then that we must be discussing the self-proclaimed “lower-middle-class-hillbilly-hipster” runaway, former alcoholic drugged out sylph but now Du-bya-bashing mum, the Duchess Of Coolsville herself. With the first ever anthology of her 26-year career recently hitting the shelves, lovingly packaged thanks to those generous folks at Rhino, **Alan Pedder** takes the time to reassess the canon of a true inspiration – from 1979's revolutionary self-titled debut through to the present day, Rickie Lee Jones has paved the way for artists like Tori Amos, Stina Nordenstam, Jewel and Fiona Apple to name but a few.

UNDISPUTED CLASSICS



Rickie Lee Jones
Warner Bros., 1979

The rare sound of an already fully-formed artist busting out in style, both musically and in a sartorial sense. The beret marked her out as an idiosyncratic beatnik with sophisticated tastes. A Grammy for Best New Artist followed, and while Jones could have easily repeated the same formula, her artistic sensibilities demanded more of her and us.



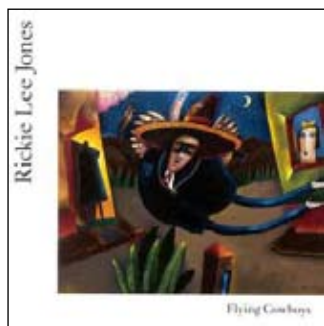


Pirates

Warner Bros., 1981

Mostly written after a devastating split from paramour Tom Waits, **Pirates** nakedly holds that relationship to account. Arguably her ultimate distillation, more so even than her debut. Gone is some of that record's naïveté and in its place lies a richness of experience and wilfully abstruse lyricism that bewitches the mind as much as the ears.

PRETTY DAMN SPECIAL



Flying Cowboys

Geffen, 1989

Ten years on from her debut, Jones had regained some of the childish exuberance of that album and merged it with the more complex song forms she'd relied upon in the intervening years. Though the songs arguably betray a long-held fascination with Laura Nyro, few could really argue that as a drawback.



Girl At Her Volcano EP

Warner Bros., 1983

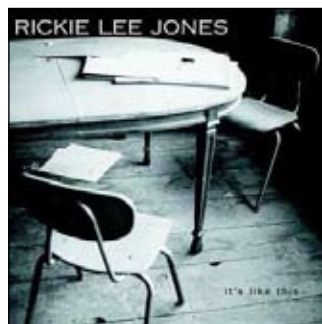
Her first set of covers and live record in one was originally sold on 10" vinyl at Jones's insistence. While these unembellished and whisperingly intimate songs may have baffled her earlier fans (those who survived the bloodletting of **Pirates**), they have weathered time well and still hold plenty of impact.

WORTH HAVING



Pop Pop

Geffen, 1991



It's Like This

Artemis, 2000

Similar in conceit, these two albums both find their joy in jazzy interpretations of an astonishingly diverse range of originals. From Jimi Hendrix to Broadway via The Beatles and Marvin Gaye, Rickie Lee exhibits a vocal dexterity akin to Billie Holiday in a mischievous mood. Joe Jackson and Ben Folds make welcome contributions to the later record, boosting Jones's gentle keening vocals. A near masterclass in how to cover songs in style.



The Evening Of My Best Day

V2, 2003

Though never really a political commentator in the past, Jones broke a 6-year songwriting drought to express her disdain for US President George W. Bush and his entire administration, infusing the record with a righteous indignance. It's not all Republican-bashing, however – this finely textured and graceful album touches on her personal struggles too. Easily her best since **Flying Cowboys**.

Also recommended: **Naked Songs** (Reprise, 1995) and **Live At Red Rocks** (Artemis 2001)

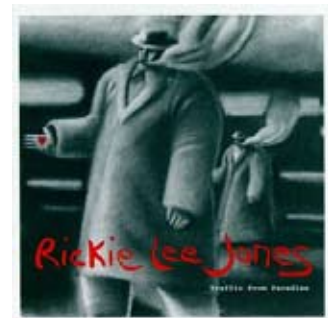
TWO FOR THE FANS



The Magazine

Warner Bros., 1984

Where Jones' isolation got the better of her. Not quite a concept album, but certainly one in which the theme of alienation is predominant. Unsettling but strangely filled with hope, **The Magazine** is a demanding listen, yet for something so self-consciously arty, for the most part, it's surprisingly bland.

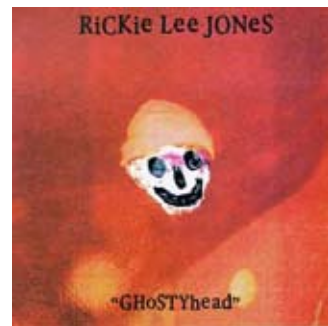


Traffic From Paradise

Geffen, 1993

Recorded, mixed and produced by an all-female crew, this is a mostly disappointing and vague collection of songs. Aside from the stunning *Stewart's Coat* and a passable cover of Bowie's *Rebel Rebel*, too many of the ideas here fail to gel.

FOR COMPLETISTS ONLY



Ghostyhead

Warner Bros., 1997

Seemingly inspired by Tricky and Martina Topley-Bird, Jones tried her hand at repetitive trip-hop noodling overlaid with mostly opaque spoken word passages. Unsurprisingly, it's mostly crap. The novelty of hearing her in this context wears off faster than cheap lipstick.

reviews

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Björk/Various Artists

Army Of Me:

Remixes & Covers

One Little Indian

★★

Anyone familiar with the mammoth Björk merchandising machine giving this latest release a cursory glance might well think that the folks at One Little Indian had one token too many on the peace pipe – TWENTY versions of the same song, have they all gone utterly butterly? Delving very little further than examining the sleeve, however, reveals a more gracious rationale for this newest apparent extortion.

Always fiercely protective of her own progeny, to which a certain rather bruised journalist would surely attest, Björk now extends her maternal warmth (via UNICEF) to the children of southeast Asia whose lives were altered dramatically by last year's Boxing Day tsunami. Indeed, as with past Björk remix projects, dramatic alterations are the order of the day on this bizarre collection. Equal parts a game of kiss chase with the sublime and chicken with the ridiculous, it is at the very least audacious. Ironically, however, the true audacity lies in the song itself, a stern slap on the bum of self-pity – "We won't save you, your rescue squad is too exhausted..." and so on. Hardly a charitable sentiment is it?

Back in 1995, *Army Of Me* was the lead single from Björk's second solo album proper, **Post**, spawning a host of remixes and even a version with her now-defunct ex-labelmates, Skunk Anansie. In fact, the 10-year old song has attracted

so much attention from remixers and reinterpreters alike that Björk herself threw down the gauntlet to visitors of her official website to contribute to this project. In less than a fortnight, she was deluged with over 600 responses, and so, aving roped in the song's original collaborator, Graham Massey of 808 State, the two set about what must have been a task both arduous and intriguing. Interestingly, it's the second time that Björk has harnessed the internet for track-listing purposes – the website vote for her **Greatest Hits** (2002) album famously resulted in *It's Oh So Quiet*, her, er, greatest hit, getting swiftly kicked to the curb.

So what of those that made the cut? Only Patrick Wolf, the UK's very own self-styled libertine folk curio, is instantly recognisable from the list of contributors, all of whom hail from either Europe or North America. The best tracks here are those that keep it mellow and antidotal to the original. French band Grisbi turn in a lovely sultry bossa nova, the UK's Martin White gets wheezily wistful on the accordion and pan-European consortium Lunamothe capitalise on the marriage of harp and muted electronica best consummated on Björk's own **Vespertine** (2001). Predictably, there are at least two versions that hark back to Björk's early punk bands, Kukl and Tappi Tikkarass, but these are probably best avoided. Likewise with the offerings by the demented Dr Gunni and the clearly piss-taking Messengers Of God, whose country and western adaptation is nothing short of risible.

With a fundraising target of £250,000 within the first 10 days of sale, it's an ambitious endeavour, though woefully misguided, and it's unlikely that even diehard Björk fans will want to play this in its entirety more than once. Is it value for money? Not really, but buy it anyway and think of the children.

Alan Pedder





The Fiery Furnaces
Rehearsing My Choir
Rough Trade

★★★



Those of us still surviving after the Fiery Furnaces's last long-player (length being a somewhat paradoxical notion in their terms – an 'EP' released earlier this year raced in at a heady 41 minutes) are surely deserving of some sort of reward. **Blueberry Boat** (2004) was a challenging beast in no uncertain terms; an extended rock opera invoking the spirit of Tommy, but at times coming across like a tub of acid assaulting a crazed school orchestra. Yes indeed, we who have clung on have the scars to prove it.

Certainly, it's no idle rhetoric to say that, from the bluesy pop sensation of their cult 2003 debut **Gallowsbird's Bark** onwards, Illinois-based siblings Eleanor and Matt Friedburger have always slipped through the grasping fingers of definition. Almost aggressively progressive, but with an effortless cool that The Strokes could never buy, the duo have constantly challenged listeners to absorb their oeuvre in terms of entire albums, rather than songs. It's an almost quixotic approach in the days of 79p iTunes singles, yet utterly admirable too.

A reward of sorts comes here. In third album **Rehearsing My Choir** (another, **Bitter Tea**, is due as early as January), we find a singular conceit truly becoming of the epithet 'concept'. The album constitutes eleven interwoven tales of Chicago from the Thirties to the Fifties, as told through the eyes and (mostly spoken) vocals of Olga Sarantos, director of the Illinois state choir for over 65 years and, more specifically, the Friedburgers's grandmother. So bring forth stories of wounded gangsters, dodgy back basement deals and the previously unimaginable hell that is trying to make candy when you're due to meet your father-in-law for the very first time.

On first impression, the Furnaces seem much more at home here. Their tendency to soften bluesy rock into a kind of psychedelic lullaby blossoms under the restraint of shorter songs and narrative focus. Odd instruments are still the main musical nuance and there's certainly no sign of your everyday verse-chorus-verse, but there are at least splatterings of rhythm and release – *The Wayward Granddaughter* pumps along with the kind

of urgency that only a didgeridoo can muster, while *We Wrote Letters Every Day* sticks in the head after only a few listens.

It's this lack of salient obscurity that makes **Rehearsing My Choir** a much more forgiving prospect. Sarantos' octogenarian vocals are at once commanding and brusque, yet also disturbingly reminiscent of a female Simpsons' Barney. The combination of Eleanor's matter-of-fact vocals and Matt's seemingly bottomless box of crazy instruments elevates the tales into circus and vaudeville, and yet the melancholy still slots into place. "We can talk about it, but memories are best often sung" Sarantos tells, or rather scolds us.

There's no doubt the Fieries are fighting against musical form to save us from our own predictable expectations, and to a certain extent they have succeeded in this latest endeavour. Each song floods the imagination with a slice of tasty Americana that's light years away from the likes of Beck and Cake. For the less adventurous, however, there remains a longing pang for the halcyon days of ultra-catchy tunes and memorable riffs. **Ian Buchan**



Sleater-Kinney

The Woods

Sub Pop

★★★★

I have no intention of clogging the page with ruminations on band set-up, record labels, history, tour dates, and downloads etc. You can find all that on www.sleater-kinney.com or www.sleater-kinney.net, written with more care and aim to please than I could ever be bothered with. While to Sleater-Kinney newbies, the trio's name might conjure up thoughts of a solicitors' office or city financial advisors, fortunately nothing could be further from the truth. If the metaphor is to be persevered with, Sleater-Kinney are, if anything, more like a construction company, complete with all the heavy earth-moving machinery that any local area regeneration scheme would be rightly envious of.

Seventh album **The Woods** contains everything from high-energy melodic grinding (*The Fox*) to raw and impassioned rock (*What's Mine Is Yours* and *Entertain*). Even the instrumental sections on the epic 11-minute *Let's Call It Love* lift you up, let you float happily awhile, before throwing you down from a very great height. Add to that the range of Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein's duelling vocals, which gloriously hurtle from sweet-sounding harmonies on *Night Light* to the howling roar of a B52 bomber found almost everywhere else, and you're on to a winner.

Although you cannot fail to recognise some of their grunge influences and PJ Harvey-esque deliveries, Sleater-Kinney pull it off by exuding a more natural and unforced cool. While the cynics amongst you might say it's all been done before, I say not recently and certainly not as well as this. **The Woods** is unadulterated, fresh, fun

and very cleverly composed. The sequencing of the tracks ensures an invigorating flow that maintains a certain sense of urgency and keeps the listener wanting more.

Want proof? It's a rare thing indeed that most tunes on an album would force me to wriggle to the rhythm and shake a leg discreetly under the desk, but it happened here alright. **The Woods** has plenty to offer and stands up to repeated listens. It seems to me that the interpretation of each tune will also depend on your mood. A song that made you air guitar with your mates on first listen might later make you want to drive out onto the interstate to lock horns with a tornado. Alone. At night. Wearing nothing but your shades. **Endre Buzogany**



Kathryn Williams

Over Fly Over

Caw

★★★★½

Kathryn Williams has an unusual habit of naming her songs after her albums. Nothing strange about that you might think, but she does it in such a way that defies usual convention. First, the song *Little Black Numbers* appeared on 2002's **Old Low Light** and not 2000's Mercury Music Prize-nominated album of the same name. Similarly, **Over Fly Over** boasts a composition entitled *Old Low Light #2*, the '#2' presumably a nod to her peculiar little quirk. A minor point, true, but who'd bet against her next album having an *Over Fly Over* of its own? Luckily for us, Williams has other unusual habits, one of which includes constantly improving and bolstering her sound. Where she goes from here though is anyone's guess – **Over Fly Over** could well be the first Kathryn Williams Band album, such is the stylistic jump from her previ-

ous, more stripped down releases.

After last year's enchanting major label contract-fulfilling **Relations** covers album, her self-professed disillusionment with music was vanquished, and she set about making **Over Fly Over** a renewed woman. The result is a sometimes dramatic, sometimes eerie collection of eleven densely-coloured and lyrically intriguing songs and a typically yearning instrumental. Thematically, the songs continue Williams' sweet way with the minutiae, with lyrics about Lemsips, watching cartoons and listening to a lover's compilation in the dark.

As it happens, the album splits almost neatly in half between the new bold sonic adventurer Williams and the quieter, more reflective folkie we've grown to cherish. From opener *Three*, which features a "bad ass out of tune electric guitar solo", through to the pop-tastic climax of *Shop Window*, Williams has never sounded so demurely forceful. Hell, *Just Like A Birthday* even contains her first ever swear word – she had previously only alluded to pardoning her French in *No One To Blame* from her debut **Dog Leap Stairs** (1999). Intriguingly, the song begins with a softly spoken line from Cole Porter's *I Love Paris* – perhaps an inside joke? Then, at its pinnacle, menacing strings swoop around and threaten to strangle the song completely as Alex Tustin's drumming grows increasingly erratic. It's a defining moment, not just for **Over Fly Over** as a whole, but for Williams herself. A thumb in the eye for anyone who suggested that her songs lacked drama.

While there is nay a poor song here, other notable tracks include the thoughtful *Breath*, the sweetly nostalgic *City Streets* and the existentialist *Full Colour*, in which Williams sings "People like you and me could leave this world and go unnoticed in another." It's a typical sentiment for her, full of humility and wonder. **Over Fly Over** proves that she is capable of testing her tether and, yet again, that she's a sorely under-appreciated national treasure.

Alan Pedder



Juliette & The Licks

You're Speaking My Language
Hassle

★★★★

Your mum will tell you that first impressions are important. So when Oscar-nominated Hollywood actress Juliette Lewis deigned to cover two untouchable Polly Harvey classics back in 1995, the prognosis for a long-term rock career was significantly worse than terminal. Ten years later, she's back with a band and this time she's not going away. Initial thoughts? Yeah, whatever. Join the back of the queue Ms. Lewis, right behind Driver, Gershon, Crowe and Reeves. Has the work dried up so badly that they all have to scramble for a gig in a dingy Camden pub? Do they too have to send their demo tapes to some longhair in Cornwall with an obscure record company and a few grand going wanting? I mean, how seriously do they think we'll take them?

Well, in this case, you might want to prepare yourself to purge clean away those Tinseltown prejudices. Juliette Lewis is angry, but most of all she just simply rocks. After a somewhat naff intro and a "This one goes out to the entire world..." (sloganeering is so 1984), things get better, much better. The title track and first single kicks some hefty ass. Musically, the overall feel of the album is perhaps best described as polite and digestible punk rock. Drums, guitars, bass, all very credible, though for some reason I can't help humming Pearl Jam songs after the slow-burning ballad *Long Road Out Of Here* closes out the record. Juliette's vocals have just the right amount of rasp (probably from sucking on Bobby De Niro's fingers in Cape Fear) to provide that extra authenticity to her strived-for rebel sound. She

even rails against the politicians and frat boy mentality in American Boy Vol 2. It's not exactly anarchy, but it seems at least genuine.

Overall then, **You're Speaking My Language** is that rare occurrence of someone awaking from a long artistic coma. For those uninclined to be overly judgemental, there's a surprising amount of pretty decent tunes, although nothing comes close to breaking new ground. Nevertheless, where Juliette & The Licks go next will be at least an interesting footnote in the annals of rock. For now though, be content with Hollywood's finest musical export in a long long while.

Endre Buzogány



Mariah Carey

The Emancipation Of Mimi
Island/Def Jam

★★★★

These days it's too easy to focus on the problems Mariah has been through over the last few years, but on the evidence presented here, her tenth album, she herself certainly isn't wallowing. If last album **Charmbracelet** (2002) reflected Carey's mourning process, then **The Emancipation Of Mimi** sure ain't the wake. This is an upbeat, light-hearted party record, reflected perfectly in the opening track and first single, *It's Like That*. Harking back to 80s R&B (via the SOS Band) yet with a pounding kick-drum that The Neptunes would be proud of, it's a snappy, simple number that relentlessly invades the brain.

It's no coincidence then that it's one of the four songs on **...Mimi** that Carey crafted with long-time collaborator Jermaine Dupri – together they have created some of the most memorable songs of her 15-year career. Second single *We Belong Together* maintains that trend, blissfully encapsulating the

very best aspects of their union. The finest ingredients are to be found here – a distinct and sumptuous melody carrying a universal theme, a classy arrangement and the perfect ratio of smooth to belted vocals. Elsewhere on the album, the party continues with tracks like the Prince-inspired *Say Something*, the infectious *Stay The Night*, vocal workout *Your Girl* and *Get Your Number*, which samples Imagination's 80s hit, *Just An Illusion*.

In the past, Carey has best impressed when backed by live musicians, and **...Mimi** builds on these successes. *I Wish You Knew* takes you straight to the concert with its energetic crowd effect, and is reminiscent of early Diana Ross, while *Circles* has a classic early 70s groove without sounding like the wannabe retro peddled by, for example, ultra-bore Joss Stone. This track, and indeed the entire album, benefits from Mariah's maturation as a singer – where once she might have indulged in warbling and melisma, here she has learnt to rein in those early vocal flourishes and sounds all the better for it. Her voice is strong throughout, and a new-found clarity and diction makes much of **...Mimi** more accessible than some previous efforts. Although the album as a whole is intended to be light-hearted, closer *Fly Like A Bird* is a spiritual number set among stunning live instrumentation and climactic vocals. It feels like closure.

What **The Emancipation Of Mimi** shows is that, when Carey is put into a position where she feels she has nothing to prove, that freedom translates into her music and allows it to convey a more relaxed energy. Though her popularity in the UK will never scale the heights of her US success, and though many music fans and critics have written her off, Mariah has no reason at all to be bothered. In terrific contrast to the usual, by blinkering herself to much of the outside world's opinion, she has returned with a purer and much better distillation of her craft than anyone could have expected.

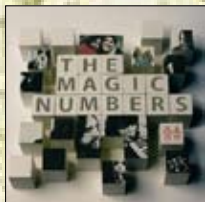
Adrian Royce

The Magic Numbers

The Magic Numbers

Heavenly

★★★★½



De La Soul once opined that “Three is the magic number”, but London-based quartet The Magic Numbers have discovered a different equation. While the folklore origins of many bands may be a shared pint in the art college bar, or an answered ad in the music press, the formation of The Magic Numbers was a home-grown affair. Trinidad-born siblings Romeo and Michele Stodart spent their formative years in New York City before their family relocated to London, bringing with them the sunshine of America’s East Coast. There, they quickly made friends with new neighbours Angela and Sean Gannon, and the four gelled over their collective love of music.

First puncturing the public consciousness when they guested on last year’s Chemical Brothers album **Push The Button**, The Magic Numbers sold out the infamous Kentish Town Forum by word-of-mouth alone. A perfect antidote to the introspective U2-isms of Coldplay, the band truly shone at a succession of UK festivals, radiating their infectious guitar-pop across waves of would-

be converts. Their festival-stealing sets have certainly paid off, as initial sales of their eponymous debut album have shifted over 100,000 units to date and bagged them a Mercury Music Prize nomination. Live favourite *Forever Lost* loses none of its appeal on record with it’s a cappella break inducing much hand-clapping and foot-tapping. Follow-up single *Love Me Like You* is a joyful ride of a song, fuelled by jangly guitars, melodic harmonies and a soulful pulse of a bass line that justifies their recent support slot for resurrected pop-genius, Brian Wilson.

Saying that **The Magic Numbers** is a ‘pleasant’ listen does not mean that the band is walking firmly down the middle of the road. None of their voices are stretched by unnecessary affectations and the female vocals complement the delicately pitched lead of hirsute frontman, Romeo. Lyrically, the theme of lost or failed love runs through the album, such as in the less-than-obliquely titled *Love’s A Game* where Romeo sings, “love is just a game/broken all the same/and I will get over you”, which has already been

mooted by Noel Gallagher as a “motown classic”. Despite the clichés and couplets, the band are unashamedly pop-wise and lines that would otherwise sound overwrought are treated here with the gentlest of hands, crafted with a transparent sincerity. The album’s emotional heart is exposed on *I See You, You See Me* which brings Angela out from the background tapestry and it is a shame that more tracks do not exploit her fragile vocals that recall US songstress Emmylou Harris.

With their long hair and airtight harmonies, early comparisons with The Mamas and The Pappas were inevitable but there are plenty more influences here, from The Lovin’ Spoonful to Nick Drake; however, co-producer Romeo ensures that the record maintains a contemporary edge, rather than lapsing into a cynical exercise in retrospection. If the reference points are obvious, then so is the appeal of this album, and when you get audio thrills like this, it’s as easy as two plus two.

Stephen Collings



Ani DiFranco
Knuckle Down
Righteous Babe

★★★★

Though never one to pass the responsibility buck, it is gratifying at least to see Ani DiFranco set aside some of the duties on this, her 15th studio album since her self-titled debut in 1990. Having enlisted the estimable wiles of co-producer Joe Henry on this follow-up to last year's self-everything'd (including, perhaps, self-indulgent) **Educated Guess**, **Knuckle Down** sees Ani return in part to the more rewarding musical territories mapped out on each album up to 2001's sprawling **Revelling/Reckoning**.

Inevitably, there will be those who bemoan the relative absence of DiFranco's almost legendary leftism here; the only overtly political song, *Paradigm*, still resonates with an inward-looking personal relevance that stitches the emotional seams of the album and mines them to stark lyrical effect. But to complain about this seems a little hard-bitten in light of DiFranco's recent personal upheavals. Both the dissolution of her marriage and the death of her father, Dante Americo DiFranco, to whom the album is dedicated, figure highly in these respectively bilious and brow-beaten compositions. The Bush Administration need not count their capitalist chickens just yet, however, as DiFranco has already signalled her intent to release a second album at the tail end of the year in which they may not come off so lightly.

As it is, **Knuckle Down** is yet another credit to DiFranco's famed survivalist mentality. The title track grittily eschews the faintly

ridiculous self-help stranglehold that grips America like a pill, instead asserting the mantra "I think I'm done gunnin' to get closer to some imagined bliss, I gotta knuckle down and just be ok with this." Happily, the following two tracks, *Studying Stones* and *Manhole* are easily among her best – the latter also featuring some charming whistling from recent Righteous Babe signing, Andrew Bird, who also contributes violin and glockenspiel elsewhere. It's no surprise then that the more liberated radio programmers stateside have embraced these songs, giving DiFranco perhaps her best commercial chance since **Little Plastic Castle** (1997). Other album highlights include the **Out Of Range-y** *Modulation*, the bluesy clunk of *Seeing Eye Dog* (a memorable chorus also helps its cause), the taut slam poetics of *Parameters* and the lyrical vulnerability of the closing track, *Recoil*.

After the chugging claustrophobia of **Educated Guess** and the often unlovable jazz forays of **Evolve** (2002), DiFranco seems comfortable (and perhaps even comforted) to be back on familiar ground, if not entirely back to her roots. The promise of less digging for greater reward should entice both new prospectors and the DiFranco converted alike. **Alan Pedder**



Natalie Imbruglia
Counting Down The Days
Polydor

★★★★½

The passive-aggressive faint praise brigade have had a field day with this, the third album from Australian singer-songwriter/actress/skin-care pin-up Natalie Imbruglia. Four

years after the patchy **White Lilies Island** (2001), a record that so earnestly wanted to be taken seriously that it only could manage to be seven shades of dull, **Counting Down The Days** arrives with the benefit of considerably lower expectations and is all the better for it. In fact, it's something of a triumph.

Featuring a raft of producers and co-writers, including her husband Daniel Johns, Ash Howes (Mr. Sarah McLachlan), Eg White (Emiliana Torrini) and Ben Hillier (Blur), Imbruglia nonetheless manages to make the album sound coherent and it's clear that the endeavour has been a three-year labour of love. Lead single *Shiver* is as fresh-sounding as *Torn* or *Big Mistake* seemed in 1997 and deservedly became one of UK radio's most played songs earlier this year. Other highlights include the Johns-penned *Satisfied*, which will almost certainly be another radio favourite. Similarly with *Sanctuary*, which features jangly indie guitarwork, discreetly wailing sirens and throbbing assertive drumbeats bubbling beneath her best rock moment since *Big Mistake*. After a noticeably sagging second half, the real surprise of the album lies in *Honeycomb Child*, an appealing little gem with undeniably **Vespertine**-era Björkian influences (music box? check! burbling electronica? check!). Like Madonna's spooky *Mer Girl* at the end of **Ray Of Light** (1998), it hints at a direction she might do well to explore.

All in all, **Counting Down The Days** showcases a pleasing progression and unmistakable maturation in Imbruglia's sound. By sticking to her organic, level-headed and famously pernickety approach to songwriting, she has pulled off an applaudable feat in reversing the (mostly exaggerated) decline of her fortunes. The fact that the album became what even **Left Of The Middle** couldn't – a #1 bestseller – is surely encouraging news. Let's hope it gives her the confidence to make a speedier follow-up.

Alan Pedder

Patty Griffin

Impossible Dream

Proper

★★★★



Defeatism is not a word you will find in the vocabulary of 41-year old Patty Griffin, but that's not to suggest some kind of deluded Pollyanna figure who could shrug off the apocalypse with a blink and an "oops" – she's tough in the way that a tree is tough. Since her debut, **Living With Ghosts** (1996), that much has been clear. Already a formidable guitarist, this fourth studio album spices things up a bit with brass, piano and organ featuring on several tracks. Interestingly, three of them have been resurrected from her indefensibly shelved third album, **Silver Bell**, a victim of silly record company bureaucracy.

Whilst the album that eventually surfaced in its place, **1000 Kisses** (2002), remains one of the most exemplary singer-songwriter albums of all time, incredibly, **Impossible Dream** is better. At once more personal and universal than its predecessor, it's an intense deconstruction of the struggle of everyday lives. Consequently, some will dismiss it as depressing,

but to do so is to bypass completely every subtlety and nuance of hope that infuses the sadness. Originally released in the US a year ago, the album finally makes it to the UK in support of Griffin's first UK tour dates in years.

The jaunty staccato blues shuffle of the opening track, *Love Throw A Line*, is something of a red herring. Stacked with an almost tangible urgency, it's heavy on the spirituality but light on the palate. *Kite Song*, too, is an easily digestible yet plaintive paean to optimism, made all the sweeter by backing vocals courtesy of Emmylou Harris and Julie Miller. Elsewhere, *Standing* takes its cue from gospel artists such as Mavis Staples, but tempers it accordingly to avoid, in her own words, making "bad white blues". The result is four minutes of being rooted to the spot in reverence.

The emotional core of the album is most evident on *Top Of The World*, a Griffin original made famous by the Dixie Chicks on **Home** (2002), and the heartstopping seven-minute epic, *Mother Of God*,

both of which feature exquisite violin from the ever-wonderful Lisa Germano. *Top Of The World* is tailgated by a touching reprise of *Impossible Dream* from the musical, *Man Of LaMancha*, as sung by Patty's parents. It's a fitting sentiment for Griffin, whose songs have often voiced the viewpoints of the older generation, that her parents take these reins and allow her own laments to bubble over.

Best of all, there's a moment approximately halfway through *Mother Of God* where her tender, reedy voice cracks beneath the weight of her emotion. It's these hiccups, these inimitable idiosyncrasies that render Patty Griffin so few of peers.

Holding an alarm clock in one hand while the other demurely hitches up her crinoline as a kite soars in the background, the Patty Griffin on the sleeve appears defiantly hopeful, as if waiting for something real to whisk her away. Even if it forever passes her by, we can rest assured she'll survive.

Alan Pedder



Emiliana Torrini
Fisherman's Woman
Rough Trade



The last few years have been eventful for Emiliana Torrini, though you'd be forgiven for not really noticing. Since her disappearance from the public eye following the release of her 1999 international debut **Love In The Time Of Science**, she has not only contributed *Gollum's Song* to the **Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers OST** (a video for which can be found as an extra on the DVD), but also found time to pen a number one single for Kylie Minogue in the shape of the slinky *Slow*. At last, following a critical standing ovation for her debut and deserved commercial success, albeit not directly in her own name, Ms. Torrini offers up her second album proper to the music world.

Lucky us! Emiliana returns with one of the most captivating folk albums of recent times, combining her delicate but powerful vocals with impossibly good melodies, perfect musical arrangements and a set of songs that place her firmly among the ranks of the best. The dreamy electronica of her debut had been shed in favour of sparse, gorgeous folk

with acoustic guitars replacing programmed instruments. The result: Emiliana sounds considerably more comfortable than anyone I have heard in a long time. At last, she seems to have finally found her niche.

In all honesty there is not a bad song on this album and tracks such as *Sunnyroad*, the sweet and enchanting first single, *Nothing Brings Me Down* and the outstanding *At Least It Was* make it even more amazing that Emiliana's talents have not brought her more attention. The title track takes us far away from the city and time of science of her debut into a simple, more homely world where melancholy and sweetness are balanced effortlessly to create an album that is both warming and heartbreaking.

The innermost Emiliana comes out on in this album. In *At Least It Was*, the timid heartbroken girl sings, "I thought I saw you on the train, I hid behind some man. I'd never seen you look so good..." and in *Heartstopper*, the self-professed "chick-flick" song, the hopeless, daydreaming romantic is allowed to voice her thoughts

where "outside your house to make a scene, in my head you grab me passionately". In almost every way, on **Fisherman's Woman** the real Emiliana grabs the reins.

Unlike her debut, the bulk of this album is self-penned, written with new co-writer Dan Carey and shows her maturity as writer and performer. Alongside her own songs, the album features a song written for her by Bill Callaghan (better known in some circles as Domino signed artist Smog) and a sublime cover of the Sandy Denny classic *Next Time Around*. These songs slide seamlessly in amongst her own to complete a near-perfect setlist. Album closer *Serenade* is possibly the most serene moment of her career.

The most striking thing about **Fisherman's Woman**, however, is its utter lack of pretence. It sounds so completely natural, free from the self-consciousness and artifice that colours so many other artists. All in all then, this is a beautifully honest and human album, and as a nice surprise, even more spellbinding than her debut.

Rod Thomas



Mary Gauthier

Mercy Now

Mercury

★★★

Within just a few seconds of a soft guitar solo delicately feeding into a slow, slurred drawl, you already know you're in the safest of hands. Such is the comforting hallmark of prime Louisianan export Mary Gauthier, whose saturnine world has been documented thus far over three sometimes stellar albums, and right from the starting blocks the gentle ear candy of her fourth, **Mercy Now**, signals no drop on the qualityometer. Revelling in its masterful weaving of guitar, percussion, cello, Hammond organ, banjo and an electric guitar with a tear-inducing twang, Gauthier once again delivers the goods with ten solid songs, including two covers (Harlan Howard's *Just Say She's A Rhymers* and Fred Eaglesmith's *Your Sister Cried*) and a re-recording of her own *I Drink*, offering folk and country in equal measures. As each track uncovers a little bit more of the mystery and history of Gauthier, the end product as a whole whips away the smokescreen to reveal what our genial hostess has been keeping herself busy with since **Filth & Fire** (2002) became the *New York Times*' indie album of the year.

The songs are both intimate and revealing, and are testimony to the art of personal storytelling which is as intact here as it has been on any of her previous albums. Influenced by the truth-telling of Dylan, John Prine, Patti Smith and Neil Young, and at times reminiscent of label buddy Lucinda Williams, Gauthier is in good company and has no doubt been encouraged to keep the stories coming, narrative after narrative. Hers are told in the barrest of settings, stripped back and

open. The first track, *Falling Out Of Love* is so close to spoken that the listener receives an intimate, seemingly confidential one-on-one recount of a failed relationship. The pained lyrics, memories, anecdotes and post-relationship ache soon rise clear before Gauthier declares her determination in the refrain of "Let me out, set me free." On the following track from which the album takes its name, the internal has become external and her concerns for both family and country are voiced.

Mercy Now delivers a plentiful dish of family issues, woe, personal trauma, disillusion, longing and addiction; the essential heartache ingredients of any Mary Gauthier record. Yet it is because of this rich bloodied vein of emotional injury, rather than in spite of it, that real beauty exists in her work. *Empty Spaces*, a gripping tale of passion gone awry, is the perfect example, rounded out with wonderful harmonies. By consistently pulling down the barriers to let her blood and guts shine through, Gauthier touches on the essence of what it is to live. Rawness, intimacy, reflection and survival are abundant in her songwriting and **Mercy Now** is a touching creation and a journey worth taking, though be prepared for a somewhat bumpy ride.

Helen Griffiths



The Raveonettes

Pretty In Black

Columbia

★★★★

Fronted by the 6' icy platinum blonde Sharin Foo and the deep, dark and handsome Sune Rose-Wagner, the mighty Raveonettes have tended to receive more press for writing entire albums in one key – 2002's **Whip It On** in Bb minor

and 2003's breakthrough **Chain Gang Of Love** in a sunnier Bb major – and for heavy feedback than for the pop perfection that was the result of this concept writing and recording. Three years and as many albums in, the duo have thrown out the rule book and delivered their strongest record yet. They've always had a penchant for the Sixties and faded Hollywood B-movie glamour (they have written three songs about LA), but it seems that only without those self-imposed musical restrictions that they have been able to embrace these themes fully.

Lead single *Love In A Trashcan* conjures up an image of Carnaby Street in 1967, with girls in go-go skirts and huge platform heels furiously shaking their shoulders to it's twangy, sassy guitar lines. In *Sleepwalking*, Sharin sings in a husky, sultry Debbie Harry-like voice, and the dramatic quiet-loud guitar chugs could indeed have come from one of the darker moments on Blondie's **Parallel Lines** (1978). But it's when the duo play the kitsch card that **Pretty In Black** hits the pop climax. In *Ode To LA* and their cover of the Angel's *My Boyfriend's Back*, they ham the Sixties motif to the max, with handclaps, woah oh oh ohs, sleigh bells, timpani drums, Ronnie-freakin'-Spector! It's as if Radiohead had never happened.

The simplicity of these songs is the key to their success as great pop. Sune has always expressed his love for the tragi-pop of Sixties girl groups like the Shangri-Las, the Ronettes and just about everyone else Phil Spector ever produced. It's no surprise then that on around half of these songs, The Raveonettes make it happen again. Many have that same muffled desperation, sung through gritted teeth and sugar-sweet pop harmonies. Unfortunately, a few songs towards the end of the album grow tiresome and some of the glistening production begins to grate. While they do not detract from the brilliance of the album's strongest moments, they can hamper its flow, and the amiability that the heavy feedback and mono produc-

tion brought to the earlier albums isn't so strong. Yet despite this perhaps inevitable trade-off between authenticity and charm, this is still a great album, just not for the same reasons as their previous efforts.

Robbie de Santos



Lucinda Williams

Live @ The Fillmore

Mercury

★★★★

The Fillmore in San Francisco, California, is the legendary venue from which Lucinda Williams chose to record this, her first official live release and eighth album overall. As was characteristic of the preceding seven, the generous two-disc **Live @ The Fillmore** set plentifully delivers the charmed smoky hues of Williams' vocals and beautifully melancholic songwriting. Lovingly presented in a lavish cover featuring one of the famously hand-drawn posters produced exclusively for the venue, the album comprises highlights from a three-night residency personally selected by Lucinda herself. Her pickings span five out of her seven studio albums and have a definite bias favouring the most recent, **World Without Tears** (2003) – 11 of its 13 tracks are included – though this is hardly surprising, given that the set was recorded in November 2003 when Williams was in full swing of the tour behind that album. Indeed, the track selection will excite those familiar with the rich, full-bodied and slightly drowsy **World Without Tears**, a record that immediately transports the listener into a world of distant hazy memories bereft of names and times – a world to which most would gladly return to in order to replenish those elusive warm fuzzy feelings. With other songs coming from albums such as the intimate **Essence** (2001) and the countrified,

career-rejuvenating **Car Wheels On A Gravel Road** (1998), the album offers a comprehensive selection of Williams' songcraft spanning a decade. However, it lacks any real deviations from her preciously polished studio work and offers nothing in the way of narration other than the occasional uttered track title or quick slur of thanks to a surprisingly muted audience, though for many the lack of audience noise will be a welcome feature – with little in the way of whoops and screams, many fans will beam happily as they sit and indulge in the rich depths of the music alone. But surely I am not the only one who appreciates a little artist-audience dynamic in the form of banter and song explanation, even if only once during these 22 tracks. I'm left with the feeling of wanting something more than or at least different to the studio takes.

Despite lacking a new flavour, the set features plenty of strong, tight and mercurial music. The first disc, in much the same vein as **World Without Tears**, possesses a chilled, dreamlike quality with songs winding their own sweet way through the speakers. Highlights such as *Sweet Side* and *Lonely Girls* hint at the magic that Williams can generate with her haunting voice, while closing track *Atonement* spotlights some meticulously crafted vocals to great effect.

The second disc, with its vibrant and rockier stance finds strength in the catchy and sexily slurred *Righteously*, the wounded, naked vocals of *Joy* and the desperate lament of *Those Three Days*. The band – Doug Pettibone, Taras Prodaniuk and Jim Christie – add skilful and soulful support with mandolin, harmonica, drums, percussion and carefully blended keys, with musical backdrops cutting through country, folk, blues and rock.

Packed with well-told stories intricately detailed through fine musicianship, **Live @ The Fillmore** is never a stale listen. Lucinda Williams' ability to communicate her experience through music is evident on all 22 tracks. But, as much as it is

easy to enjoy this release, it doesn't come close to capturing the energy of Williams' live band in the flesh.

Helen Griffiths



Erin McKeown

We Will Become Like Birds

Nettwerk

★★★★½

Ingredient 1: A failed relationship at your heels and weighing on your mind. Ingredient 2: A roomful of instruments with which you are skillfully competent. What on earth's a girl to do?

Well, if you are 27-year old Erin McKeown, you creatively bind together the two ingredients with handfuls of hope, and with patience and time, **We Will Become Like Birds** shall emerge. With a relationship crumbling around her, McKeown has simply picked up her guitar, bass, drum-sticks and keyboards and atypically enlisted other musicians to produce this wonderfully hopeful album. These twelve complementary songs are lyrically pertinent to anyone who has survived a relationship break-up – sentiments of creation and loss, construction and destruction are plentiful.

In the opener, *Aspera*, McKeown is found musing on her own discontent, singing "I'm in shambles, blown to bits by our troubles, these brambles, our stumblings, our struggles", but by the second song, *Air*, she is contemplating the wider issue of the origins of heartache in general: "love! and you're wondering how it works, the heart and the natural world, it's a wonder that science can hurt".

Though the songs are firmly in the camp of relationship fodder, McKeown provides something more than the archetypal break-up album with a continuous hopeful

twist. Buoyant ruminations on how experience forces growth are welcomed in the positive statement of *We Are More*, in which sadness is transcended in the form of “this morning I saw a glimmer of hope, in the eyes that I met at the door, of separate futures and confident sutures, to the wounds we have endured.” The album is undeniably sad and yet irrepressibly hopeful.

For those who don't appreciate an emotional battering as part and parcel of a listening experience, McKeown's clearly auspicious lyrics and musical choices reflecting a light emotional approach will indeed sweeten the medicine. With its upbeat, rising notes and tempting hand claps, the overall feel isn't one of loss – the musical scenery is as misleading as her carefree, light vocals. In typical McKeown style, her voice drifts lightly and spreads warmly through the album, winding over even the highest notes with softness.

With her personal evolution in full view, McKeown's musical growth cannot be overlooked. She is forever changing and her tendency to frolic willfully through varied musical landscapes is only slightly diminished here. As ever though, McKeown's musicianship is nothing short of admirable and will make even the most gifted a little green-eyed. Competent enough to play all the instruments herself, McKeown could have easily created the album nestled alone in a studio, but with an ethnomusicology degree and three acclaimed genre-hopping solo albums already in the bag, Erin arrived at this album with a strong pedigree and looking for something new. She and co-producer Tucker Martine have called on highly accomplished musicians to freely improvise on her compositions as they best know how. With Matt Chamberlain on drums (Tori Amos, Fiona Apple), Sebastian Steinberg on bass (Beth Orton) and Steve Moore on keyboards (Laura Veirs), the album wears an impulsive band feel. Collaborations with singer-songwriters Pete Mulvey and



The Duke Spirit Cuts Across The Land

Polydor

★★★★½



After 18 months in the making, it's not surprising that **Cuts Across The Land** is a fairly polished, well-produced and suitably promising debut. It's an adept and listenable dark-edged rock 'n' roll album. The problem arises when you start to wonder what exactly it is you're listening to – it would be fair to say that the London-based five-piece wear their influences on their sleeves. Sadly, these are rarely combined into any new, innovative or interesting sound; rather, they are too often laid out bare in quick succession for all the world to ear, particularly in the Sebadoh-esque riffing in the chorus of the title track to the alarmingly *Anarchy In The UK*-like opening chord of first single, *Lion Rip*, although in the latter this quickly dissolves into one the album's standout tracks.

When their influences aren't so apparent, such as on the interminable bore that is *Hello To The Floor*, neither is the passion that could have made this reasonable album into a really good one. In fact, this track, and to a slightly lesser extent, *Bottom Of The Sea*, smack of a by-the-numbers “every rock album needs a couple of ballads” approach to recording, which fails to showcase properly any of the bands talents, except possibly an ear for a nice couplet, as the frequently well-crafted lyrics are

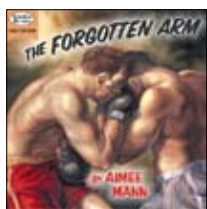
dribbled out by singer Leila Moss with less enthusiasm than is found at your average Saturday night karaoke, which is made all the more disappointing because elsewhere on the album you discover that she can do so much better. For example, there is infinitely more zeal on *Win Your Love*, a high point of the record, especially if the prospect of Polly Harvey fronting Sonic Youth is one that excites you. But PJ isn't the only vocal influence Moss parades – Patti Smith and Nico are never far from mind. Indeed, the Velvet Underground themselves are one of the more pervading influences of the guitar sound throughout.

However, it seems somewhat mean spirited to continue to run through the tracklist namedropping the many earlier, often seminal, acts that are brought to mind when listening to this record. Perhaps in this era where exceptional debuts seem to be the norm, promise is no longer enough, but **Cuts Across The Land** is full of it. If future efforts can use these diverse influences as exactly that and not as such obvious templates, as well as capturing some of the fervour and excitement that most reviewers and music fans alike agree that the band exhibit when on stage, then they are certainly an act worth keeping an ear out for.

Scott Millar

Spanish chanteuse Juana Molina on *Delicate December* and *The Golden Dream*, respectively, also add a different dimension.

The rich, multi-instrumental path set out by her previous album **Grand** (2003) is trodden even further here, breaking away from that record's jazzy, Fifties-style swing. Slick production and a stark reduction in guitar focus have augmented this effect. McKeown is no longer the folkie that appeared on the independent scene in 1999 with **Monday Morning Cold**. Regardless, with perhaps her most commercially accessible album to date, Erin McKeown is stepping back into the alternative spotlight while laudably retaining her enthusiasm for experimentation, her charming vocal style and a distinctive and familiar originality. **Helen Griffiths**



Aimee Mann

The Forgotten Arm
SuperEgo/V2

★★★★★

Somewhat fittingly for an artist who famously soundtracked a movie in reverse – Paul Thomas Anderson's multi Oscar-nominated **Magnolia** (1999) was based on her songs, not the other way around – Aimee Mann's latest endeavour is a vibrant and fully realised sonic novel in a similar vein to Tori Amos' nomadic narrative **Scarlet's Walk** (2002). While the latter was an intimate love/hate letter to a post-9/11 America, **The Forgotten Arm** has a far narrower focus, chronicling as it does the oscillatory relationship of Caroline (a seemingly aimless victim of circumstance) and John (a down-and-out boxer and Vietnam war veteran). Both journeys, however, happen by the US state of Virginia. Indeed, Mann's story begins there, on the midway of the VA State Fair,

where Caroline in her reminiscence is working as an attendant. The two ignite a spark in one another and head for the border in an old Cadillac to escape the humdrum and hassle of smalltown life; however, all is not well. John's experiences have left him a hard-drinking, drug-addicted gambler whose luck is cooling faster than either can fathom. As the Ronseal-style title suggests, *Goodbye Caroline* sees a parting of the ways. Having lost every asset but the car, John heads north to San Rafael to get himself clean and earn some quick money. Inevitably, nothing's ever so simple and *Going Through The Motions* is a peek into the mind of Caroline as she realises the effort is a certainty to fail.

John is by far the better sketched character and his sad and sorry situation is skilfully drawn out over a four-song suite beginning with the foggy *I Can't Get My Head Around It* and culminates in the grimy hotel room of *Little Bombs* in which he realises that he may never recover. The highlight of the album, however, comes with Caroline's dejected throwing in of the towel, a handsomely understated ballad fantastically titled *That's How I Knew This Story Would Break My Heart*.

In what is supposed to be their final meeting, the also rather self-explanatory *I Can't Help You Any-more* kicks off the regret in a rather unremarkable fashion, but the lovely piano-led *I Was Thinking I Could Clean Up For Christmas* offers one last hope of salvation. Lyrically, it's simply gold standard Aimee Mann – "I was thinking I could clean up for Christmas and then, baby, I'm done, one less fucker trying to get in the business of the prodigal son" – and the melody here is one of the album's more memorable moments. After all, therein lies one of the pitfalls of the concept album as a genre. When the narrative takes such precedence, the music can often fall by the wayside as a secondary concern. Not so with **The Forgotten Arm**. In fact, it boasts some of the most muscular music of Mann's solo career to date.

Recorded almost entirely live by producer Joe Henry, it's a marvel that the mix is so refreshingly roomy. By adopting heavy doses of stereo separation, the production breathes with a rare and cinematic verve. Guitarists Jeff Trott and Julian Coryell turn in a few solos that never feel overcooked, and together with drummers Victor Indrizzo and Jay Bellarose and bassist Paul Bryan, they consistently add a Seventies flavour without overwhelming the broth.

There are some who will think this is Mann by numbers – more disaffected, drugged-out also rans holding onto their last scraps of dignity – but this is a delicately nuanced side to the singer that's both new and impressive. She has always excelled at the role of coroner, picking over the carcasses of long-dead love affairs, extracting the evidence and leaving her lyric sheets dangling from their toes.

Within the central conceit of the concept, Mann has allowed herself the luxury of a more detailed analysis, and while this at first may render some of the songs seemingly superfluous (and a couple are a little samey), repeated listens peel back ever more layers. Such lack of immediacy was also evident on her previous release, **Lost In Space** (2002), though this also rewarded the persistent listener with greater depth than the surface sheen suggested.

In boxing, the "forgotten arm" refers to a decoy sparring manoeuvre in which one arm is deliberately underused until the sudden strike for a KO. In something of a departure for Mann, it is hope that delivers the sucker punch, the final blow of the twelfth round. In a perhaps unexpected reprieve, Mann gifts her creations a hard-won bittersweet compassion in which they realise that in a world where so many dumb things are said in haste and countless things go maddeningly unuttered, sometimes, just sometimes, a simple "you're beautiful" can tear down the fortresses of doubt and permit that longed-for fresh start.

Alan Pedder

Martha Wainwright

Martha Wainwright
Drowned In Sound



When writing about Martha Wainwright, youngest progeny of the McGarrigle/Wainwright dynasty, it has become standard fare to open with family trees, domestic wounds and sibling rivalry. Releasing her debut album within months of father Loudon Wainwright III's **Here Come The Choppers** and brother Rufus' acclaimed **Want Two**, Martha has avoided trying to emulate the theatrical excesses of her elder sibling as this assured debut's musical roots are closer to the country-tinged folk rock of mother Kate McGarrigle.

In the McWainwright's hermetically-sealed world, writing songs about family members is perhaps one of the more creative forms of psychological catharsis. While Loudon was still reeling from Rufus' ode to paternal absence *Dinner At Eight* from **Want One** (2003), Martha provided the killer blow with last year's *Bloody Mother Fucking Asshole*, an acid-tongued riposte to a father who once wrote that his daughter was "just a clone of every woman I've known."

Turning thirty next year, Martha's first album proper is the culmination of over seven years

of songwriting that may have endured a long gestation, but for fans of her live sets, this album reads like a "best of" collection. Having spent these formative years opening and backing for Rufus, Martha has acquired many fans of her raw, whisky-coated vocals over earnestly-strummed guitar strings. Now at last rewarded with a record deal on independent label Drowned In Sound, the songs translate well to disc without compromising their heart-on-sleeve simplicity. For instance, *Don't Forget*, complimented here by Kate McGarrigle's dreamlike piano, is a beautiful realisation of a live favourite. Cousin Lily Lanken also contributes, not only with honeyed backing vocals, but also the paintings that adorn the inner artwork of the sleeve. Rufus returns Martha's many favours by cropping up, albeit with far less of his usual gusto, on *Don't Forget* and *The Maker*, particularly impressing on the latter as their two voices interweave along a precocious swirling melody.

While Martha admits that many of her songs fall into the "woe is me" vein, the album itself has many faces and one album is almost too little to contain the

number of voices fighting for attention. *Far Away* and *Whither I Must Wander*, a traditional cover, bookend the album and find Martha at her most sensitive and subdued, while *Ball & Chain* is infused with all the resentment, hurt and resignation of a lost love.

With a lyrical candour that recalls fellow Canuck Alanis Morissette, Martha places herself firmly at the centre of her songs, and while her voice takes centre stage here, the harmonies complete the musical landscape far beyond the horizon. It's not all plain sailing however. The album's MOR low comes with the anaemic lyricism of *This Life*. "This life is boring", she begins with an uncanny accuracy. However, normal service is resumed with latest single *When The Day Is Short*, and, alongside the achingly good *BMFA*, the album subsequently scales one peak after another.

On his latest album, Rufus sings on *Little Sister* a tale of paranoia at being eclipsed by his talented sibling. Martha, however, should not be so concerned with such familial one-upmanship when her strongest competition is evidently with herself.

Stephen Collings



photo by Robbie de Santos



Sons & Daughters

The Repulsion Box

Domino

★★★★★



The Repulsion Box is the first full album from hard-edged Glaswegian indie rock band Sons & Daughters, formed in 2003 by ex-Arab Strap bit-partners, Adele Bethel (vox, guitar, piano) and David Gow (drums, percussion). Alongside bassist Ailidh Lennon and guitarist/co-vocalist Scott Paterson, they released their debut seven-track mini-album, **Love The Cup**, in July 2004 to widespread critical acclaim.

In fact, the Strap connection provides two key elements in the Sons & Daughters equation – a penchant for the darker things in life and a willingness to sing in their native Glasgow accent, the latter of which only adds to the overwhelming sense of menace that runs throughout this album. It almost badgers you into appreciating it, conjuring up an image of Bethel leaning down, spitting and sneering in your face as her bandmates draw in ever closer, backing her up with a relentless wall of drums and guitars warning you that you'd better like it, or else.

Some comparisons have been drawn between Sons & Daughters and now-defunct fellow Glas-

wegians, The Delgados, mostly due to the male/female singing patterns. Frankly, that's ridiculous, the hometown and the gender balance are the only similarities here. The Delgados are sorely missed, but Sons & Daughters are not here to provide a stopgap.

On the subject of dual (or duelling) vocals, whilst Paterson is nominally the co-vocalist in Sons & Daughters, in reality he's more the dark, deadpan backing vocal to Bethel's more varied, more passionate and ultimately more frightening lead. This is how it should be; Paterson's not a bad singer by any means, but it's clear when he takes to the front, such as in the second verse of *Monsters*, who it is that makes this record outstanding. That said, the Paterson-fronted *Rama Lama* is one of the best tracks on the album. A slower-paced, stomping, chanting verse that bursts into an energetic, derisive Bethel-screamed chorus, alternately cresting on waves of quiet menace and passionate anger – it's a deadly combination. That's not to say that Sons & Daughters don't have a pop sensibility to go with it; tracks such as *Dance Me In*

and *Taste The Last Girl* disprove that theory. However, it's pretty unlikely that these will lead to a slot on Top of the Pops just yet.

The final part of the jigsaw is provided by producer Victor van Vugt, who has previously worked with PJ Harvey and Beth Orton, though his long-standing collaboration with Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds is a more fitting reference point in the context of this album. You can certainly pick out some of the Australian's dark glaring foreboding, brilliantly helped along by the death-, break up- and murder-inspired lyrics. Indeed, Bethel is positively pant-wetting in the closing track, *Gone*, shrieking "I'll cut you out of every photograph to within an inch of your life!", channelling the spirit of a bunny-boiling psychotic.

The relentless musical assault might make this album difficult for some listeners to stick with all the way through without wanting to hide in a corner, but track by track it will insinuate itself into your playlists until everything else begins to feel almost unimportant and trite in comparison. In a word, essential.

Scott Millar



Diane Cluck

Oh Vanille/ova nil
Cargo

★★★★½

If the world was bequeathed a stanza of poetry for every time it's been written that such and such a songwriter was inspired by the tortured complexities of Sylvia Plath, we'd have assembled a monster modern epic to rival The Iliad and Odyssey combined. Clearly, this is no bad thing – Plath's intensity is addictive and energising as much as it is famously wretched – but the comparison perhaps lacks imagination. From the clever wit of the title in, however, New York nutritionist Diane Cluck's fourth release better recalls the less studied, rawly humanistic and life-affirming work of former NY state poet laureate, Sharon Olds. Both bring a worldly mellifluousness to the boil, daring the reader/listener to continue and delivering the kind of emotional payoff that's totally unputdownable.

Over the course of these eleven truly memorable songs, recorded in her apartment during the summer of 2003, Cluck's voice is the constant main attraction, coaxing out her insanely astute lyrics with a peculiar and uniquely clipped glottal beauty. When double-tracked in the rousing *Easy To Be Around* and the spectral a cappella of *Petite Roses*, it's enough to stop and swoon to. Elsewhere, the stark bruised balladry of *All I Bring You Is Love*, *Wild Deer At Dawn* and the sensational *Yr Million Sweetnesses* is poignant and cliché-free, the songs gliding like silk-gloved fists along their airy arrangements. Likewise with the heart-rending *Bones & Born Again* – there's no clutter here. Cluck has achieved the elusive optimal minimalism that's easy to get so very very wrong.

Having been described by Devendra Banhart as his “favourite singer-songwriter in all of New York City”, and featured on his **Golden Apples Of The Sun** (2004) compilation (alongside Joanna Newsom, CocoRosie, and more) with *Heat From Every Corner* from her **Macy's Day Bird** (2002) album, Diane is certainly not short of cult figure endorsements. She is also linked with the antifolk movement spearheaded by the likes of Herman Düne and Jeffrey Lewis, though her classisitic sensibilities and ornate melodies seem a little at odds with some of her crasser stablemates. She certainly comes across more demurely than, say, Kimya Dawson, claiming little more than that she likes “to play different instruments and sing and write songs.”

If there's any justice, she'll be doing it for decades to come, and should **Oh Vanille/ova nil** ever receive domestic recognition, a Newsom-style word of mouth stoking of this so far highly secret pleasure is almost guaranteed. **Alan Pedder**



Mara Carlyle

I Blame Dido EP
Accidental

★★★★

Legend has it that upon her arrival in Libya, Dido, the founder queen of Carthage, was permitted to buy only as much land as could be covered by a bull's hide. Being a wily little minx, she thus proceeded to slice the skin into slivers so fine that they encircled an area of several acres, upon which she built her city. As such, the phrase “to cut up didoes” came to describe an extravagant behaviour.

On first impression, the title of Shropshire-born Mara Carlyle's new EP may seem like an attempt to sever a chunk from the crown of our own queen Dido, perhaps the

very antithesis of extravagant, but is in fact “entirely coincidental”. That is, according to the cheeky-faced creator of last year's most aptly titled album, **The Lovely**. Recorded over several years and completed on a secondhand laptop in a north London flat, **The Lovely** displayed a staggering yet homely virtuosity paired with through-a-glass-darkly operatic vocals that placed Carlyle somewhere along the continuum between early Joan Baez and the gentle lilt of Kathryn Williams.

Continuing the cutting theme momentarily, that album opened with the unforgettable combo of eerie vocals and bendy DIY essential that was *The Saw Song* (Carlyle once played in a trio called The Weeping Saws; clearly, she knows her way around a pun or two) but it's the sweeping, smoky *I Blame You Not* that finds its way onto this EP. Sounding for all the world like a lost Dusty Springfield in pensive mode classic, it would have sounded equally at home on Feist's **Let It Die** (2004). With its muffled piano, soft jazzy drums and soothing background coos, it single-handedly dislodges the stake from the heart of the torch song hammered in by the likes of Katie Melua and the soporific Norah Jones.

The Carthagian connection arrives in the form of a cover of *Dido's Lament* from the Henry Purcell opera, *Dido & Aeneas*. This was not, as it happens, wholly inspired by the baroque original, but by a spirited take by the dearly departed Jeff Buckley. “Baroque music was meant to be filled with passion when it was written” says Carlyle, “But these days people are too reverential about it.” The result is a distinctly tasteful rendition that builds in intensity to a dreamy multi-tracked refrain of “remember me, my fate.” It's measured, certainly, but never dull. Carlyle returns again to essential listening territory with a bizarrely soulful cover of labelmate Dani Siciliano's *Walk The Line* from last year's **Likes...** album. Maybe it's the slightly comical baritone beatbox on the blink, but its charm is infectious and somehow improves on the original.

On this evidence, Carlyle's upcoming covers album on which she will tackle material by her icon Dolly Parton and the extraordinarily odd bedfellows of Iron Maiden, Robert Palmer and OutKast, is going to be spectacular. Frankly, anyone who compares opera singing to "weight lifting whilst reciting poetry from memory whilst convincingly acting like you're about to cry/laugh/kill/shag someone" is more than alright by me. If you loved **The Lovely**, this is like manna from heaven. Else, if you somehow missed out, get this as an entrée and proceed to the main course directly; do not pass Dido, do not regret £10.

Alan Pedder



Róisín Murphy

Ruby Blue

Echo

★★

Rumours of Moloko's death have been greatly exaggerated. At least, I sincerely hope so. When quizzed on reuniting with her ex, Mark Brydon, the impossible-to-type Róisín 'pronounced Rosheen' Murphy has offered the predictably gnostic response, "I don't *not* want to."

That's promising enough for this listener. While the familiar set-up remains intact – feisty, barking-mad Irish vocalist meets cutting-edge bedroom DJ turned producer – none of Moloko's loveable Balearic stomp has survived. Instead, Murphy's defection to one Matthew Herbert has resulted in an album of two halves; those of two egos. One is fragile and over-compensatory, getting back on its feet after a year of limbo, and the other overwhelmed and eager to please. This album is a make-or-break statement for both parties, which only adds to the overall disappointment.

Even in a world of iPod Shuffles and cut-and-paste playlists,

an album should still be listened to properly, tracks one through twelve, at least until you can safely discard some of them without the risk of overlooking a nascent classic. It is therefore surprising that **Ruby Blue's** opening salvoes – the ones supposed to leap up and grab you by the balls – are so tentative, especially given how much this album has to prove. A faltering tinkle of keyboards kicks-off *Leaving The City*, meandering in an aimless fashion that soon becomes a trademark of the album as a whole. Eventually, that husky croon we know and love shuffles to the forefront and remains there, steadfast. Reassuring? Unfortunately not. Instrumentation behind a voice as strong and distinctive as Murphy's should complement and support, not jar as much as this. Herbert's conscious decision to use a ramshackle collage of everyday random noises, jazz refrains, dance grooves and synthetic skiffle very rarely hits the right note. *Night Of The Dancing Flame* can only be described as Dizzy Gillespie meets The Ewoks.

Things are a little brighter with *Through Time*. It's a welcoming simpler affair, wrapped in gentle layers of organ and decorated with plucked acoustic guitar and cascading arpeggiated motifs. Heralding a string of stronger offerings, it is soon followed by *Sow Into You*. Here, one is reminded of Murphy's Moloko diva status; a status built on a dance remix of *Sing It Back* which made it onto over a hundred compilations and hundreds more dancefloors. The first and most obvious single from **Ruby Blue** comes with *If We're In Love*, easily the most accessible and immediate of Murphy's erratic stable. "If we're in love, we should make love. When will be lovers?" she asks. One has a sneaking suspicion that this enigmatic girl isn't letting on as much as we'd like to imagine. This is a lyric as popastically bland as the market she's aiming for.

For me, the title track is far too long coming. Buried three-quarters of the way into the album, it's a glorious romp of grunge guitar, hand claps, jubilant backing "woos!" and



swirling, multi-layered vocals. Sadly, it's an all too brief glimpse into the heights that Murphy and Herbert could scale, but... well... don't. The album's solid middle section finishes here, bookended by a clutch of damp squibs. It bows out on as subdued a note as it started. Perhaps Murphy really was assuming that people would listen this solely on an iPod Shuffle.

This record might have served as a versatile and grandiose addition to Matthew Herbert's portfolio – surely his magnum opus so far. Instead, it falls flat, weighed down by overbearing vocals far too high in the mix and much too complex to play bedfellow to the laboured production. Indeed, this is as much Herbert's record as it is Murphy's, but ultimately it's to the detriment of both. **Alex Doak**



Saint Etienne

Tales From Turnpike House
Sanctuary

★★★★

Thank the blue expanse above for Saint Etienne, perennial vanguards of fair Londinium, and their inimitable eye for a sorry mundanity in need of a paean to its ordinary glory. Clearly, whoever in radical Islam

wants the capital on its knees hasn't reckoned with Cracknell and co. Their latest feat of escapism, **Tales From Turnpike House**, is a concept album so familiar in its themes of inner city struggle and on the point of bursting bubbles of esteem that it's utterly engaging for the most part. Over the course of the 12-track song cycle, the Ets unravel a day in the life of the residents of an East London high-rise, the titular Turnpike House. As such, the album opens with the breezily optimistic two-some of *Sun In My Morning*, a gentle strum that lazily blossoms with winsome Beach Boys harmonies and a gossamer-light flute solo, and *Milk Bottle Symphony*, which, quite simply, may well be their finest moment yet in a 15-year long career. Serving as more than just an introduction to the denizens of Turnpike House (one of whom, Gary Stead, appears in no fewer than three songs), it's an irony-free and poignant glimpse into the morning rituals of the plateau'd and downwardly mobile.

Elsewhere, the work of Girls Aloud producers Xenomania yields that rare beast, an emotional dance number (!), in the guise of *Lightning Strikes Twice*, which recounts the laments of a failing new-ager. They also crop up to polish the charm offensive of *Stars Above Us*, a sweetly gratifying floor-filler extolling the simple virtues of a roof garden in this reverse oasis of concrete. Other highlights include the sultry first single, *Side Streets*, a tune that swings so unapologetically that it's easy to overlook the urban paranoia/violent crime lyrical bent, and *A Good Thing*, a hefty slab of disco Etienne at their finest. The mostly spoken word *Teenage Winter* mines a similarly rich seam of nostalgia as the glorious *How We Used To Live* from 2000's **Sound Of Water**, this time with an added twist of the inevitability of change and the futility of resistance. Album closer *Goodnight* is also worthy of a mention, with its soothing backdrop of wistful boy-girl harmonies drawing the cloak of evening around the humble tower block.

Where Saint Etienne have been less successful in the past, it's almost always been the fault of being just that little bit too knowing, a fault repeated here on the stilted and silly *Relocate*, a marital wobbly about moving to the country featuring none other than David Essex as the reluctant husband. It's as if the Tom Jones/Cerys Matthews duet on *Baby, It's Cold Outside* never even happened. Even William Shatner managed to mostly avoid such cringesome pitfalls on last year's **Has Been**. Nevertheless, **Tales...** is a dignified return to form after the mostly disappointing **Finisterre** (2002), and one that will ensure that their legacy remains intact if, as the abounding rumours suggest, it does indeed turn out to be their last album together, at least for grown-ups that is – September's **Up The Wooden Hills** will be aimed at, though by no means restricted to, those who've recently mastered the feat of walking from the high chair to the potty.

At a time when London is reeling from the first blood of a psychological turf war, **Tales From Turnpike House** is not just another album from the city's most enduring musical champions, but also an affectionate tour of an instantly recognisable but altogether less harrowing reality. Get lost in it.

Alan Pedder



KT Tunstall

Eye To The Telescope
Relentless

★★★

KT Tunstall is something of an unusual prospect in these parts. Rarely does an artist on a major-label imprint freely admit to having sacrificed their artistic vision to satisfy the commercial demands of the suits, at least not in the dawn

of their careers rather than the twilight, let alone profess to writing music that they themselves would not buy. But that is precisely the situation in which the 29-year old part-Scottish, part-Cantonese theatre studies graduate has placed us. Can she be taken at all seriously in light of such revelations? The answer, thankfully, is a large plate of yes with just a small garnish of no.

There is no question that Tunstall is in possession of a disarmingly versatile voice, best displayed here on the proverbial sore thumb that is *Black Horse & The Cherry Tree*, a refreshingly odd toe-tapping singalong rooted in swampy blues. As a first single, it's almost entirely unrepresentative of the album as it stands, though one suspects not of the album Tunstall had in mind before the creases were A&R'd out. Given that her live shows are considerably more engaging than this sometimes samey record would suggest, even garnering comparisons to the more visceral rock of Carina Round, Tunstall clearly has the potential to make an album more vital than this.

That nagging frustration aside, **Eye To The Telescope** is by no means bad. There are enough moments of swagger and poise to delight a wide audience and the album's shortlisting for the 2005 Nationwide Mercury Music Prize would certainly have pricked up many a new ear. *False Alarm*, the title track from last year's debut EP, is a fine example of accessible melancholia, and the similarly accomplished *Stoppin' The Love* is almost downright groovy. Elsewhere, *Other Side Of The World* is her power ballad moment and she handles it with aplomb. Sure it sounds a little calculatedly widescreen, but if Avril Lavigne could get away with *I'm With You*, Tunstall's off the hook. The somewhat Norah Jones-a-like *Under The Weather* and the raspy *Miniature Disasters* are also worthy of attention.

Overall though, despite a number of flourishes and the glaring promise of a prodigious new talent, **Eye**

To The Telescope suffers from a few too many generic contributions. Though it's tempting to think that had she stuck more rigidly to her original blueprint we'd be listening to a far better album, this is, after all, only the beginning. The true test of Tunstall's determination to find her sound will come later.

Alan Pedder



Lene Marlin

Lost In A Moment

Virgin

★★★

OK, just for one moment suppose that at just 17 years old you had the fastest selling single in Norwegian music history and then at 22, two best-selling platinum albums under your belt. What the hell would you do next? Well, if you were Lene Marlin, you'd hide yourself away and secretly make an album with top Norwegian production trio StarGate, who have had hits with Mary J Blige, Mariah Carey, Texas, Cher and Brandy, among others. What started out as a personal experiment for the now 24-year old quickly morphed into a full album; even her record company were not expecting an new opus until she turned up with the finished article.

So, a short history lesson for those unfamiliar with Lene. Back in the mists of 1997, her debut album **Playing My Game** hit big with a clutch of smash hit singles, going on to sell 1.8 million copies across Europe. Faced with such overwhelming success at a young age, Marlin walked away from the music industry and it was another five years before she felt ready enough to try again. Her second album **Another Day** was released in 2003, bringing more success in

her native land. However, the album received little fanfare in the UK upon its release and sank without a trace. So what of Ms. Marlin in 2005? Gone are the silly hats and hoodies from her previous videos and in their place comes a gorgeous, mature new look and a grown-up collection of eleven new songs that she describes as "different moods and flavours, a real personal effort and the best record I have ever made."

Perhaps she is listening to a different album. **Lost In A Moment** is no genre-busting feast of musical styles. Like its predecessor, **Another Day**, it is a pleasant enough collection with some nice touches, but fails to really engage. On the rockier-than-usual opener, *My Lucky Day*, Marlin somehow manages to seem even more disinterested than Avril Lavigne – not a good place to start. Fortunately, things improve quickly; the quietly beautiful *All I Can Say* is reminiscent of her earlier work, and first single *How Would It Be* is one of the more upbeat numbers. It's a nice jaunty pop song, catchy enough to be sung along to after a few listens and is certainly the kind of song to be found playing over the credits in Generic Teen Girl Movie 2.

As for the rest? Well, despite the odd highlight (*Never To Know, Eyes Closed*), the songs tend to wash right over the listener to the extent that some may even go unnoticed (e.g. *When You Were Around*). It is a shame because Marlin is in possession of a beautiful voice and the kind of image that should be marketable enough to sell records by the truckload in the UK as well as Norway.

It may be a little soon to say whether Lene Marlin peaked too early in her career with the dizzying pop heights of *Unforgivable Sinner* and *Sitting Down Here*, but certainly next time it will take more than this competent but rather samey collection of songs to blow her public away.

Ian Addison



Maria Taylor

11:11

Saddle Creek

★★★

On this, her debut solo album, Saddle Creek staple Maria Taylor sings as if trapped behind a veil. As a result, too many of the songs enclosed herein hold all the sensual suggestion of a whisper but lack the electric touch to fulfil their heady promise. Certainly, there are many bewitching melodies at work in the rear, but Taylor's vocals are often at best lethargic and, in places, even monotonous. The opener *Leap Year* is a prime example – Taylor intones impassionately over a complex but undistinguishing mess of instrumentation, leaving an unfortunate sense of so what? This is not a newly-acquired trait either. Certain songs in her band Azure Ray's three-album oeuvre, have fallen equally flat.

Tellingly, the most vital songs here are the ones uplifted through guest star turns by her bright-eyed boyfriend and Saddle Creek label boss Conor Oberst (*Song Beneath The Song*) and her Now It's Overhead cohort Andy LeMaster (*Hitched*). Remarkably, *One For The Shareholder* is a decent enough stab at dancefloor bothering, but it jars enormously with the rest of the album and is perhaps best listened to when taken out of context. The veil is lifted a little on simpler tracks such as *Two Of Those Too*, *Nature Song* and *Speak Easy*, and these carry greater an emotional impact as a result, though the two former are perhaps overlong and don't really go anywhere.

The production by LeMaster and Mike Mogis, another Sad-

dle Creek regular and sometime member of Bright Eyes, is partly to blame for the album's overall unwelcome detachment. The instruments, and particularly the strings, seem to flounder too low in the mix, adding to the absence of immediacy. Although **11:11** does thaw slightly with repeated listens, Taylor's ambition is used too sparingly and spread a little too thinly to make this anything more than just a pleasant listen.

Alan Pedder



Electrelane

Axes

Too Pure

★¹/₂

Brighton is, as far as I'm concerned anyway, only good for taking your relatives to when you can't be bothered to drive into London or up north, and perhaps to provide an easy apex of convergence for various rallies (cars, cycles, hippies and politicians, for example). Oh, and sanctuary for aging cheesy DJs. So I was really hoping that East Sussex four-piece Electrelane would show me a new town, a revitalised seaside resort brushed clear of its cobwebs, with newly painted shop fascias and nay a broken lightbulb on the rides.

Plugging in my headphones, I was transported in an instant to Electrelane's creation, with a packed lunch, petty cash and a camera provided. The town is called **Axes**. People are milling around. Above the gentle lap of the waves, intriguing sounds are abounding. There's a vague sense that somewhere nearby The Fall are jamming with Tom Waits, Blur and assorted prog rockers. Yes indeed, **Axes** feels pleasantly

"arty", the sun is shining and the temperature is just perfect for a day trip.

Shame then that having spent a few hours treading its highways and byways, I can't help but feel that the town planners could have done more with **Axes** to make it more attractive to casual visitors. Although this third album once again proves that Electrelane are skilled musicians and are able to hold an exceptional rhythm, it seems that nowadays that's just not quite enough to make the masses voluntarily flock to **Axes**. It's the kind of town that will rarely find its way into anyone's much-loved holiday snaps.

This particular day trip feels much like a Sunday stroll along the promenade. Despite the desolate, almost ghostly sleeve hinting at a dark netherworld, the outlook at **Axes** is actually pretty mellow; mostly instrumentals with the occasional highlight coasting in on a much appreciated breeze. Without the irrepressible gusto of these, anyone visiting **Axes** might be tempted to just fall asleep on a bench overlooking the shore, missing the last train home.

Endre Buzogány



Queenadreena

The Butcher & The Butterfly

One Little Indian

★★★★

After a three-year hibernation, Katie Jane Garside and friends return to the fray with third album, **The Butcher & The Butterfly**. Expanding upon the band's past glories and unique delivery, the album seemingly and seamlessly splices the varied sounds of Garside's previous

outfit Daisy Chainsaw with those from Queenadreena's debut album **Taxidermy** (2000) and the follow-up, **Drinkme** (2002). Indeed, the overtones of the latter are clearly audible in the opener, Suck. Miss Garside's abrupt transitions from cutesy singsong to banshee screams are as remarkable as ever and tastily complement the shimmying metal wail of her band. Beyond the melody and tight composition, there lies a sleazy desperation and grimy energy to the song, making it just one of many highlights.

But **The Butcher & The Butterfly** is not all fitfully thrashy, many of the tracks reveal a versatility and eclecticism that casual listeners may well be surprised by. In fact, it's a wonder to listen to. From the tribal thumping, cooing and moaning of *Medicine Jar* to the chilled out acoustics and whispery melody of *Birdnest Hair*, the album offers a great deal to those who would give it a chance and flirt with their own dark side. First single *FM Doll* is a disturbing tribute to murdered US child star, Jon Benet. Among the warped cabaret of crashing guitars and drums and Katie Jane's sexily macabre vocals, there is a blunt but poignant ballad of the sinister goings on in Benet's family, hinting at the suspicion of child abuse that surfaced in the wake of Benet's own parents standing accused of her death.

That sombre note aside, **The Butcher & The Butterfly** is a wildly accomplished album with a list of influences that range from metal to blues via folk and beyond. It is proof that Garside and her long-time musical partner Crispin Gray have continued to grow as musicians since their beginnings in Daisy Chainsaw. That evolution will be further consolidated by their forthcoming **Live At The ICA**, and on the evidence of this impressive album, it, like all things Queenadreena, should not be missed.

Sean Hudspeth

Janis Joplin

Pearl: Legacy Edition

Columbia/Legacy

★★★★★



This October marks the 35th anniversary of the day that Janis Joplin unintentionally took her own life in an LA motel room with a lethal heroin overdose. She was just 27 years old and on the cusp of what was shaping up to be the most rewarding time of her life. Since 1990, the Grammy-award winning Sony BMG subsidiary Legacy Recordings have been rewarding the patient with lovingly packaged and often essential “re-imaginings” of some of the most beloved albums ever recorded. In Joplin’s case, there is no doubt that **Pearl** (1971) is the jewel in a distressingly small discography, and this long-awaited full Legacy Edition adds no fewer than six bonus tracks to the original album plus an additional live disc of 13 songs recorded during 1970’s Canadian Festival Express Tour. While some of these have previously been available on either the 1999 single-disc reissue of **Pearl** or the 2001 3CD boxset **Janis**, many are newly unearthed.

After two mostly bewildering albums recorded with the psychedelic Big Brother & The Holding Company in which the sheer sonic intensity threatened to overwhelm even her powerhouse vocals, Joplin formed the Kozmic Blues Band for a successful but patchy album before disbanding them, taking Brad Campbell and John Till with her and gathering around her a more sympathetic ensemble in Full Tilt Boogie. The results were astoundingly raw, focusing on her gritty and revitalising vocals more than ever before. Everyone has their favourite tracks, and with stone-cold classics like *Me & Bobby McGee*, *A Woman Left Lonely*, *Move Over* and *Cry Baby* to choose from, it’s no mean feat to elevate a single cut above the others. Even the sadly overexposed *Mercedes Benz* still sounds fresh in its natural context, positively brimming with Joplin’s sense of humour.

Of the two instrumental tracks on the first disc, both are poignant reminders of our loss. The frantic keyboard wig out of *Buried*

Alive In The Blues only serves to remind that, had Joplin lived for just one more day, it would have been completed with vocals and all. The other, the gorgeous *Pearl* is available here for the first time and is a touching tribute to Janis from her band, titled in honour of the nickname given to Joplin by those closest to her. Other bonus tracks worth mentioning are the endearingly banter-laden acoustic demo of *Me & Bobby McGee* and a handclap happy version of *Move Over*.

The second disc collates recordings from three different live shows from the summer of 1970, including live versions of *Piece Of My Heart*, *Summertime*, *Try (Just A Little Bit Harder)* and more. Every song is a spirited affair and is further testament to her powerful and ingratiating onstage persona. Contrary certainly, but she used her insecurities to propel a live show like few have done since. In my favourite Janis anecdote, it is said that when warned her voice would not sustain such repeated hammering, Joplin retorted that she’d rather not be an inferior performer for the sole reason that she could be inferior for longer. It’s this dedication to her art for which she should be most praised. No mere blues belter, Janis Joplin was an intelligent and vivid woman with unparalleled grit and commitment. Given the timelessness of **Pearl** as a document of sheer vitality, it’s maddening to think what she could have accomplished if only she’d had more time.

Alan Pedder





Edith Frost

Calling Over Time

Drag City

★★★★

Telescopic

Drag City

★★★½

Wonder Wonder

Drag City

★★★★

Edith Frost is living, wonderful and irrefutable proof that even cowgirls really do get the blues. Her knack with a minor key and simple but never underspun stories is, or should be, the envy of many. Why she is not revered in wider circles remains a mystery – one that may well be favourably and deservedly solved when her long-awaited fourth album **It's A Game** is released later this year. As a generous precursor to this long anticipated arrival, Drag City have graciously reissued all three of her previous efforts to reacquaint us with their charge.

Signed to the label in 1994 after mailing in a copy of her demo alongside a fan letter to Drag City luminary Will Oldham (aka Bonnie 'Prince' Billy), Frost's first release was a self-titled EP fashioned out of those very same four-tracks. It was followed in 1997 by the album **Calling Over Time**, an unprepossessing gem of a record showcasing a voice not much unlike a Patsy Cline for the modern disaffected. In the wake of a painful divorce, Texan-born Frost, then aged 31, relocated to

Chicago from New York where she had been playing in a number of long-forgotten bands. Having befriended members of the Drag City stable and other Chicagoan icons of indie, including Gastr Del Sol, Rian Murphy, Eleventh Dream Day's Rick Rizzo and The High Llamas' Sean O'Hagan, the sessions for **Calling Over Time** certainly had no shortage of talent in the studio. That the results live and breathe as they do (albeit with a slight sense of spacey disconnectivity) is testament to the skilful pool of players. The lasting sense is one of reassuring melancholia; that is to say, her songs are rarely depressing – they're a little too detached and distant for such extremities – but somehow comforting in their minimalistic mulling over of fate's crueller twists. Standout tracks include the divorce bruiser *Temporary Loan*, the achingly pragmatic *Too Happy*, the heartbreaking *Wash Of Water* and the weary defeatism of *Albany Blues*.

Frost returned the following year with the even hazier but more meaty **Telescopic**. Opening with the fuzz-strewn lo-fi indie pop of *Walk On The Fire*, a dark and mournfully menacing song that early Liz Phair would have chewed an arm off for, the album signalled a clear progression from its sparser predecessor. Production duties were fulfilled by the curiously monikered Adam & Eve, better known as Neil Hagerty and Jennifer Herrema of Drag City signings Royal Trux. Other contributions came from the ever-present Rian Murphy and Tsunami's Amy Domingues.

Lyrically, **Telescopic** mostly offers more of the same soul-searching of her previous releases, with one notable exception. *You Belong To No One* is a cabaret revenge song, a sashaying "fuck you" that runs rings around her lonesome schtick and never fails to raise a smile. Musically, *Bluish Bells* is further confirmation of Frost's ear for an ingratiating mindtrick. Amid pleasingly retro jangly keyboard effects and an inobtrusive fuzz gui-

tar motif lies a melody that's lifted from an old Willie Nelson song played backwards. The gorgeous ballad, *Tender Kiss*, is similarly impressive, mixing violin, flute and a subtle complex programmed drum pattern with some of her finest vocal harmonies.

As mirrored by the simplicity of its quietly dramatic and organic sleeve, **Wonder Wonder** signified a step away from **Telescopic's** thicker fog of indie aspirations. That's not to say that Frost had returned to her humbler origins – **Wonder Wonder** is a much more ambitious and focused record than her previous work, once again featuring Rian Murphy on production and a dozen other players, not to mention Steve Albini as sound engineer. Many of the songs have the feel of a twisted orchestra, but the central stylistic touchstone is subdued and thoughtful country. Songs like the snappy title track and the immensely hummable *Cars & Parties* (surely her great lost single) sit comfortably alongside trickier material. *The Fear* is reminiscent of an eerie midnight walk through a haunted fairground, while *True* is the very definition of desolate. She also gifts us what is surely a country standard in waiting with *Honey Please*. I wouldn't be surprised to hear Emmylou Harris cover it at some point in the future. Closing with *You're Decided*, a break up song laced with despair and regret, the listener is left with little doubt that Edith Frost's ability to convey any emotion precisely and without lyrical excess is a wonder in itself.

Like Even Cowgirls Get The Blues' feet-finding heroine Cissy, Edith Frost has hitched a ride with many a kind friend, travelling with them through a myriad of musical landscapes. Ultimately though, she has been at the helm of her own evolution and these timely reissues should plenty whet the appetites of fans of Lisa Germano, Cat Power, Barbara Manning, and, of course, Will Oldham before the next instalment comes along. **Alan Pedder**

Kirsty MacColl

From Croydon To
Cuba: An Anthology

EMI

★★★★



It's safe to say that listening to this 3CD retrospective compilation of Kirsty MacColl's work was always going to be a bittersweet experience. Five years on from her premature death in a speed-boating accident in Mexico at the age of 41, it seems she is still recognised more for her duet with The Pogues on the festive staple *Fairytale Of New York* than for her own well-observed pop songs about chip shop romances and cowardly lotharios.

This fairly exhaustive collection sets about trying to rectify that sorry situation, serving up 65 songs worth of concrete proof to fans and non-fans alike that MacColl's way with a tune was of a quality at least the equal of her more successful peers (from Eddi Reader and Alison Moyet to Morrissey and Johnny Marr via Van Morrison and Billy Bragg,

all of whom have expressed an immense love and respect for her music and her inimitable spirit.

MacColl's songs primarily dealt in the currency of romantic love, but always from the perspective of a woman under no illusions. As everything here is chronologically sequenced, **From Croydon To Cuba** goes some way to reconciling the wide-eyed girlish warbler on her 1979 debut single, *They Don't Know*, with the older and wiser family woman of later years. And it doesn't take long for her talent to shine. Her 1984 cover of Billy Bragg's superb *A New England* stands out for its bracing honesty and freshness, but it's the reassuring tone of that single's original B-side, *Patrick*, a lovely little ditty about a young Cork-born fella finding his feet in London, that tugs insistently at your heartstrings.

The country swagger of *Don't Come The Cowboy With Me Sonny Jim!* is executed in typical MacCollian fashion, mixing laugh out loud lyrical flair with a serious undertow, always ready to fall in love but never really expecting it to work. The second disc is notable for the single *Free World* and her version of The Kinks' *Days*, both lifted from her Steve Lillywhite-produced 1989 album, **Kite**. But it's the captivatingly sad *Dear John*, co-written with Mark Nevin from Fairground Attraction, that really encapsulates MacColl's unique gift for effortlessly balancing the personal with the universal without a trace of cloying sentimentality.

While Kirsty MacColl never commanded the kind of commercial respect that her music deserved, her fiercely loyal fans have always maintained that her songwriting never wavered in its splendidly literate qualities, flinching not at the Latin American rhythms that flavoured her later songs and critically-acclaimed final album, **Tropical Brainstorm** (2000).

From Croydon To Cuba is a magnificent and towering tribute to one of the warmest, funniest and most skilful songwriters these isles have produced in the past twenty years. For those who prefer to digest an album in just one sitting, a slenderer single-disc collection, **The Best Of Kirsty MacColl**, is also available, but for those with any more than a passing interest should indulge themselves with this.

Jane Gillow



Tagaq

Sinaa

MapleMusic

★★★★½



The traditional Inuit practice of throat singing, a form of vocalisation that uses the timbres of the windpipe to create unusual rhythmic sounds, is often considered to be a whimsical pastime by those who indulge. Not so for Tanya Tagaq Gillis, born in the Nunavut province of Canada, whose unique abilities have been championed by the likes of the Kronos Quartet and Björk. While a typical throat singing setup would involve two women standing face-to-face, close enough to feel one another's vibrations and singing rhythms in a kind of round, Tagaq was forced to develop unprecedented methods of emulating these rhythms as a soloist after moving away from Nunavut to study in Nova Scotia. With no partner to practice with, she would spend hours attempting to cure homesickness by copying the throat singing audio tapes her mother would send from home. While traditional practice dictates that throat singing should be completely emotionless, Tagaq's modified rounds were propelled by instinct and feeling. Her unique style subsequently heralded her arrival on the ex-

perimental music scene before being thrust out of obscurity when, in 2001, a keen-eared Björk proclaimed her to be "the Edith Piaf of throat singing."

By personal invitation, Tagaq then accompanied Björk, experimental duo Matmos and harpist Zeena Parkins on a number of dates for the Icelandic singer's 2001 **Vespertine** world tour. They collaborated again in 2004 where Tagaq played a pivotal role on **Medúlla**. These triumphs have led to her debut solo album, **Sinaa**, an Inuktituk word that translates to "edge". It's almost certainly unlike anything you will have ever heard before, displaying Tagaq's art in all its glory, range and intricacy. Few instruments appear on the album, the most commonly used being the txalaparta, a percussive instrument that often sounds like wooden wind chimes and has little musical structure. Indeed, most of the rhythms are created by Tagaq herself and sometimes seem inhuman. Recalling by turns a wide range of sighs, growls, clicks, yelps, whispers and yells, it's harsh and guttural, and parts won't even sound like music to the casual

listener. But it's also interesting and incredibly atmospheric. Much like Björk did on **Medúlla**, Tagaq recognises that instinct and emotion are the most powerful driving forces in all of us, and she tries to explore the places inside us where these concepts reside. On *Still*, the only song in English, the lyrical theme is the inner workings of the human body. Elsewhere, *Qimiruluqpiq* is a traditional throat song in which Tagaq performs the parts of both participants, sounding like a factory floor production line with her rhythmic growling and buzzing.

The album centres around *Ancestors*, an atmospheric duet with Björk that also appeared on **Medúlla**. As Tagaq's vocals undulate and pulse, the raw emotion invested is clear. It's a magical combination. Although Tagaq also attempts regular singing on three tracks, displaying a warm voice admirably soft and deep, the closest she gets to a pop song is on *Breather*, one of the only songs to feature noticeable programming. It's an unexpected and glorious finale in which her vocals and the chimes of the txalaparta are cut up into a rhythmic but organic dance tune. A hidden track at the end seems to consist of her baby daughter Naia, to whom the album is dedicated, crying softly in the background.

Overall, while **Sinaa** conjures up feelings of longing and dreams of other lands, it never quite stirs the want to leave your home. In that respect, for something so daring and original, it's a safe, introverted way of exploring the broadness of human capacity for emotion and imagination. In a traditional game of throat singing, the loser is she who breaks the rhythms through either tiredness or laughter. As with all no frills declarations of honesty and humanity, there will be sceptics who tire easily of such unembellished purity, there may even be some who laugh, but those who enjoyed **Medúlla** or have a wider interest in the voice as the ultimate instrument will find something to admire here.

Bryn Williams



Lauren Hoffman

Choreography

Ardent Music

★★★

When an artist announces that they are quitting the music business, it's often wise to take a pinch of salt and throw it disbelievingly over all of their records. In reality, few stay gone for long. In Lauren Hoffman's case, it has been a fairly respectable five years since her sparse and sensual sophomore album, **From The Blue House**, was released independently in the UK.

After dropping out of a university degree in the autumn of 2002, a spontaneous trip to India set the wheels in motion for the follow-up, via a stint in her hometown rock band, The Lilas. Certainly, many of the songs here have been thoroughly road-tested in one form or another over the last two years, including the waltzing *Out Of The Sky*, *Into The Sea*, which was formerly the title track of The Lilas's sole EP.

It's no surprise then that the album has a slightly worn in feel. That's not to say it's all been done before, but Hoffman seems to have cultivated a middle ground between **From The Blue House** and her exceptional 1997 debut, **Megiddo**, and so **Choreography** perhaps lacks the element of surprise that both those records possessed.

Broken makes for a promising start; a seductive, moody undercurrent propels Hoffmann's perfectly ice cool vocal along a shimmering hummable melody. Equally suggestive is the largely acoustic, slow-burning ballad *As The Stars*, though it is warmer in tone and boasts a lovely piano part in the bridge. Although some of the rockier numbers such as

Crush and *Hiding In Plain Sight* lack the necessary bite to really impress, *Solipsist* benefits from a more aggressive feel and is the first of a four-song suite that shores up the record's second half. *Another Song About The Darkness* is an ideal showcase for Hoffman's most lucid yet languorous vocal, which escalates as the song progresses towards its palpably melancholic conclusion.

Though **Choreography** has neither the freshness of **Megiddo** nor the cohesiveness of **From The Blue House**, many favourable constants remain – Hoffman's tantalising vocals and salient attitude are stamped all over the record. Not a great leap forward then, but a diagonal sidestep it might well be worth you taking alongside her. **Alan Pedder**



Lori Carson

The Finest Thing

Meta

★★★

For all the emphasis we place on the lyrical, it's sometimes a simple la la la that can grip you like a tendril. Take Kylie Minogue's *Can't Get You Out Of My Head* for example, where the nagging vocalisations do exactly what it says on the tin, for hours.

Fear not though, reclusive indie chanteuse Lori Carson won't be sashaying half-naked across your TV screens any time soon. If anything, her first album of new material since **House In The Weeds** (2001) sees her picking up the baton from ex-Dead Can Dancer, Lisa Gerrard, and flirting with the ethereal.

These seven songs plus one reprise constitute something of a concept album, though not an overt one. In this subtle series,

life itself is the concept with all its accompanying dreamscapes and sadness. Carson herself refers to them as "meditations" rather than songs and she has a point – much like meditation, this album takes patience but in return bequeaths a degree of serenity. However, with five of the tracks overrunning the seven-minute mark and many containing prolonged passages of monosyllabic, light as air whisperings, you might want to have a good book handy.

Only *The Finest Thing* and *Hold On To The Sun* approach the confessional singer-songwriterly melodiousness that has been Carson's stock in trade. Both are delicate wisps of songs anchored by acoustic guitar. The title track is a swooning, aching realisation of how rare and fleeting are moments of sheer contentment. Similarly, *Hold On To The Sun* is a more grounded expansion of the same theme – the spiritual salve of hope.

The standout piece, *Glimmer*, wraps her vulnerable soft vocals around very sparse, almost skeletal instrumentation. Tellingly, it's the one long track that doesn't feel like it and you wish it could go on. Elsewhere, there's a certain compelling sweetness to *Coney Island Ride*. While it doesn't quite conjure all the fun of the fair, Carson successfully regresses the listener to their first rollercoaster ride, only this one arcs through clouds and there's no rib-crushing safety bar. You're free to float in the slipstream should you so desire.

Sadly, none of these songs survive intact when listened to out of the context of the album, and it's this insular quality that is both the record's most precious and most limiting factor. While **The Finest Thing** is a sonically adventurous and welcome diversion for Lori Carson, it is not without its tedium. By virtue of patience, however, the filmic beauty of it all is something that's easy to treasure.

Alan Pedder



Ember Swift

Disarming

Few'll Ignite Sound

★★★★

The dark heavy boot and brightly striped sock featured on the sleeve offer only a suggestive shade of the intensely gritty grass roots, independent musical and energetic thrust of Ontario native Ember Swift and her band. On this, her eighth release since 1996, the trio proudly parade their musical dexterity. Charging through a musical *mélange* of jazz, punk, feisty blues, folk-rock, pop and Middle Eastern tunes, they carefully weave together rich acoustic guitar with layers of bass, drums, electric violin and harmonies. Some may sense a little too much activity on a musical level, leaving a wake of disjointed tracks in its ambitious path. However, do not be turned off by how different Ember sounds. Beyond the unusual mish-mash of songs and wandering vocal style lies a lyrical truth, a beautiful voice and forceful maverick passion. Released on her own indie label, **Disarming** leaves the listener in no doubt that Swift is freely and happily “independent by identity not by default.”

Opening with *Tapped & Wired*, Ember swiftly welcomes and energetically lures the listener into her consciously aware and politically active world. A poignant commentary, the song champions the enlightenment of the masses, unreservedly noting the dodgy dealings and twisted priorities of politicians. It is a positively intelligent kick-start to a unique musical journey, treading a path through political and personal ideology. You'll want to join in. You'll want to believe in these tunes with their soaring jazz vocals and sweetly soft sounds.

Other highlights include the title track and *FAQ*, which Ember describes as “a reggae-driven pop quiz”. It's the perfect Q&A session song to get to know the girl behind the music.

To dismiss **Disarming** as disjointed and lacking concept would be a rash decision and one that misses the purpose of her songwriting as truthful expression and storytelling. It is immediate, uncalculated on a corporate level, full of passion and revels in revealing her truth. As the title track accentuates, “I think it's sad if you find me alarmingly disarming, and I look for those who align, and who find the honesty charming.”

When *Breath* draws to a close and the album stops spinning, the listener may reflectively appreciate the slightly funkier feel to this release compared with previous discs, and if time allows, they may also reach over and press repeat to absorb more of the plentiful lyrics and audacious grooves. Swift will have made them smile in musical bliss for long enough to open their mouth and poured in little truths of the world outside their headphones. **Helen Griffiths**



Hilary Duff

Most Wanted

Hollywood

★★★★½

In the sometimes scary land of teen pop there is a boxing ring, with Hilary Duff in the red corner and Lindsay Lohan in the blue. Whilst not quite delivering a knock-out punch with this release, Hilary at least shows that she has the edge and will stay standing for quite a few more rounds. The cliché of the difficult third album is not easy to apply to **Most Wanted**, as it more closely resembles a greatest hits

with a few new tracks thrown in. Coming in an attractive two-piece case, the Collector's Signature Edition contains 17 slices of Duffness, of which just four are new. The remainder are remixes of songs from previous albums, although a collaboration with sister Haylie on The Go-Go's classic *Our Lips Are Sealed* is carried off with dignity, showing that it is possible to cover a well-known song without leaving the original artists turning in their graves (or, in this case, mansions).

Hilary's move into more soulful and lyrically complete tunes in her second album is less apparent in this latest offering, which walks the line between rock and pop. US radio programmers have swooped upon first single *Wake Up*, which flaunts a killer hook and is one of her best to date. However, the standout track is the super slick *Break My Heart*, which borders on a Blink 182-esque anthem pitched around a superb middle eight. This comes as no real surprise, as song was co-written with the Madden Brothers from pop/punk band Good Charlotte and John Feldmann from Goldfinger. Club DJ Chris Cox does a good job of turning the previously likeable *Come Clean* into an irresistible floor-shaking house mix, building up from the simple melody of the original with big beats and delivering the goods.

Perhaps more than simply a greatest hits, this album is a showcase of some of the more unique songs from her repertoire, such as the raucous *Mr James Dean*, from 2003's self-titled second album. Duff certainly has a unique voice, clearly identifiable amongst the often faceless pop crowd. *So Yesterday*, the signature track from her debut, **Metamorphosis** (2002), makes a welcome return. Although perhaps more polished than even the crown jewels, it's pure pop perfection. The standard edition of the album, running at a more bite-sized thirteen songs is an attractive option for Duff's doubting thomases or newcomers to her music. **Simon Wilson**





Björk

Medúlla Videos

One Little Indian/Wellhart



Though already widely regarded as a fearless musical innovator, Björk's 2004 album **Medúlla** was a chance for the artist to indulge and experiment further than most other 'mainstream' acts would dare. From the album's title inwards (**Medúlla** is Latin for 'marrow'), Björk was playing on two familiar and favourite themes in her work – nature (specifically of the super kind) and the human voice. Within its inner sanctum, sounds were simply pieces in an ambitious sonic game. As well as Björk's unearthly singing, we heard breathing, grunting, groaning, snoring, yawning, whispering, whining, and hyperventilation.

But **Medúlla** is more than that; Björk is depicting not just the diversity of the voice, but the body as a whole being, organ and spirit. A possible explanation for this preoccupation with the physical lies in her relationship with art provocateur Matthew Barney. Barney himself has had a life-long heightened awareness of the body, previously working as a medic, model, athlete and physical performance artist in his video art works. Another major influence was Björk's pregnancy with their daughter, Isadora, during which she says she became "really aware of my muscles and bones."

Although written at the same time, Björk refers to *Who Is It* as being "from a different family" to the songs found on her previous album, **Vespertine** (2001), which she describes as "introvert and shy and not very physical a record." Featuring the extraordinary and 'untreated' vocals of human beat-box Rahzel of The Roots, the song creates a bridge running deep into the

truly physical being of **Medúlla**. Video director Dawn Shadforth's treatment places the singer in the surreal and awesome landscape of the barren black sands beneath Hjørleifshöfði, a hill on the southern Icelandic coast. We see her peering out of an eccentric Alexander McQueen dress, tubular and with a wide trunk neck covered in tiny silver bells, weighing in at a hefty 50 kilos. In this simple and sonically separate place, Björk responds directly to the conceptual dress. Appearing animated, she plucks and flicks at her percussive garment. She beats herself voluminously across the dark wide landscape, finally collapsing as if her clockwork cogs have turned to a stop at the final toll of the bell choir. This is Björk literally using her body as an instrument. This is but one of her many video selves. Björk self-characterizes and uncompromisingly allows video directors to characterize her. She's been a polar bear, a robot twin, a ghost in the machine and more.

In *Oceania*, Björk sings as Mother Ocean, giving voice to the sea itself in what seems to be an ancient poem on the evolution of man. The Lynn Fox Collective's visual depiction of this humbling tribute shows us the ocean's dark, mysterious glamour. It is graceful, and in places divine. From the black depths, Björk glides into view, spinning and smouldering in silky threads. She wears a perfectly formed facemask of precious-esque diamond gems as gorgeous close-ups cast out the deep aquatic whispers of her song; however, the film does not seem to do justice to Björk's imaginative role, failing to depict the power and eloquence of her as a physical embodiment of her chosen oceanic deity. This sentiment was better realised at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, where she commanded the huge opening ceremony wearing a gigantic sea of blue that billowed and opened out toward the crowd.

The Lynn Fox Collective is known for their generous and impressive use of computer-generated imagery and here is no exception. The video depicts a

sea-seed's underwater germination and the upward growth of its stalk from the watery black to the orange glowing air above. We see nature bursting from the water through the air in a sumptuously choreographed display, providing a fitting metaphor for the song's salute to the story of man as child and ocean as his origin. Although breathtaking and integral, the Collective's use of CGI seems unreal and lacking the tangible fleshy life of the sea. It seems almost too perfect, yet still gives its depiction of nature a satisfying effect of organized chaos and natural choreography. Throughout the film, jellyfish "dance gracefully, billowing like ballroom dresses" and give graceful and endearing form to the backing of The London Choir.

The Collective has worked with Björk numerous times in the past, and are also responsible for the video for *Desired Constellation*, a visual and quite literal representation of Björk's lyrical conceit of someone's hands shaking up the stars. Although aesthetically similar, this film is subtler and, quite refreshingly, does not feature Björk.

In *Where Is The Line*, we are ushered into a hay-strewn barn where Björk plays a bounding and bulbous straw-sack cartoon chicken. Wobbling around her warm nest, she raises her beanbag body to give birth to a shivering white-skinned, yellow-eyed alien that on exit from her cheesecloth skirt vomits chunky womb fluid and gasps at the dusty air, accentuating the song's accelerating shrieks and drones. Straw heaps explode and smoke in time to warping warhead pulses, until the white baby retreats and the straw walls take shape to close in on our delirious anti-diva farmyard queen.

Although it's huge fun, at worst the video seems inarticulate and am-dram. But still, it serves as a suitably surreal representation of its manic and sonically sporadic inspiration. More than anything, this video is a small weird window into the mind of director and visual artist Gabriella Fridriksdottir



photo by Ohashi Jim

who previously provided artwork for Björk's 2002 **Greatest Hits** and **Family Tree** compilations. This outlandish promo is an example of the singer's generous ability to give the artists she works with a chance to express their own vision without compromise. That Fridriksdóttir truthfully represents Björk's preoccupation with the body, visceral and maternal, as well as the playful and surreal, is testament that their collaborative relationship was genuine and true to form.

While each of these videos is interestingly unorthodox, they have a mutual concern with the body as instrument or vessel. Although *Triumph Of A Heart* has a similar theme, extolling on the heart as "the king of the body", the promo proves much simpler. Though the vivid imagery of the concept seems a fascinating subject for a pop song and its accompanying music video, director Spike Jonze unfortunately explores little of that potential; however, this video is a genuinely cute and comical story, with occasional fun effects and wry fly on the wall footage. It poses as an everyday tale of a woman and her commitment phobic lover, played by a tabby cat named Nietzsche. After escaping

from this slapstick rom-com beginning, Björk gets roaringly inebriated before returning home to her cat-man bruised and disgruntled, but ready to reconcile and dance a feline sphinx-trot in the film's finale.

If one were to take Björk too seriously, she could seem self-indulgent, incoherent and perhaps downright daft. But I believe she is a dedicated and serious artist. As with her music, if you care to probe deeper into the products of her art and the various influences that have been unified within, you begin to realise that what she creates, both singularly and collaboratively, is part of a big, fast, bright and brilliant way of life.

The same is true of Jonze's video, as proved in a spoof "making of" documentary by Ragnheidur Gestsdóttir. In this, we are constantly unaware of what is serious and what is not. Tales are told of personal connections with Björk and the video's location and props. We hear of the video's quirky fairytale inspiration and scores of local Icelanders audition to be involved.

Where the other videos in this diverse collection portray Björk as an array of otherworldly characters, allowing her to manifest in herself a vision of fascinating su-

pernatural illogic, Jonze's video illuminates the humour of both parties, and reminds us that she is, after all, only human. After the rich and sometimes disturbing visual textures of what has gone before, Jonze brings the viewer home to Iceland, intimately including us in a jolly drunken art-bar party scene with Björk in the middle of the action.

Ultimately, whatever else it is also concerned with, this video helps us to realise the album as a whole. It is physical and personal, but also uniquely political. It was, she says, a way to counter "stupid American racism and patriotism" after 9/11. "I was saying, 'What about the human soul? What happened before we got involved in problematic things like civilization and religion and nationality?'"

In the wake of recent natural disasters, these questions loom ever more importantly. All issues aside, however, these videos are simply a dream to watch. That the DVD closes with the spoof documentary is a warm waking into a party of all of **Medúlla's** colourful collaborators, of Björk's dreams and of Iceland itself. A party where everyone can be as wild and wonderful as they like and all are invited.

JJ Stevens



photo by Stefano Giovannini

As anyone who has endured the wretched soulwreck that is seemingly every other Cat Power live date will tell you, to witness Chan Marshall's shambolic disassembly of self on stage is to feel like you are spying on a very private decline. It's intensely uncomfortable and you wonder how soon the whitecoats will come and lift the shuddering, incoherent thirtysomething from her lonely little stool. Not that she is incapable of performing so publicly – her 2003 set at Islington's Union Chapel was by all accounts mesmeric. Thus, providing she was having a good day, a live DVD seemed an ideal compromise, yet **Speaking For Trees** manages to be as maddening and restless as Marshall is in the flesh.

Set in a noisy, chattering woodland clearing and filmed in an interminably dull single shot, supposedly in homage to the probably equally excruciating art films by Andy Warhol et al., the 100-minute long main feature could, much like Vagon poetry, extract a confession from even the most hardline criminal. Either that or put them to sleep. Shot on digital video rather than film, a barely distinguishable Chan Marshall stands at least

fifteen feet away from the camera for the entire feature, her face either blurry or hidden behind her trademark hair.

At first this seems like a wonderfully apt way in which to capture the reluctant indie heroine, alone with her guitar in the woods. Then, as she strums and mumbles her way through nearly thirty songs, several of which are simply alternate takes of the same tunes – *Night Time/Back Of Your Head*, *From Fur City* and *Knockin' On Heaven's Door* appear no less than three times each – the gritting of teeth inevitably sets in. In fact, the greatest variation for our viewing pleasure is when the filmmaker Mark Borthwick overexposes the image and gives a moment's white respite.

There are nine covers in all, the best of which is Marshall's version of M. Ward's *Sad, Sad Song* which appears a generous twice. When not drowned out by crickets rubbing their legs or birds singing as though their lives depended upon it, Chan's voice is as exultantly morose and beautiful as ever, particularly on some of her more recent songs such as *Evolution* and *I Don't Blame You* from the album **You Are Free** (2003).

Fortunately, it's not all a big letdown as Marshall also includes a CD with the package containing a single 18-minute epic, *Willie Deadwilder*, which features the aforementioned M. Ward on guitar. Giving anything as conventional as a chorus or bridge the widest of berths, she weaves a charming rambling tale based around a rather naïve melody and easily gets away with it. It's an indulgence for sure, but anyone who enjoyed **You Are Free** will find moments of transcendence in the song which was taken from the same sessions.

Sadly, this is perhaps as close to a coherent Chan Marshall live performance as most are ever likely to witness. Those lucky enough to see her sing sans meltdown will continue to regale us with stories of how amazing she can be and we who miss it will continue to believe in this elusive confident character. Of course, there will be those who say that appreciating music shouldn't be this hard and they'll certainly have a valid point. Whatever your slant on the matter, the music industry would be a lot worse off without mercurial icons like Chan and this blip just comes with the territory. **Alan Pedder**

Aimee Mann

Live At St. Ann's Warehouse

SuperEgo

★★★★



As a self-confessed “classic, nit-picky Virgo”, it’s hard to imagine Aimee Mann ever sitting down to watch this resolutely no frills live document of last summer’s three-night residency at Brooklyn’s St. Ann’s Warehouse. Not that it’s in any way bad, it’s just that she seemed so acutely disengaged from the experience the first time, not necessarily vocally (although her normally warm and reedy vocals are a little thin), but in an emotional sense.

Maybe it’s just my Britishness showing, but witnessing Mann’s pained and stilted stage ban-

ter even made my own cheeks flush. With her delivery so wry, it’s difficult to distinguish between deadpan and robotic. She’s hilarious when she claims she could “take Dylan” in a boxing match and at other times inadvertently, but her many “I fucking love you guys” seem as genuine as, say, a Florida election. But perhaps I’m being unkind. After all, Mann is not known for her enjoyment of touring, and although her self-effacing humour doesn’t quite translate from the interview setting to the live environment, she thaws a little towards the end.

One of the most consistently essential artists of the last decade or so, Mann could never be accused of style over substance and this 16-track DVD is a testament to her talent, spanning all of her full-lengths plus the career revitalising soundtrack to Paul Thomas Anderson’s 1999 film *Magnolia*. Not only that, but Mann treats us to a preview of two songs from **The Forgotten Arm** (2005). Or at least it would have been a preview if we in the UK hadn’t had to wait six months from the US release date for the set to officially reach our shores. Inexplicably released a week after **The Forgotten Arm**, Mann thus seems even more out of the loop when referring to the album under its working title, *King Of The Jailhouse*.

So what of the music? There’s an air of perfunctoriness surrounding the whole affair, with little or no attempt to distinguish the songs from their studio counterparts. That said, both Mann and her fellow guitarist Julian Coryell pull off some fantastic musicianship on the excellent *Pavlov’s Bell*, *Long Shot* and *Deathly*. Best of all though is *Wise Up* from the **Magnolia** soundtrack, representing as it does the mournful pivotal moment of the film.

Having heard **The Forgotten Arm**, it’s safe to say that the live takes of *Going Through The Motions* and *King Of The Jailhouse* add little of merit to the studio versions, although it’s nice to see Aimee at the piano on the latter.

As is customary for these releases, four of the songs on the DVD are excised from the accompanying CD, although in a break with the norm, the CD features a bonus but rather inessential performance of *That’s Just What You Are* not on the DVD.

Although Aimee and the band have a decent enough stab at the backstage interviews, anyone looking for real insight into the band dynamic will most likely be disappointed. All in all, this is pretty standard fare from a stellar artist. Still, it’s a pity we had to wait so long for it. **Alan Pedder**



Natalie Merchant

VH1 Storytellers

Rhino Home Video



Since its inception in February 1996, VH1's Storytellers format has given us insight into the inspirations behind the songs of some of the most enigmatic and elliptical performers of our time, including Tori Amos, REM, Tom Waits and David Bowie. More often than not, however, it was the refuge of tired and crashing MOR bores mounting their nth attempted comeback. The show was also symptomatic of US programmers' attitudes to female artists; even though its most successful years coincided with the Lilith Fair phenomenon, less than a quarter of its 56 episodes featured women performers. Tellingly, the only such act to appear following the demise of Lilith in 1999 was Gwen Stefani's No Doubt. After a series of mostly inessential performances by the likes of Billy Idol, Bon Jovi, Matchbox Twenty and Train, among others, the chapter finally closed on Storytellers in June 2002.

It could easily be argued that Natalie Merchant's place in the Storytellers canon would have been warranted regardless of the Lilith influence. A performer since

the age of 17 in US college rock band 10,000 Maniacs, she had well over a decade of experience, and presumably stories, behind her. This performance, recorded the same year as she released her second and arguably best solo album, **Ophelia** (1998), is a resolutely no frills affair – there's no elaborate set design and Merchant herself is understatedly dressed for the occasion. Her instantly recognisable warm and reedy vocals, however, rise easily to the challenge as she tackles these eight songs of sadness, gratitude, stoicism and wonderment spanning her extensive back catalogue.

Given that so many of her songs are self-contained observational narratives that hardly lend themselves to in-depth analysis, it's a little worrying when Merchant seeks to reassure the audience "I didn't have to tell you anything deep and dark and scary about myself" after the opener *These Are Days*, which we're informed is simply about the springtime. Fortunately, her romantic and humanitarian interests rescue some of the other commentaries from

the precipice of blandness. In another's hands, her explanation of how an abused child inspired her to write *What's The Matter Here?* may have seemed trite but her plainly visible emotional involvement is touching.

Special guest N'Dea Davenport adds a welcome change of pace for the blue collar worker anthem *Break Your Heart*. Of the bonus tracks, *Life Is Sweet* (presumably not included on the original broadcast because of a minor sweat problem) is given a new lease of life by Merchant's explanation that her objective was to reclaim the cliché and thereby allows the viewer to listen with renewed perspective.

Though the DVD is only brief at 43 minutes, as a precursor to Rhino's forthcoming Natalie Merchant retrospective hits album, it serves as an adequate reminder of her talents. In the absence of any new material to follow-up 2003's **The House Carpenter's Daughter** and the scarcity of high-quality recordings of Merchant's live show, fans will be satisfied with this solid, if unspectacular, addition to her discography. **Alan Pedder**

Tori Amos & Ann Powers

Piece By Piece
Plexus Publishing

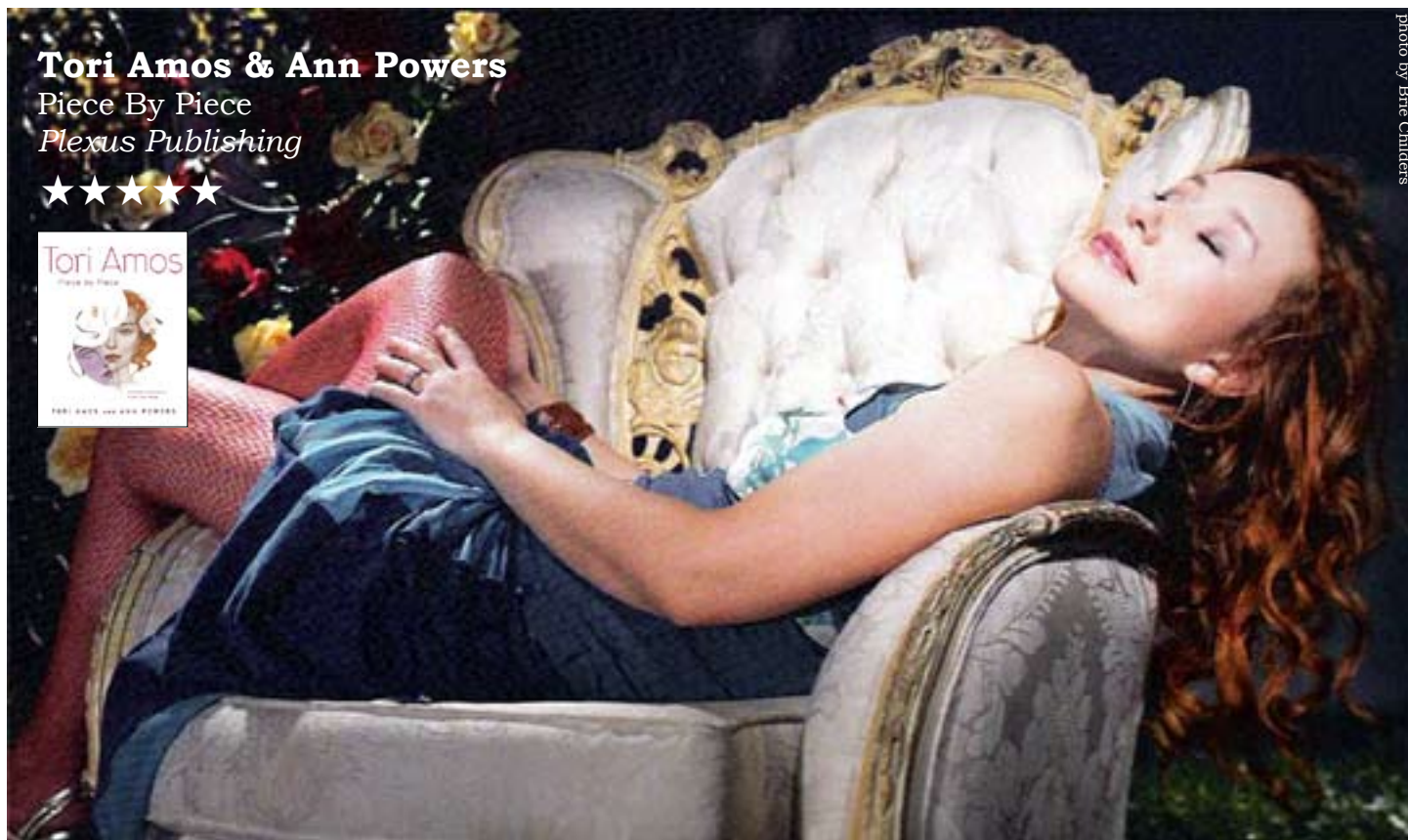


photo by Brie Childers

Released in the US just prior to her eighth studio album, **The Beekeeper** (2005), this fascinatingly unconventional semi-autobiography did what few Tori Amos releases since **Under The Pink** (1994) have been able – it failed to split the critics. It even made the New York Times Bestseller List. Having finally found a publisher in the UK, where her fanbase is slenderer yet unremittingly fervent, *Piece By Piece* at last hits the bookshelves in June in support of the European leg of her Original Sinsuality Tour.

Regardless of whether you have an appreciation for Tori Amos the performer, Tori Amos as author brings to the fore her enviable intelligence, quick wit and literate, piercing insight and as such commands respect even from those who would give it begrudgingly. Co-written with renowned New York music journalist Ann Powers this is no mere memoir, for Amos has always had a keen eye for a concept – her last few albums have come with buckets of convolutions. With a nonlinear narrative to match the most ambitious writers of fiction, Amos and Powers construct

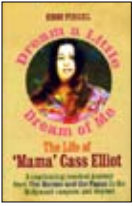
a verbal collage of various conversations (including contributions from Amos' husband, friends, touring bandmates, chef and security guard among others) that are woven through eight hefty chapters.

Each chapter is overseen by an archetype of mythological or religious legend, including Amos' constant inspiration and "erotic muse", Mary Magdelene. Amos has been trying to reunite the spiritual and the sexual aspects of womanhood since her debut album **Little Earthquakes** (1992) tore down gender barriers and kicked open the floodgates for similarly confessional songwriting. Years before *The DaVinci Code* popularised the gnostic gospel of Mary Magdelene, Amos has given voice to the much maligned biblical figure, but never more so than in *Marys Of The Sea*, one of the standout songs from **The Beekeeper**. This song and many others are discussed and abstracted upon in 'song canvasses' scattered throughout the book.

The motherhood chapter (overseen by Demeter, the Greek goddess of harvest and fertility), which tells of Amos' long battle to successfully

carry a child that finally ended in 2000 with the birth of her daughter Natashya Lorién, is guaranteed to hit a nerve. Her disarmingly frank account of each of her three miscarriages is both harrowing and brave. Equally engaging is her tale of how these health problems contributed to the souring of her relationship with Atlantic Records. That, and a brazen publicity scam on their part, were the final straw for Amos who told them where to stick it. Unfortunately, she still had three albums to turn in to fulfil the terms of her contract, albums which Atlantic were determined not to promote in order to effectively ruin her career, an effort in which they clearly failed.

The interplay between Amos and Powers helps to keep the notoriously wordy songwriter on track, although some passages are a little hard going. If you can forgive Amos her small indulgences, there is much to be enjoyed here, even for those with just a passing interest. It is an utterly unprecedented opportunity to look so far into the mind of one of the most enigmatic artists of our time. **Alan Pedder**



Eddi Fiegel

*Dream A Little Dream
Of Me: The Life Of
'Mama' Cass Elliot*
Sidgwick & Jackson



Contrary to popular belief, body fascism did not begin with the birth of *heat. magazine* in 1999. Nor did it spring from the bowels of inventor Logie Baird when his 'Televisor' colonised with alarming speed much of the human race. Even if the fig leaf didn't quite make Eve's behind look big in it, the point is that people, and especially women, of a larger size have always had it hard. That's not to say that television (and to some extent, *heat. magazine*) never had or no longer has an impact. Since its arrival in the late 1950s, the medium has majorly compounded the fears and insecurities of generations of women. Indeed, while the flower power epoch surely swung, there is also room to reflect on a lesser-known angle – the Slimming Sixties.

The explosion of teen girl pop singers that ushered in the decade put the focus of many promoters firmly on their protégées' sex appeal. The Shirelles, The Crystals, The Ronettes and their like were all youthful, fresh and distinctly uncurvy. Although dieting was already rife among female performers – Dinah Washington, for example, was a diet pill addict – the added pressure of TV appearances and the dreaded extra projected pounds was immense. Then, as now, a bit of extra baggage could send a career down the dumper. Florence Ballard of The Supremes was one such example, allegedly sacked from the band in 1967 for being overweight, among other things. Nine years later, depressed, lone-

ly and drunk, she died at just 32 years of age.

Ellen Naomi Cohen, better known as "Mama" Cass Elliot also died aged 32. Not as has been so ignobly rumoured by choking on a ham sandwich, but from massive coronary heart failure as she slept, having earlier completed the final show in a wildly successful run of solo performances at the London Palladium. As this tender account of her life reveals, the dichotomy between Cass' charismatic outward personality and her internal struggle with her own self-image was evident from a young age. Born in Baltimore during World War II and talking by the age of two, as a teenager, Cass was as intelligent and politically-aware as many of the adults who surrounded her. Being fat by the age of seven had done nothing to endear her to those her own age and their rejection haunted Cass right to her grave, despite all that she went on to achieve. From her initial faltering efforts to become "the famous fat girl" she so desired to her audacious attempts to break into the group that would become The Mamas & The Papas, Eddi Fiegel carefully picks apart Cass' famed ambition from her genuine need to be loved. Fiegel's fondness for her subject, while clearly apparent in every tale, is admirably never allowed to cloud or bias the story. Written over nearly four years and based on more than 100 interviews, what we get here is a mostly sympathetic but balanced account of a well-loved and unique individual.

Where the book becomes unmissable is in Fiegel's account of the final days of The Mamas & The Papas. As adultery and unrequited love tore them apart before they had even recorded their second album, Elliot's long struggle to extricate herself from the sorry mess without losing all she had worked for is all too vivid. The band finally folded in October 1967. Elliot's first solo album, **Dream A Little Dream Of Me**, followed a year later, and a second, **Bubblegum**,

Lemonade & Something For Mama in 1969. By then, despite having a young daughter (Owen Vanessa Elliot was born in April 1969 and contributes to the book in places), Cass had a significant drug habit and went through a number of damaging relationships with assorted lotharios and down-right spongers. Even at the time of her death, she was engaged in a one-sided relationship with shady promoter George Caldwell who mysteriously disappeared after her death.

As Fiegel notes, however, Elliot wouldn't have stood for the "tragic" tag so many have lumbered her with. Her independence and resilience defied such lazy thinking. Rarely has a mould been so completely shattered than the one from which Ellen Naomi Cohen emerged – she was the people's princess before Diana was in training bras. In her introduction, Fiegel tells how rocker David Crosby offered her \$100 if she could find a single person who hated Cass. Unsurprisingly, his money went unclaimed.

Alan Pedder



It's 7:30pm and already tonight's instalment of the 2005 Meltdown Festival is lingering a little too close to the literal for my liking; the temperature at the rear of the Royal Festival Hall is enough to make the blood boil. All of a sudden, I feel sorry for lobsters. Luckily, such empathy fits snugly into the theme of the evening. Patti Smith, punk's most judicious high poetess, has seen to it personally that this year's festival is no mere excavation cum shindig with cronies (à la Morrissey's 2004 effort) or disappointingly macho all-male love-in (e.g. David Bowie's stint as curator in 2002).

Instead, she has opted for a typically many-layered production, drawing together the themes of war, politics, art, the working class, literature, experience and tonight's *raison d'être*, the innocence of children. More specifically, the theme of the evening is an extension of Smith's love affair with the works of poet William Blake, and in particular with his late 18th Century classic, *Songs Of Innocence & Experience*. The book was originally published in two volumes, the first of which is tonight's inspiration and the second will close the festival on June 26th during a neat tie-in with the work of Jimi Hendrix, featuring the likes of Joanna Newsom, Jeff Beck, Robert Wyatt and Patti Smith herself. Tonight's cast is no less stellar. In fact, it's deliriously brilliant. A once-in-a-lifetime bringing together of some of the world's greatest female performers, plus a few token males and Yoko Ono.

After a comedic short film of a lunatic dancing boy plays on the big screen, the stage goes dark until actress Miranda Richardson steps out of the shadows to read Blake's pastorally charming *The Lamb*. Patti Smith and her band then take to the stage for an utterly engrossing and powerful rendition of *Birdland* from her near-sacred debut album **Horses** (1975). The song is a discourse on the loss of a young boy's father and the desire the child feels to be reunited with his dad. Given that tomorrow is Father's Day, it's inevitably uncomfortable listening

for some. Patti later returns to sing a sweet but drippy ditty written for her son Jackson by her late husband, Fred "Sonic" Smith of MC5, and then another with her daughter Jesse on piano. She also takes time out to introduce us to her favourite childhood toy, little green Gumby, the "clay man you can trust" who's fast becoming the unofficial Meltdown festival mascot.

In that moment, the notion of Smith as tortured artist and sullen elder stateswoman is banished forever and rightly so. If only Tori Amos were as endearing. As exemplary as her performance is, the empathy factor is lacking. In a four-song set drawing heavily on her earlier albums, her finest moment is in fact a stirring take on *Mother Revolution* from 2005's **The Beekeeper**. For someone who struggled so hard to be a mother and is so proud to finally be one, that she doesn't engage the crowd with on-stage banter or even acknowledge the purpose of the show smacks of lost opportunity, though you can't really argue with a standing ovation.

The notoriously self-effacing Beth Orton fares better with the endearment factor – her sweet reedy voice cosies up to the songs like old friends, and she ends each with a somewhat overexcited yelp of thanks. Best of all is a cover of Fred Neill's *Dolphins*, but a fine version of Woody Guthrie's *Don't You Push Me Down* is an unexpected joy. It is in fact the second Guthrie song of the night, following Billy Bragg's hilarious take on *Dry Bed*, a charming ode to no nocturia.

Kristin Hersh later extends the night-time subplot, performing traditional songs about death and despair that her father lulled her to sleep with as a child. Other highlights are Eliza Carthy's enriching a cappella folk songs and Marianne Faithfull's boisterous rendition of The Beatles' *Working Class Hero*. Additional readings from the works of Blake come courtesy of a hushed and spooky Tilda Swinton, although she doesn't join Miranda Richardson in indulging us with a simple pretty folk song that Eliza herself would be proud of.

It's not all quite as successful, however. Tim Booth of now-defunct indie stalwarts James performs an awfully trite song about child abuse before plundering the past for an acoustic version of *Sit Down*, his former band's biggest hit, with a sorry sense of "so what?". The same can be said of The High Llamas, whose sole contribution, a song based on an imagining of Blake's own childhood, is surprisingly dull for one with such a glorious premise.

Sinéad O'Connor, too, is equally unexciting, though more unexpectedly so. Granted, she isn't aided by the sound problems which render her rudimentary acoustic plucking all but inaudible, but for someone so famously impassioned her set is devoid of emotion. Only *Scarlet Ribbons* from her **Am I Not Your Girl** (1992) covers album seems to raise her out of a stupor. Then there's Yoko Ono, in a giant hat, providing a timely reminder why the most derided 72-year old woman in 'music' is so utterly unlovable. Screaming "Follow your heart, trust your intuition" for ten solid minutes would test the mettle of anybody's audience. It actually seems like an hour, thereby allowing far too much time to contemplate how on Earth we are all still breathing in this sauna. In fact, the performance is so lacking in redeeming features that it's a relief when Ono departs to a bizarrely rapturous round of applause. The same people were sniggering just seconds before. Maybe I just didn't get it.

Such a disparate line-up was guaranteed to raise a few eyebrows, but none arched higher than during the finale, a bizarre attempt to sing rounds beneath Patti's pulsing Blakean verse. The song, *Inchworm* from the Hans Christian Andersen biopic, is a cute choice, and after a faltering start the entire cast of the evening finally get the harmonies right. A moment of indefinably beautiful uplift ensues before the tired, hot but mostly exhilarated audience spills back into the muggy London streets singing "Inchworm, inchworm measuring the marigold, you and your arithmetic, you'll probably go far..."

Alan Pedder



Songs Of Innocence

Royal Festival Hall

June 18th, 2005

★★★★

Miranda Richardson

Auguries Of Innocence (*poem*)

Patti Smith

Birdland

Billy Bragg

Dry Bed

Eliza Carthy

Young But Daily Growing

Beth Orton

Someone's Daughter

Don't You Push Me

Tilda Swinton

Nurse's Song (*poem*)

Tori Amos

Silent All These Years

Mother Revolution

Winter

Pretty Good Year

Tilda Swinton

The Lamb (*poem*)

The Tyger (*poem*)

Yoko Ono

Rising

Tim Booth

Lullaby

Sit Down

Eliza Carthy

The Grey Cock

Patti Smith

The Jackson Song

Marianne Faithfull

The Little Black Boy (*poem*)

God Bless The Child

Working Class Hero

The High Llamas

Peckham Rye

Beth Orton

Dolphins

Kristin Hersh

Down In The Willow Garden

Banks Of The Ohio

The Cuckoo

Sinead O'Connor

Scarlet Ribbons

Days Without Number

I Long For You

Daughters Of Jerusalem

Miranda Richardson

The Bitter Withy

Patti Smith

I Heard You Crying In Your Sleep

Patti & Jesse Smith

Cradle Song

Entire Cast

Inchworm

Patty Griffin

Lyric Hammersmith

May 31st, 2005

★★★★



photos by Ben Hall

As any singer worth their salt should know, a whisper can be every bit as effective as a scream. In Patty Griffin, a woman who embodies the former but has the fire of the latter, the full range of capability is ours for the absorbing. Disarmingly shy at first, she seems almost embarrassed to have bothered us from whatever our Tuesdays typically bring, but the ice is soon broken after the first song, a stirring take on Bessie Smith's *Backwater Blues*, when she realises that her guitar was unplugged for the entire rendition. To the credit of the Lyric theatre's acoustics, however, the difference is barely noticeable.

After a stomping *No Bad News*, she offers up an engaging suite of songs from her latest album, **Impossible Dream**, released just the day before in the UK though it has long since been available in the States. Despite only being accompanied by one of her usual band, guitarist Doug Lancio, we miss none of the breezy shuffle of *Love Throw A Line* nor the lightly melancholic *Useless Desires*.

Moving to the piano, Griffin treats us to a French lullaby once sung to her by her mother. Entitled *J'irai La Voir Un Jour (I Will See It One Day)*, her emotive voice conveys every drop of the pensive hope that the title suggests. Staying at the keys, *Kite Song*, an-

other cut from the "new" album, charms effortlessly with its poignant imagery of dreaming and holding out for fulfilment.

New song *Free* sounds promising but the real highlight comes next with *Top Of The World*, a beautiful and heartbreaking paean to those once loved and lost. The upbeat but lyrically desolate *Long Ride Home* follows before Griffin really lets her hair down and unleashes a surging version of the frantic *Flaming Red*.

Unfortunately, a residual cough left over from a recent cold begins to trouble the singer in the closing songs of the main set. In fact, her confidence is visibly shaken by wracked renditions of *Icicles* and *Making Pies*, two of her most vivid examples of top-notch storytelling. The audience seems not to mind and shouts in encouragement and sympathy. A standing ovation later and Patty, slightly tearful, gracefully returns for an encore during which she road tests another new song, *Up To The Mountain*, inspired by the bravery of Martin Luther King, and old fan favourite *Mary*. Then she is gone, though we mill around for a few minutes uncertain of whether there will be a second encore. But Patty has other shows to play in the days to come and we've been plenty spoiled already.

Alan Pedder



Original Sinsuality
 Father Lucifer
 Icicle
 Mother Revolution
 Take To The Sky
 Yes, Anastasia
 Bells For Her
 Father Figure
 Like A Prayer
 Winter
 Cooling
 Jamaica Inn
 Witness
 The Beekeeper

 Sweet The Sting
 Rattlesnakes

 Hoochie Woman
 Hey Jupiter

Tori Amos
 Hammersmith Apollo
 June 4th, 2005

★★★★



Though each of her last few albums have come swaddled in conceptual complexities that would make Nietzsche think twice about indulging, tonight's stop on Tori Amos' Original Sinsuality Tour mostly dispenses with the cerebellar workout, leaving room for the levity of her music to truly impress. The sixth-form poetry clunkiness of the moniker aside, this latest tour has been one of the more memorable in recent years and given her the chance to showcase those famous interpretive skills first evidenced by her version of Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit*. For each night of the tour, fans have been able to request covers via Amos' official website, resulting in performances ranging from the obvious to the outrageous. Tonight was the turn of George Michael's *Father Figure* and Madonna's *Like A Prayer*, both of which have been played before but sounded all the more polished for it. The former especially hit all the buttons that Michael could only strive for.

In a setlist drawing heavily from her first three records and this year's **The Beekeeper**, several of her albums, including the sublime **Scarlet's Walk** (2002), were sadly neglected. However, a surprise rendition of Lloyd Cole & The Commotions' *Rattlesnakes* from her contract-fulfilling covers album **Strange Little Girls** (2001), seemed unusually at home in the two-hour set.

To attend a Tori Amos gig is to be guaranteed a display of reverence from her notoriously rabid fans and tonight was no different. Some even wept during more tender moments such as the captivating *Winter*, live favourite *Cooling* and the hymnal theatrics of *The Beekeeper*, a song written last year after Amos' mother fell ill with a life-threatening heart problem from which she thankfully recovered, and later embellished following the death of her brother Michael in a road accident last November.

In complete contrast, Amos invited onto the stage a choir of six

gospel singers to add a welcome sense of fun to the proceedings, unique to this performance. The live debut of the six-minute soulful epic *Witness* was the highlight of the night, though the bizarrely fluid boogie-woogie of empowerment anthem *Hoochie Woman* was another real treat.

Only *Jamaica Inn* truly floundered as Amos switched between her beloved Bösendorfer and Hammond organ a few too many times, slowing the song considerably. Still, Amos' prodigious talent and mastery of her instrument never fails to amaze and confirms her singular status.

The only true gripe was that, while Amos is undoubtedly a musical auteur, she fared less well visually with some of the worst lighting projections in memory. Certainly she's no Björk in that department and they added little to the experience. But with a performer so compelling and music this affecting, who really needs such trifling distractions?

Alan Pedder

incoming!

A guide to the best new releases of the coming months. Dates subject to change.



SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	
05: Ladytron - Witching Hour	03: Jana Hunter - Blank Unstaring Heirs Of Doom	17: t.A.T.u. - Dangerous & Moving
05: Sarah McLachlan - Bloom (remixes)	03: Ms. Dynamite - Judgement Days	24: Vashti Bunyan - Lookaftering
12: CocoRosie - Noah's Ark	03: Floetry - Flo'Ology	24: The Fiery Furnaces - Rehearsing My Choir
12: Erin McKeown - We Will Become Like Birds	03: Heather Nova - Redbird	24: Jessica Simpson - ...& The Band Played On
12: Natalie Merchant - Retrospective 1990-2005	03: Sinéad O'Connor - Throw Down Your Arms	31: Gemma Hayes - The Roads Don't Love You
12: Bonnie Raitt - Souls Alike	03: Liz Phair - Somebody's Miracle	31: Diana Krall - Christmas Songs
12: Kate Rusby - The Girl Who Couldn't Fly	10: Adult. - Gimmie Trouble	31: Texas - Red Book
12: Trisha Yearwood - Jasper County	10: Fiona Apple - Extraordinary Machine	
19: Broadcast - Tender Buttons	10: Deerhoof - The Runners Four	NOVEMBER
19: Susheela Raman - Music For Crocodiles	10: Alicia Keys - MTV Unplugged	07: Anastacia - Greatest Hits
19: Dar Williams - My Better Self	10: Dolly Parton - Those Were The Days	07: Kate Bush - Aerial
26: The Corrs - Home	10: Sugababes - Taller In More Ways	07: Patti Smith - Horses 30th Anniversary
26: Sheryl Crow - Wildflower	10: Rosie Thomas - If Songs Could Be Held	14: Cyndi Lauper - AcoustiCyn
26: Orenda Fink - Invisible Ones	17: The Cardigans - Super Extra Gravity	14: Edith Frost - It's A Game
26: Lene Marlin - Lost In A Moment	17: Espers - The Weed Tree	14: Madonna - Confessions On A Dancefloor
26: Katie Melua - Piece By Piece	17: Melissa Etheridge - The Road Less Travelled	14: Alanis Morissette - Greatest Hits (TBC)
26: Shelly Poole - Hard Time For The Dreamer	17: Eileen Rose - Come The Storm	14: Pink - Long Way From Happy (TBC)
26: Alice Russell - My Favourite Letters	17: Ashlee Simpson - I Am Me	14: Shakira - Oral Fixation Vol. 2

