

WINTER 2005/06 for fans of female musicians

wears the trousers

move over
o'donnell
it's the

Rosie Thomas
show

bye bye

2005

our year end round-up

we talk to:

Eileen Rose

Mara Carlyle

Nerina Pallot

Jane Monheit

Carolyn Mark

Allison Crowe

& Sing-Sing

PLUS: whatever happened to the likely ladies? we seek out the women of Britpop a decade on...

welcome to...

wears the trousers

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Phew! We made it to a second issue, and what a bumper edition we've got for you this time. We've been on quite a trip these last few months. First there was the fantastically successful launch party held at Green Note in Camden Town where we and many of thee wined, dined and listened to the sublime sounds of Beth Dariti, Adrian Roye, Dana Immanuel and our very own associate editor, Mr. Rod Thomas, who wheeled out a trio of covers especially for the occasion. Then, once the dust had settled and the damage reimbursed, work began in earnest on this very edition. First to invite us into their minds was the returning prodigal Bostonian, Eileen Rose, who took us backstage at The Borderline to talk of lofty things. Find out why making her latest album nearly drove her crazy and why she loves London. Next, we went to meet our cover star, the exceedingly special Rosie Thomas, who told us all about her newest opus and her brand new project with the godlike Sufjan Stevens. From then on, they just couldn't say no and the interviews flooded in. We grabbed a few minutes with Mara Carlyle and even fewer with US jazz sensation Jane Monheit who was busy preparing to tour. Across the Atlantic, Carolyn Mark sacrificed a morning's lie-in to speak with us on the phone from Canada to tell us about her new duets collection and tour with the Be Good Tanyas, while closer to home, Emma Anderson had a good natter about her days as a member of Lush and the future of her not that new but officially brill project, Sing-Sing. Backstage at a Sheryl Crow gig, we hung out with rising star Nerina Pallot, who's just about due for some major success after a fantastic 2005 – she told us how it really is on those Saturday morning kids shows and how she's wangled a new deal with Damien Rice's label. Ah yes, and what end-of-year issue would be complete without a poll of our mighty readers. Well, according to you lot, 2005 was the year of Kate Bush, and we've no desire to argue with that. Our full review of her comeback is the lead feature of this issue's reviews section. It was also the ten-year anniversary of what is officially recognised as the advent of that mythic beast Britpop. At times like these when even Oasis can stage a comeback, we wonder what ever happened to the likes of Justine Frischmann and the other women of Britpop. In a special report, we find out what went wrong and pose the question of a female Britpop revival to rival the likes of Kaiser Chiefs. And lo, as if by magic, we pick who we think have the wherewithal and just plain old wow factor to make it big in '06. Lastly, it wouldn't be proper to end this editorial without saying a huge thank you to everyone who's supported us, written to us, blabbed about us on MySpace and Livejournal etc. – we've had over 9500 unique visitors since September (and what's more, they keep coming back!) and well over 45,000 page views so a thousand million thank yous. The next issue is scheduled for March. See you then! **ALAN PEDDER**, *Editor*





04 Mara Carlyle

"My love interest is a lobster!"

06 Carolyn Mark

Canada's queen of barroom country.

08 Nerina Pallot

"Knitting is my reason for getting out of bed!"

12 Rosie Thomas

The loveliest woman in music.

18 Eileen Rose

"Making my album turned into *The Shining*"

22 Whatever Happened to the Likely Ladies?

The women of Britpop a decade on.

26 Sing-Sing

Emma Anderson on life after Britpop.

29 Jane Monheit

"I was a big Nine Inch Nails freak"

30 Stocking fillers!

Step into Christmas, the admission's free.

32 2005: Your favourites

How you voted in our end of year poll.

34 2006: Our picks

Six bands, six solo artists, one massive year!



35 Nanci Griffith

Her oeuvre from a distance.

38 Reviews / New Releases

Kate Bush, Fiona Apple, Cat Power, Madonna & many more

63 Reviews / Reissues

Múm, Iona

64 Reviews / Imports

Robyn, Allison Crowe & more

68 Reviews / Film & DVD

Screaming Masterpiece, The McGarrigle Hour

70 Reviews / Live

Kristin Hersh, Regina Spektor, Emiliana Torrini, Annie & more



Luck be a Ukulady

Introducing the lovely Mara Carlyle, London's own (by way of Shropshire at least) ukulele-strumming, opera-loving, never-sleeping anti-diva. Her reputation as one of the busiest and friendliest people in the business is not just PR propaganda. Still working her day job with Euston's young and underprivileged, Mara's enthusiasm for, well, everything is unbelievable. How can anyone be so alive? **Rod Thomas** popped a Pro Plus and went to get the low down...

Located right in the heart of London, The Social has been a staple of the city's competitive music scene for over half a decade. Its stage has showcased the likes of Beth Orton and the Chemical Brothers, but in recent years it's fair to say that it's lost some of its status outside of the DJ scene. Even so, it's surprising to find Mara Carlyle at the bottom of an otherwise nondescript line-up, on a Wednesday night no less. But then low-key suits her perfectly. Tonight is a testament to her talents, showing that not only can she shine as the opening act for a range of big name performers, but that, like few other artists working today, she can still The Social's trendy and raucous after-work crowd into hushed, attentive silence.

Accompanied by acoustic guitar, occasionally breaking out her ukulele and wielding a shiny household saw, her soaring voice and command of the stage quickly win over any skeptical onlookers. That, and her undaunted approach to straddling musical genres and fearless deconstruction of other artists' songs alongside her exquisitely self-penned material. Last year's debut album, *The Lovely*, was universally acclaimed, and this year has seen not one but two brilliant EPs – the wickedly titled *I Blame Dido* and the graceful *Baby Bloodheart*. I was lucky enough to grab a few moments to ask about her ever more hectic life...

Wow, you seem so busy. How on earth do you manage to balance your day job with all this amazing music?

It's a lot easier since I went part-time but still, if my colleagues and managers weren't so utterly cool and supportive and wonderful there is no way I could continue to do my music. I owe an awful lot to the good people of New Horizon Youth Centre.

It seems like it's working really well for you. You've done quite a few impressive support

slots... what was it like opening for a giant chart act like Will Young?

That was a real eye-opener... dipping a little toe into the world of pop. Provided some quite surreal moments though; playing *You'll Never Walk Alone* on my saw while five thousand Liverpoolians sang along was a strangely moving experience...

Sounds it! Is the saw your favourite instrument then or does the ukulele clinch it?

I love my ukulele, but I think the saw is probably my favourite. I'm going to try and learn how to saw and sing at the same. That's my next mission.

Who's been your favourite touring partner so far?

Hmmm... well in terms of pure fun, touring with Willy Mason was a very good way to spend a few weeks. We just laughed so much and his audiences were great to play for. He's a terrible influence though... made me drink a lot of booze...

[laughs] I'm sure you really protested too! Now, you've already worked extensively with Plaid who produced your debut album. Are there any other artists you'd love to work with? Any current favourites?

Well, apart from Andre 3000 (I have something of a crush on that fellow), the people I most want to work with are my friends... Willy, Max de Wardener, Jamie Liddell [whose *Game For Fools* Mara covers on the *Baby Bloodheart* EP], Jackson, Jade Fox... I've got plans for them all! And I'm really crazy about my brother's new band Deep Elem; pure traditional bluegrass music made by two blokes in Shropshire. Really the best thing I've heard in aaaaages.

I heard your much-touted covers album got put on the backburner for a while, but at least you've treated us to a typically eclectic range of interpretations on the new single [one track, Piximerie, infeasibly

bly splices The Pixies' Hey with Amerie's 1 Thing to startling effect]. How do you find the inspiration for your covers?

I don't really rate myself as a songwriter, but I think I'm quite a good arranger and I love to mess around with songs, it tickles my brain.

OK, so say someone wanted to cover one of your tunes, who would you like it to be? Missy Elliott... just an idea.

Just one more question, I know you're busy! What are your plans for the future, any exciting tricks up your sleeve?

I have just made the most amazing video for *Baby Bloodheart* and I am completely focused on getting as many people to see it as possible! It was directed by this gorgeous French genius called Gaelle Denis and she turned me into a mermaid, playing the ukulele, in a bath on wheels on Hampstead Heath... and my love interest in the video is a lobster! Other than that, I'm just cracking on with my new album and I recently DJ'd for the first time, which I'm very excited about... although I don't have any records... or CDs... or mixing ability... hmmm...

The next time I hear from Mara she's telling me how she's learning Vietnamese so that she can sing a national song at a festival, which, by the way, goes very well. So well in fact that one listener who'd been looking in the other direction mistook her for a native. Random, sure, but I get the feeling it's not even close to the strangest thing she'll ever do in her unstoppably illustrious career.

Though she may not have 100% confidence in her songwriting skills, her talent and dedication to all aspects of her work overcome her doubts. Singer, saw-wielder and sometime DJ, it's hard to imagine that Mara Carlyle will remain one of music's best kept secrets for much longer. ■

Making her Mark



With Canadian bands currently exploding all over the indie music map (see Arcade Fire, Stars, Tegan & Sara etc.) and quirky songstresses like Feist and Martha Wainwright stealing our hearts, it seems that the time has never been more right for British Columbia's Carolyn Mark to stake out her piece of the pie. Drawing on Canada's rich seam of traditional songwriting, Mark chucks the genre rulebook out the window and hits the button marked **BLEND**. Her latest record, *Just Married: An Album Of Duets*, is a collaboration with some of Canada's most engaging performers yet to make it to these shores, including NQ Arbuckle and the rib-tickling Whiskey Rabbi, Geoff Berner. It's a delight from start to finish and raises many a smile. Indeed, humour is absolutely integral to Carolyn's music – check out the unendingly silly *Slow Poke* and *Rocket Piano Man's* spaghetti western mash-up of Bowie and Elton John. Off record, she's equally vibrant too, as **Clare Byrne** discovered when calling at some ungodly hour of a December morning between one of Mark's incessant tours and her record label's Christmas party.

There's quite a collection of co-stars on this album! How on earth did you pick who you would do each duet with? Is there any reason you chose specific songs for specific partners?

Well, the Geoff Berner song, *It's All Just A Matter Of (Where You Draw The Line)*, I love it but he wrote it, so I couldn't not sing that one with him. And Neville [NQ Arbuckle] and I both love the first song, *Fireworks* – my friend Jay [McLaughlin] wrote it – and I've wanted to sing with Neville for a long time so that worked out great. And The Silver Hearts? Well, I've always wanted to record with a twelve-piece band. What lady doesn't?

Is it true that you wore lab coats the whole time you were recording this album?

Actually, that was the album before [2004's *The Pros & Cons Of Collaboration*]. But it is true. We lived here for three weeks and we wore lab coats the whole time, like we were going to work.

You obviously thought of this album, like the previous one, as an experiment, but you have collaborated on all of your albums. Why is this one specifically the “duets” album?

I have collaborated many times before but the difference with this one is the two-part vocal. The others featured different musicians, but sharing the vocal – that’s what makes it a duet. Like those great old country records.

Who are your main influences? Your music is such a blend of rock, blues, folk and country, it’s hard to pin one down.

Why thank you! I guess probably for the aesthetic it would be the classic country album. But as for modern, I love Lucinda Williams, she’s really cool. I’ve started to use her lyrics as the I Ching! [laughs]

Did your parents play country music when you were growing up?

No, they just played Vivaldi and Gordon Lightfoot.

So you found it yourself?

Yeah, I worked in a used clothing store that only had one record and it was Johnny Cash’s *At Folsom Prison* [1968]. If you only have one record, that’s a good one.

I heard you wanted to be an actress originally. How did you end up becoming a singer instead?

Well, probably because I wasn’t very good at it. And you have to wait around for someone to put on a play and then you might not even like it. You have to wait for a lot of things to transpire before you even get on the stage, and I’m not very patient. So I made my own show! [laughs]

Do you find it easier to write songs that are personal or fictional? It’s hard to tell with many of your songs because they are usually told like stories, the way country songs often are.

I think they’re mostly about things that actually happened. Well most of them are. Edmonton [a heartfelt little tune from her 2000 solo debut, *Party Girl*, that tells a sorry tale of trying to get closer to a musical idol]... I just made that up, but it sounds really true so people often ask about it.

[laughs] *Actually, yeah, I was going to ask the same.*

No, that one I woke up in the middle of the night and wrote it. Obviously parts of

it are true but it’s not about one person or one night.

OK! Well, obviously humour is crucial to your music. Is that something you consciously bring in?

I don’t think I can help it! I don’t think I could remove it from anything I did!

You live with Tolan McNeil [Carolyn’s guitarist and long-time collaborator] don’t you? And you obviously spend a lot of time making music together – don’t you guys ever get sick of each other?

I think if you were around us for a while you would notice alarming co-dependent tendencies. We’re OK with it [laughs]. Yeah, we totally get sick of each other but then we go away, and when he’s away I notice all I do is talk about him! And we have the studio together in the basement, so that’s great. So every time I get really sick of him I think of that!

Having seen you live, and having seen how vivacious your onstage persona is, I was wondering how hard it is to get that across in a recording? Do you find it difficult?

Yes, but I’m trying to think of it as two different things now. I used to always want to try to capture it but I think it’s two different things and you have to work with it.

Have you ever thought about doing a live record?

Oh yeah, I still want to do that. I want to do the Sammy Davis Jr. live thing with the guy with the orchestra and the jokes. That would be great. But I dunno, I want to do a solo record too, all by myself. So I’ve got lots of ideas.

You said that your family didn’t really influence your music tastes but your dad played on one of your records didn’t he?

Yeah, he played the violin. He taught me actually, he made me play piano. I wouldn’t say they weren’t an influence at all.

How was that, recording with your dad?

Oh it was great. He was really shy and cute. It was fun to reverse the roles too, to tell him “I think you should probably do that again.” [laughs]

I hear you’re going on a tour of the States next, when is that?

Early January. I’m going on tour with the Be Good Tanyas girls. Diona [Davies] plays violin with me and with them. We’re going to be travelling together to Texas, to play the South By South West festival.

Have you played Texas before?

Well, Austin. Austin is awesome, the rest of Texas is a little... [laughs]

Do you get nervous about going to the South and playing country music? Do people ever give you a hard time about being Canadian and it being their music or anything?

I thought about it for a minute once, but I think if you’re OK at it then it’s no problem. But you know, I don’t talk about Memphis or my pappy or anything like that [laughs]. But most places I play are not random anyway, there will be people who have come to hear me play. I’m not playing the State Fair or anything.

What else is next for you after that? Will you be recording with Neko Case again?

[They’re good mates and labelmates to boot; Carolyn featured on Case’s live album last year and they performed together as The Corn Sisters for a short while before that]

I’m trying to find her actually. I think she’s going to meet me in Texas. So hopefully we’ll do something together. And then her solo album comes out [Fox Confessor Brings The Flood, out in March 2006] so she’ll be on tour for like a year. So we’ll see. And I’ve been doing these tours, the Hootenanny tour, with fifteen people! So I’ll do another one of those in April. That’s a lot of fun. Actually, I want to bring the Hootenanny tour over to the UK at some point.

Last question, a bit random maybe. It’s just that every time I see you, you always have these amazing dresses. Where do you get them? Are they all vintage?

Thank you. Yeah, it’s an excellent hobby that travelling helps. It’s a lifelong journey. But I’m afraid that as time goes on there won’t be as many vintage dresses, they’ll be rarer. So I’m hoping to find someone that can sew! [laughs]

Well, thanks so much for doing this. Sorry I got you up so early!

Thank you for thinking of me. Have a happy Christmas! ■

Back in 2002, Nerina Pallot was unceremoniously “freed” from her recording contract with Polydor after her debut album, *Dear Frustrated Superstar*, failed to set the charts on fire. She would spend the next three years going back to university, knitting, eating ribs, drinking tequila and making a follow-up, *Fires*, which was finally released last April on her own label, Idaho, and published by Chrysalis – her original publishers, who were shrewd enough not to let her go. Calling the shots herself, she certainly appears to know what she’s doing. The album garnered four-star reviews in the UK broadsheets, suggesting that not only had Polydor made a very big mistake, but they had also done Pallot a great big favour. Since then, Pallot has been touring non-stop, both as a headliner and in support of acts as diverse as Paddy Casey, Keith Urban and Jamie Cullum. Tonight, however, she is playing what could be her most prestigious gig to date: opening for Sheryl Crow at a sold-out Hammersmith Apollo. **Michael Banna** accesses all areas...

the Emancip



ation of Nini



Backstage at the Apollo, Nerina Pallot is pacing the room. I can't quite work out if she is doing so out of nervousness, or strutting confidently, awaiting a triumphant performance and legions of new fans, but I suspect that it's a little of both. It's a slight observation, certainly, but it highlights a recurring dichotomy with Pallot; is she a shy and nervous shoegazer or a fierce, snarling rock chick? I certainly can't tell from having seen her live before, or from meeting her today, but again I suspect that it is a rare and wonderful combination of both. I have seen her say, "OK I'm going to do one more song – yes, don't worry, I'll be leaving soon" in one support slot, yet at another shoot back to a heckler "yes of course you are the authority on all that is musical aren't you? Perhaps that's why you're in the audience and I'm on the stage!"

As we sit down to begin the interview, Nerina is polite and well-mannered, having perfect command of the Queen's English. She also happens to be extremely beautiful, and I find myself wondering what this woman lacks that the likes of KT Tunstall, Jem and Dido do not. Something tells me that I probably won't find out today...

At what point did you realise that the Polydor deal wasn't going to work out?

When my A&R man still couldn't pronounce my name a year after signing me.

Not a good sign. I hear that at the time you also had a bit of an "experience" on Saturday morning TV - care to elaborate?

Ooooh, I think it was that moment where I realised that all those little pop puppets are really the dreadful little creatures you imagine them to be when reading Heat magazine. It involved stilettos, and two females, each of which were members of now defunct pop outfits, and I simply can't say any more, as it opens up all sorts of old wounds for me *[laughs]*.

Your first album was very impressive, what made you choose to work with different people on the second?

Aw, that's so nice of you to say that. It was more a product of circumstance, I guess. A very nice circumstance. Ordinarily, when you get dropped there is a lot of skulking about and feeling unwanted, but the same day I got dropped, my lovely publishers Chrysalis music offered to pay for some recording in Los Angeles, with Wendy Melvoin. While on that session, I met the other producers, Howard Willing and Eric Rosse, who went on to make the rest of the record with me. It was great actually, because none of it was anything other than people getting on and becoming friends, and roping in their musician friends to do a few favours, because there was very little money to make *Fires* with. Of course, I still skulked about and felt unwanted, but I

think I've been doing that since I was about 5 years old, so no change there really.

Did you find that releasing music on your own label as opposed to being on a major label limited you in any way, with regards to these things?

Well, I may harp on about how little money I had to make the album, but because all the producers became such good friends, I was extremely fortunate in that they roped in all their mates to do me favours too – who just happen to be the cream of LA studio musicians. This was the cheapest \$200,000 album ever made, I'm not kidding. But, it did directly affect how long it took to make the record, because I couldn't just book studios or musicians, I had to wait until they had a gap in their schedules to just drop by and play. See, that old adage about patience totally applies to me. I think the musicians were more sympathetic to my cause because I wasn't on a major label, and that helped in some ways. And, while I was A&R'd by my publisher at Chrysalis, he took a very hands off approach which was amazing. He has a really interesting way of overseeing things - he doesn't really come to the studio, but I will play him things and he knows immediately what he likes and doesn't, and then I would go off and think about it, work some more, and somehow we'd reach the place where we were both happy. The flipside of this is that I had to be very self-motivated, because there wasn't a release schedule and nothing was rostered, and I was very slow because I didn't feel very confident about making a record again. I was second guessing myself a lot, but that was probably no bad thing in hindsight.

Well it does seem to have paid off, but does that mean we'll have to wait another 4 years for your next album?

Erm, I hope not. But I would still like to finish the English degree I started while making *Fires*, so I might go back for the final year while I make the third album.

If the deal was right would you ever be tempted to go back to a major label? I hear there's a lot of sniffing around at the moment?

The deal is right, and I just have. I am now on 14th Floor, the Warners label behind Damien Rice. They specialise in taking finished albums by artists with existing fanbases, and then building from there. It's quite something to be signed for ex-

actly what you are right now, rather than what they would like you to be.

Congratulations! Sounds like a great position to be in artistically. If it was a different kind of deal, how much, if any, of your artistic control would you be willing to relinquish for fame and fortune?

That depends on how much fame, how big the fortune, and thus how many shoes said fortune would afford me.

I noticed that you worked with Delerium on a dance track on their last album - how was that?

It didn't really feel like I worked with them – it was more a sort of recording by correspondence, whereby they sent me a backing track, I wrote a melody and lyrics, recorded those in London and sent them over to Vancouver and LA, and then they worked on that further until we were all happy. I quite enjoyed it actually, even though Delerium make very different records from my own. It was easier in some ways because not all the onus was on me, so I didn't fret as much as I do when I am working on my own stuff.

I have counted that eleven of your songs mention death, and even more mention religion – why the fascination?

One is our only certainty in life; the other our only satisfactory medication for that nasty little certainty.

If you had to pick one song from your repertoire to represent your entire body of work, which one would you choose and why?

Aaaaargh. That's hard. That's a bloody good question too. I think *Idaho*. It was my 'manifesto' song, I guess. I wrote it when I was feeling utterly wretched, but defiant too, and it's musically very representative of me, i.e. lots of piano and fiddly orchestration, and lyrically, my most honest, and personal, I suppose. I get lost when I play it, and I never get bored of playing it either.

It is a great song – I hear that the story behind it is far deeper than you simply liking the place though – what is it?

Well, it was inspired by the book *Zen & The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig, which involves a road journey that takes in Idaho *en route*. My favourite part of the novel takes place there, and so I harbour this strange idea that the secret of the universe may in fact be unravelled in the state of Idaho alone. That, and my other

pipe dream of running off to the mountains to live out my life as a batty old bird with horses and cats, drinking port of an evening and writing cod-Cole Porter songs on a battered old piano in my mountain log cabin.

As a musician/artist, what has been your finest moment so far?

My Dad's face when he heard a song of mine on the radio for the first time.

How sweet – it must be a really interesting thing for family and friends to watch you unfold as an artist, especially when some of your songs are about them. What ever happened to your soldier friend in Everybody's Gone To War?

As far as I know, he is alive and well, and I hope that he stays that way.

How does it feel to have your songs played on Hollyoaks and Eastenders? [Damascus was used during an emotional goodbye scene in Hollyoaks, and Patience is a regular in the 'Enders caff']?

Unnerving, as it always happens when I'm doing the ironing and I nearly always narrowly miss a potential domestic catastrophe [laughs].

You are often compared to other female artists of both the past and the present; have you ever been compared to someone you think is terrible, and how do you respond to it?

It happens a lot. More than I would like to mention. There is one artist in particular that comes up a lot at the moment, and I just smile and nod like a poodle at a dog and pony show and hope I come across as sincere. There's a time and a place for lamenting about things you instinctively know are rubbish, but tons of people buy anyway, and I reserve that for when my friends need entertaining. My particular problem is that I am highly critical, and so think nearly everything is crap.

Well, often it is! Speaking of which, of the female singer/songwriters around at the moment, who do you think will still be around in 20 years time?

Hmm. That's another good question. I can only think of PJ Harvey and she's already been around for about 10 years. Oh Lordy, I don't really know. How can you know? I guess you base it on who do you think will still be making interesting work 20 years' hence, so PJ definitely. But the newest crop? That's hard, because while some artists may

well be equipped to go the distance, it's questionable whether the industry will support that. I hope so. But this increasingly common three album cycle for artists (Album 1: hello we love you, Album 2: you're ok, Album 3: please go away now) is not conducive to long term artist development.

You've often spoken about growing up in Jersey, and you're going back there later this month for a special gig - tell me about the Help a Jersey child charity project you've been working on.

Well, the charity is being launched by Channel 103 FM, the main independent radio station in Jersey, and they have asked me to play a gig as a fundraiser for the launch night. I haven't been involved in the creation of the charity or anything like that, I just agreed to do the show that will hopefully make everyone aware of the charity's existence.

What does the future hold for you?

When I look into my crystal ball, I see suitcases, and pianos, and guitars, and the acquisition of yet more strange objects from foreign lands. I think there's the odd hangover in there, too.

And what's this about knitting?

Knitting? It's my reason for getting out of bed in the morning....

And finally, are you nervous about tonight?

YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW NERVOUS. I always get nervous, but I love Sheryl to bits, so not only is it a big honour to be opening for her, but I don't want to let her or her fans down.

And it is with this that I leave Nerina and take my seat for what is arguably the most winning performance by a support act that I have ever seen. As Nerina takes the stage, she informs the audience of her "wardrobe malfunction" [she stood too close to the sink when washing her hands] and tells us that she doesn't usually start speaking before she plays as it puts people off. She is wrong, winning the crowd over within a matter of minutes, and by the end of her set she has them eating out of the palm of her hand. Afterwards the venue is buzzing about how good she was, and the merchandise table quickly sells every copy of *Fires*, and I am still left wondering why this woman is not a household name. But with a new record deal and a re-release of the album coming very soon, 2006 might just be Pallot's year.. ■



Coming Up Rosie

You know what they say, the road to success is always under construction. So too is the London Underground it seems, but so completely gracious is Rosie Thomas that she doesn't seem to mind at all when **Alan Pedder** and **Clare Byrne** arrive at Bush Hall an hour later than planned. Perhaps sensing their intense disarray, she insists on giving them both an affectionate hug and offers to fetch them a drink from the rider. It's impossible not to love her already. But this is about the music, and if you've ever heard a Rosie Thomas song, the chances are you'll have picked up on her delicate way with a melody and her uncanny knack of distilling both internal and universal concerns into one beautiful lyric. Her new album, *If Songs Could Be Held*, is a cohesive, angelic collection of songs that achieves the difficult feat of raising her game while remaining unequivocally true to her experience and ethic. You see, more than most other artists, Rosie Thomas seems to really understand that the route to fulfilment is fraught with jams and roadworks, and that sitting behind your own wheel complaining is no way to get things done. So completely devoid of vanity and preening, she's a non-stop delight in both the interview and, later, on-stage when she tells the eager crowd how, as a child, she once caught her brother Brian trying to fart on her burger and a thousand other disarmingly adorable stories.

A breath of fresh air in a mischievous wind.

Because your first two albums were recorded in a short space of time, you said that you were coming from the same viewpoint and discussing similar themes. So, on this new record, did you feel any pressure to step it up a gear?

Yeah. I mean, I think I wanted to though. I'm not sure I felt the pressure for it but the inspiration. I wanted to progress, to be challenged a bit more. I took such a stance on sticking to what I love and not pushing myself – whatever came out was meant to come out. Like me having a conversation with you; not thinking ahead of what I'm going to say but just allowing it to be organic and natural, and I tend to do that with my music because it comes from such a personal place. But with this record, I tried to step outside of that a bit more. I have to say it was very refreshing because I added bridges and choruses, I spent time on the songs I would normally be very quick to go, “no, that song is it. That's it – I wrote that at three in the morning, that's it!” You know? I sort of went back and thought, well maybe that wasn't it. Maybe that song deserves more, maybe there's more in there that I haven't yet found. And so I spent a lot more time on the structuring of the songs.

And it was worth it, because I think perhaps I made a record that stands out from the other two. It challenged me – now I write differently because of it. It was really good to see that I could go beyond what I had done. It was getting, to me, a little repetitive. I mean if you're enjoying what you're doing, that's wonderful – you have to love it. But I was starting to really wanna *[makes snoring sound]* fall asleep on stage and I thought, “uh oh, that's not a good sign!” So yeah, the pressure no, but the inspiration came to push myself and put myself in a different environment that would be a bit more challenging for me. And what came out of it for me was well worth it.

And you moved to LA to do it?

I did, yeah. It was fun! I got to go to the beach a lot, and I drank a lot of water because that's what people do there *[laughs]*. I didn't jog – a lot of people do that there. It was fun though, it was really nice to be in a really sunny place, especially from Seattle where it rains all the time. It was refreshing – having days off and being able to go to the ocean. It was nice to be in a different environment.

You said your first two records came from a really personal place, and it seems like you delved much more into fiction for this third album?

In a way, yeah. It's funny, I used to tell people that I can't write that way. I just can't write fiction-based. And I had such a struggle with it. I was saying the other day to someone that I really empathise with people, and he said, “well you can't empathise with everyone Rosie”. And I was like, “well what do you mean?” And he said, “well to empathise you have to go through it.” And I was like, “oh that's right, that's the difference between empathy and sympathy.” But, what I realised from it is that that is really what I want. I want to be able to able to empathise with people. And the only way I know how to do that is by being available to myself, being honest with myself, about my struggle, the things I go through, and therefore maybe someone can empathise with me. Because if that can happen then there's a great connection that's made and then at the end of your life you can go, “I did something that hopefully provoked somebody to feel.” Right? By being vulnerable, and who I am in my own expression. That's really important to me.

So on this record, I step outside of it a bit, but what I laugh about is I used to think I could never write fiction-based; however, what I realised is that writing fiction-based is still writing for yourself. Even the way you see things or write about things. What I realised at the end of the day is that it still filters through me. It still provokes me to think, “how would I deal with that?” And so I realise again that we all are very similar. Even if I try to write outside of what I know, it's still something that I describe the way I would know it to be. But it's freeing. It's refreshing to not make it so personal. So at the end of the day, I don't have to go, “I just spilled my gut!” *[punches the table melodramatically, then laughs]*. I mean I still will, somehow, because it's important to me and always will be I think.

Would you ever write a song from a man's point of view?

You know, I have done a couple of those. Yeah, I need to do more of those from the guy's point of view...I'll just change the words, just from girl to boy *[laughs]*. Yeah, I've tried that actually, but on this record, *Death Came & Got Me* is about a guy friend of mine. Romantically, I haven't really

done it that way, but that would be a good challenge. Thank you! I need that *[laughs again]*. I'll write that down.

It's interesting to me from that perspective that you do comedy as well. We've seen you when you've done both in one performance. How do you think those two things interact? Because I don't think anybody else does that!

Yeah, it's bizarre. But it's weird though – I think they come from similar places. And the reason is because music is such a personal thing to me and comedy is quite the opposite, yet in our daily walk, our daily lives – getting up in the morning can be a struggle, but then there's the one friend you run into who makes you laugh. So we need both, don't we, to get through. And what I realise is music is so important to me because it's the core of who I am, it's the real personal truth. I would rather hang out with someone that engages with me personally than plays the jokester all the time. But at the end of the day it's nice to have the jokester there. I think what I realised is that it's really enjoyable to me to offer both to people. The struggle, the reality, the things that we ponder and question, and who I really am and being open to that. And then, by being able to do that, I can extend laughter and comedy because we all need that. It's sort of a full circle. It can come across as lunacy though! Which I've definitely received *[laughs]*! But it's important to me.

Gosh, look at you guys, you're doing what you love, you're doing something you're passionate about. You wouldn't want anybody to tell you how to do it. Because it has to come from you for you to make a difference with somebody. By sticking to who you are and seeing your loveliness really. Because I do. I wake up and go, “I'm lovely”. Really, I am. And dysfunctional and sporadic and up and down as it is, it's exactly the way I'm supposed to be, and if I can own that, then I can do something with that. By being present, and by being forgiving with myself, and by really just seeing the loveliness of what uniquely I can offer as an individual that would be different from what you can offer. And not being prideful, but to really just be grateful. I mean, I'm really grateful. I really am really grateful for my life. It's a pleasure to be able to get to that point where I can really say that, and finally wake up and go, “yeah, I like me alright. There's a lot of fixing to do but I'm alright.”

But I think I can only do that because it's taken me some hills to climb to get there, to be honest about who I am. For the sake of even being, gosh, for the sake of all of us to be mocked, or for someone to read your magazine and go, "I don't like it." Big deal. You love it and that's the thing that matters, and you think what you're doing is making a difference and it will make a difference.

The fact that I'm here in London is ridiculous! Performing! I mean, that never ceases to amaze me. I'm like, "look at you in your pink dress. Wow! Yeah!" It's just fabulous. I think we all have the ability for it. If we could only see that in ourselves. It's hard to do it, it's very hard. Believe me, I say that as if I know it so well, and I sometimes have to say it out loud to remind myself, because it's a struggle.

You were saying you're happy with where you are right now. It's no wonder, really, you've become so successful. And so quickly! I mean, you're on Sub Pop, and you're quite an unusual addition to most of the other bands they have. And you've toured here so many times. I'm quite interested to know what you want to do next really!

You know what, I don't know! I was telling someone earlier – he said, "Rosie, what's the craziest thing you could do?" And I was like, well I suppose I'm meant to say climb Mount Everest or something but you know, I think having kids would be, like to me, everything that's normal... well, what is normal, I guess we could argue... but for the most part, getting married and having kids, that would be like climbing Mount Everest to me. Like "woah!" You know, the more that I do what I love, life can become so self-based, me me me, it seemed to become that. I didn't mean it to be, because what I really felt was that if I could really focus on what I am supposed to do then I can affect people and then I can affect myself and that would be the most perfect thing. If I could really be that vulnerable, I can plant a seed, I can say something that maybe would provoke thought, make someone's heart soften and hopefully it could soften mine too. And now I think, maybe I should have kids and hang out with them. Like, have a family to go home to and things like that. I feel very thankful because I've done a lot of the things I wanted to do. Not that it's over by any means, good God, there's so much more and it changes all the time.





I remember when Sub Pop first asked me to do the record, I honestly thought that they were joking. “You’ve gotta be crazy!” I said, “look at me! I look like Laura Ingalls! Like the Amish! What the hell? How does this fit? You can’t go from The Murder City Devils to this, it’s insane!” But then, he said the word. He said, “well I’m willing to take a risk if you are.” And it’s like, aww man, that’s like somebody calling me chicken. When someone says “take a risk,” I’m like, “if you tell me what to do I’ll do it.” Because I think, gosh, that’s what gives me that rush in life. My father said to me once, “you’ll never know unless you try it.” But he always said, “you gotta love what you do first. And if you love what you do Rosie, you can’t fail.” Even with music, it’s sort of become a friend to me in a way. I’m so passionate about it and I love it so much that I can disregard expecting that the world is supposed to love it too.

It’s really wonderful because I think it’s such a search for so many people. I hear my friends say all the time still, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” I met this eight year old when I was a camp counselor one summer. We were playing hockey and I said, “Sam what’s wrong?” And he said, “Wosie,” (he talked like Elmer Fudd) “I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do with my wife. I don’t know what my mission in wife is.” I started crying, I was like, “you’re eight! You’re already that passionate!” But then I thought, aren’t we all though? Even at eight or ten or fifty

or whatever age, still trying to figure out what that is. And so I feel so fortunate that I figured that out, for one, and then going beyond that. Being able to actually do it, to make a living at it is just quite an experience and I feel extremely grateful for it. So yeah, it was quite a surprise, but it was the risk factor! When he was like, “you wanna take a risk?” I was like, “you bastard. I’m in!” [laughs]. And it turns out it was an alright risk, you know. And even had it not been, it still would have been worth it because it still would have helped me figure out, at the end of the day, that I lived a life that was courageous, a life that taught me things. By stepping out, even mockery, whatever comes with it, bring it on. So yeah, it’s a good surprise – there’s plenty of bad ones! [laughs]

You said once that you were planning to do an album of covers. Is that still on the cards for you?

Well here’s the deal. Now it’s changed a bit. Damien [Jurado] keeps touring and we were going to do it together. He’ll be like, “Rose, I’m going to...” and I’m all, “aww, man!” So I think Sufjan Stevens and I are going to do something. We already recorded a few songs together in the summer and then I’m going to go out there at Christmas and spend time with him in New York. And we’re going to record as many songs as we can. And then with Sam Beam from Iron & Wine – I’m going to shuttle over to Texas and we’re going to record some there too. So that might

be the cover record, but covers and songs we’ve written together. I’m all about the collaboration lately, just because when I hang out with different people, so much different inspiration comes. The stuff Sufjan and I wrote this summer, I was like, “woah! Did I write that?” and he was like, “no, we wrote that!”

We love Sufjan!

He is amazing. And what a wonderful human being that guy is. And that’s the thing. When I see people doing what they love and knowing who they are, what a privilege. What a privilege to see him doing well, and to know him. And he’s just so grounded, and just so lovely. He is the most scatterbrained person I’ve ever met in my life. He’ll lose everything in a day; I mean the most important things, he could lose his head. His glasses, everything he needs, he’ll lose and then he’ll still keep going. So yeah, that’s the next idea, and then the Sheila stuff [*Sheila Saputo is Rosie’s stand-up comic alter ego*], I’m also working on a documentary with her. So that should hopefully be done by spring because I want to tour it actually. I want her to come on as the opening band and just freak people out!

Is that the Raspberry Jams?

No, Strawberry Jam. Raspberry’s good too though!

Does that go over well in Europe, the comedy? Do people get it?

The first time I had her open for me in London I think two people laughed. I don’t think they knew what was going on. It was really exciting though, because I kind of wanted that. It was at the Borderline, I think it was for an encore, and I thought instead of coming out for a song I’d come out as this. And I think people were like, “What? Who? Why?” And then the jokes are different. I’ve had to learn the lingo a bit, because the jokes are a bit different here. So some of the stuff didn’t come across very well, but I love that stuff man, I think it’s hilarious.

I’ll tell you man, if you want a challenge in life, do stand-up comedy. There’s nothing more challenging. Because if people don’t laugh, it’s over! Oh God, and how do you dig out? But it drives me, I love it! The first time I ever did Sheila on stage, nobody laughed because they didn’t know it was me, they didn’t know what was going on, and that’s what I wanted it to be! I

wanted them to really believe it was a lunatic woman that I was bringing on tour. It was the most uncomfortable ten minutes of my life, it was incredible and not once did I break character even though I wanted to so badly, like “I’m sorry! It’s me!” That’s so me to wanna be like, “let me comfort you!” But I kept thinking, “don’t do it! Freak these people out! You’re freaked out so let’s all freak out!” And someone had heckled me, or heckled Sheila, and said, “my God, get off the stage!” or something, it was great [laughs]. And then after he came up to me and was like “Rosie?” and I was like “yes sir?” And he said, “it was you wasn’t it?” And I was like, “[whispers] yeah but don’t tell anybody!” And he was like, “well I heckled you, I’m sorry,” and I said, “no it was perfect! It was awesome!”

You covered a couple of old country songs on your new album.

Yeah, one with Mr Ed Harcourt.

Yeah, that’s a beautiful song. How did that come about?

I called him [laughs]. I had the pleasure of meeting him a few times and his voice blows me away. Oh man, his voice! It’s a problem, I’m telling you. Woah! He came to the studio and I was like, “Ed, buddy, you have to leave. I cannot watch you sing anymore.” He came to the studio and he was dangling off the door like a monkey, and my producer was just like “who is this guy?” And I was like, “you’re gonna love him. Don’t even ask, just love him.” He’s adorable. I met him a few years ago and he played piano all night, he did this press thing that Sub Pop had sent me on, and I’m not a big fan of those and there’s Ed, playing the piano for everybody in the hotel lobby until four in the morning. Entertaining everybody, and it was like, “this guy is amazing!” So he happened to be in Seattle playing a show and I was trying to figure out who I wanted to do the duet with, and I thought, “Ed’s going to be in town, let’s call him.” So he came, and that worked out great.

Who do you consider your major influences? Not only musical... seeing as your lyrics are often very literary, I wondered if you had literary influences?

Well, that’s a great question. I would still have to say though that although I’m a fan of poetry, I’ve had a hard time with it. Like, can I really read this without laughing my ass off? I’ve become more of a fan

of poetry and that type of literary work as of late, so I think going back, it would be more folk musicians that have influenced me. Joni Mitchell, of course, is a huge one. And Stevie Wonder, Motown. I think that was the thing that really encouraged me in writing from the heart. It wasn’t even lyrically, it was more the presence of the voice that I heard in the songs my father introduced us to. Aretha Franklin’s voice – it didn’t matter what she was saying, even though the songs are great, it was just I kept listening to her voice. She could have been mumbling anything and I believed every word. I thought, this woman’s soul is crying out. It’s joy-filled and I could feel it in the way she sang and that inspired me more than anything, just that soul.

And so when I thought about writing, how could you write and bring that into it as well, not just the voice but the whole package deal, it was really Motown music that was a huge influence, growing up in Detroit, especially. My father, who was a musician as well, was always opening us up to rock and roll and introducing us to the Beatles and everything. But Motown was what stuck with me, more than anything. Stevie Wonder was a huge one, oh my God. His lyrics and the way he would describe something, it just made my heart fall out. And I wanted to write that way.

It was Joni Mitchell that made me think, I wonder if I could ever convey something like she conveys it. Not even vocally, just lyrically – I thought, how could I write something that’s that specific. I can see every colour, everything in that room, the place that she’s sitting, all of it. I’m still, oh my gosh, I don’t know if I will ever... that’s a talent of hers that is beyond anything I know. It’s ridiculous, how perfect she is at description. At describing every aspect, so you feel that you’re there. And I think that’s why writing from the heart is really important to me, because I have to believe that Joni Mitchell would write those songs because she really experienced those things. You have to be a very open person to be able to write like that. If you’re open to life, in any area, if you’re heart is soft and you can take in joy and sorrow and all angles of it, I think how could you not write? Because if you’re a person who feels and allows that to really hit you, then there’s no way you can lose at trying to describe it, if you’re really honest about it.

I feel privileged because I think about life and it’s so hard-hearted, and I’m so

thankful everyday that I’ve never gotten hard-hearted. I’ve never gotten jaded somehow. Every time I fall in love, I give it all. Again, and again! Like, “yeah, this is it!” There’s never that part like, “you’re going to fail me.” No, I go into it like it’s a brand new experience and I feel so privileged that I take in life that way. Even being in Europe, the first time I came I remember thinking, “I’ll never see these buildings like I’m seeing them now.” But I made myself. I have to stop and go, “don’t become a jerk just because you saw it already, take that in!” I have to remind myself sometimes to remain vulnerable.

One last thing. I wanted to ask you about the album artwork, is it by a friend of yours? I think it really captures the record.

My father, the classic musician, is always asking, “when are you going to put a picture of you and a guitar on the cover?” And I’m like “yeah dad, when we’re gone and buried. No and never.” So most of the pictures that are taken, I’m looking down and I don’t like the traditional shots, I try to steer away from that as much as possible. But with this record, he [Dave Pauls] wanted to do a painting and I’ve always been a big fan of his artwork, it’s just phenomenal. He’s been struggling for years, and you look at his artwork and think how is that possible? And he’s such a wonderful person. So, I called and said, “do you wanna do a portrait?” And he said “yeah,” and I said, “how about the whole record?” And he said, “really?” And I said, “yeah man, go to town.” I was a little bit worried. I knew it would be my face on the cover, but because it’s a painting I can forget it’s me and just look at it. I sent him the music and basically told him to do what he felt. It’s really important to me that when people are part of it – whether it’s melodically, the guitarist, the drummer – that they bring themselves into it.

With collaboration – if you’re going to do a magazine you don’t want to tell somebody what to do, you want to go, “I’m a writer on this level, and then you bring into it what you bring.” And then by all of that, we can collaborate and by all of our creativity and our heart and minds, we can put something together. It’s really great. With Dave Pauls, I sent him the record and said, “I’m not going to give you any direction, I want to see what you get from it.” And it couldn’t have been more perfect. ■



Signora Storm

For a woman so petite and slender, Boston resident Eileen Rose sure knows how to straddle them genres. In the course of her career, she's been likened to everyone from Janis Joplin to Stevie Nicks, Patti Smith to Paul Simon, Bruce Springsteen to, er, a "one-woman mid-period Floyd". And now the scourge of many a music critic is back after a three-year absence with yet another stunning, unputdownable album. Come *The Storm* ranks as her finest achievement to date, building on the promise of her fully-formed debut *Shine Like It Does* (2000) and the rangy, addictive *Long Shot Novena* (2002). It's also her most poignant, dealing as it does in the weight of the world with depth and remarkable flourish. Backstage at *The Borderline* before her first London show in an age, the atmosphere is easy and Eileen seems incredibly relaxed. It's not surprising really, she's always been at home there and they, too, have taken her to heart. In what passes for a dressing room in the venue's spartan surroundings, she talks to **Alan Pedder** about her love of London, fighting with the church and going crazy in the snow...

Last time we heard from you, you were packing your bags and heading back to Boston. Was it something we said?

[giggles] No, it was around 9/11 and all that tragedy, the subsequent war and everything that was happening, I felt like I'd been away for twelve years and I really just felt I wanted to be around my family. My parents are about 80 now. Without being maudlin, you don't know how much time they have left and I just wanted to be in America for a while, y'know? And I did and I took my time with the next record and I learned to play the piano, and get better and recorded it, and I was just around them and got to know them all again, my brothers and sisters – I have eight brothers and sisters – but now that the record's coming out it's all starting up again, I've been away for six weeks and I gotta go home for Christmas and I'll be away again. I said to them "you better not die when I'm away or I'll feel really bad!" [laughs]

How was the America you returned to post 9/11 different to that which you left? Are you worried about what the future holds?

When I first got back there was still that residual patriotism, which is good and is bad. On the one hand obviously it's nice because it's nice to see people bonding together over something and proud of where they come from, on the other hand it also has its scary side where, y'know, they just wanna go blow somebody up, whether they know we're coming or not... I don't know. But I think in the country it's a little bit nervous right now, because the President's iffy and his cabinet's iffy.

We're tired of being at war over something we're not sure about, and with storms and floods and hurricanes.

It's been a really terrible year!

It's really been bad, y'know, that's why my new record is kinda heavy and it's not quite so [clicks fingers twice] and I just can't think about booze, boys and Saturday nights right now.

There's a line in Stagger Home that seems like quite a political lyric.

You're the only person whose spotted it!

"Paint the rooms different colours and nothing red or white or blue / Well there's all this sad talk lately 'bout the damage they will do, if they have to". Are you talking about civil rights issues, the uncertainty over Iran, or something totally different?

Everything. There's plenty of problems with civil rights issues, not to mention raging war in Afghanistan, Iraq and, um, y'know, this president, he doesn't care about peace, he's ruined everything Clinton did with the country, he doesn't seem to care that America is polluting the world more than anybody else, not to mention civil liberties that I'm all for – I don't mind being inconvenienced, I don't mind waiting at airports for safety and all that, but I do mind being spied on. I don't want the Big Brother aspect, it's spooky.

It's getting that way here too. You can't move without being on CCTV.

No kidding! You know what I'm thinking? Who's watching all this stuff? It must be

really boring! There's so many cameras around, I feel like I must have lipstick on all the time!

Well, there's certainly no shortage of lofty ideas on the album. Most obviously, there's the songs about spirituality, or rather a lost or elusive godliness. What impelled you to write about that?

I was raised a Catholic, and me and the Catholic Church don't get along... we're having words. I would like to believe in God, I would like to believe in something, but sincerely believe in it and not just say it. I know faith is something you choose to have, but it just seems like I've never had one of those moments where I was sure or really felt something. I've dabbled with a little bit but the Catholic Church is just... I mean, I think Jesus was a really cool guy and I agree with everything he had to say. You can't disagree with Jesus. It's like disagreeing with the Dalai Lama! I mean, when he says forgiveness and compassion, you can't really say, "no, I don't think so" [laughs]. But what the Catholic Church has done with it is something else. They've made it about control and they train us to feel bad about ourselves, to believe that we're born flawed and no matter what we do, we'll always be flawed. But to them God is so cool and as long as you say to him, "I'm horrible and I don't deserve it", then he'll love you. To me that's just kinda weird, and I think it's self-destructive... well, I shouldn't say self-destructive, but I think it doesn't encourage the kind of self-love that you need to have, y'know. It makes me nervous!



So do you think that God approves of things like gay marriage?

If there is a God out there who disapproves of gay marriage, then bring on the devil. How can you disapprove of two people who care about each other and loving each other? I don't care what they are, I don't care if it's black or white, same-sex, or old and young. How can you think that's a bad thing? I think gay people have every right to get married, just as much as we do... and divorced! Let them see how it is for a while! *[laughs]*. Let them lose the house, see how they feel. No, seriously, how can you be against any of it? Not to mention the legal aspect of it, it's simply a contract. If I wanna make a contract with my guitar, I should be able to do it.

[laughs] Absolutely! There's also a big dose of loss, not just of love, which I think is evident in all of your albums. Was there really a time where you thought you'd lost your edge, as alluded to on *Never Be The Same*? How did you get your confidence back?

When I was younger and trying to transition into being a grown-up, A lot of the time I was ill, I had relationships breaking up, my first record company went into litigation, the band split up, I had an eating disorder and I was just low. I think I was just growing up, now that I look back on it, and I was just trying to get through all this stuff with my family and Catholicism, finding my place, y'know. All the stuff that you do when you're an overly sensitive singer-songwriter! I don't want to go back there and I'm healthier now, but sometimes I kinda

miss that time because I felt poignant. I mean, when someone dumps you, isn't music better?

Hell yes!

You know what I mean? Everything feels more edgy and uncomfortable, and I kinda miss it. Oh no, I feel terrible for saying that. Something bad's gonna happen to me if I don't stop talking about it! *[laughs]* As I get older I don't want to lose my problems. Not that I want to make trouble, I just don't wanna lose that ability to feel. I don't want to become complacent.

One thing I love about the album is that these big themes are counterbalanced by a constant undercurrent of the grounded and elemental.

You really listened to this record, huh?

[laughs] Well, they're all in there, water, fire, earth, air, rains, winds and storms. So it's not really a surprise to learn that the album was written in the winter. How did the location and season inspire you?

When I first came home to the States, I had to sorta ease my way into things, y'know, being around my family. So what did I do? I went and lived on an island *[Martha's Vineyard]* with about two hundred people on it. Because it's a little posh, expensive Kennedy type of island in the summer and in the winter no-one's there. So you can rent these amazing places for really cheap money, so I went to this place that Jackson Pollock and Thomas Hart Benton used to hang out in. It was an amazing house, but it snows and it snows, and then it

snows again and they don't plough. So it basically turned into *The Shining* after a while. Really, honest to God, I kept seeing this little girl. So, there's nothing to do but write and work and really get into it, so maybe some of the songs are a little desperate. It was difficult, but it yielded some good things.

Do you think it's good to not feel comfortable when making music?

Yeah, I do. I'm not really interested in music that doesn't have anything to say and isn't taking some kind of risk. Y'know, pushing something, some kind of button. And I think in order to sincerely do that, you've got to put yourself in a place that's uncomfortable, at least mentally, emotionally.

Was the writing process much different to that of your previous records?

It felt heavier because I think the world felt heavier. Ever since those towers went down, I feel like the world has changed, everything's changed. And I don't think we're even sure what it is yet, y'know. Not to mention what's happening politically, it feels to me like the world is trying to cleanse itself. The reason we're having all these natural disasters, it feels like the world is trying to shrug us off like vermin. We have to listen, we have to do something about it.

Did you have a distinct sound in mind?

I did, and I always do, but because I don't sell millions of albums, when I go into record, I have a really limited budget. And limited budget means limited time. I mean, I would love strings, but I can't afford strings, or maybe I would like a hurdy gurdy but how can I find a hurdy gurdy for fifty bucks? Y'know? So what I hear in my head has never gone down on tape, it's always what I can afford. It's an approximation. It's like seeing something in designer label and heading down to Top Shop. That's just the way it goes, y'know, but I've always been able to express myself in the way I wanted to. Maybe one day I'll get all the accoutrements!

There's a lot of piano on the album, which is a new instrument for you. Did you teach yourself?

Yeah, is it quite evident?

No! It's lovely!

I do this thing where I hold the sustain down always. It's kind of my thing. You

know why, because I can't play and look at my foot at the same time! *[laughs]* I try! But you know, most cool things are discovered by accident so what the heck.

So are you just as comfortable as you are with guitar now?

It's getting there, especially after this tour. At first I was scared and I'd look down at my hands and see my fingers shaking. Y'know I hit a bum note once in a while, but big deal. If I make a mistake, so what?

Ocean Of Fire was written for the Disney film Hidalgo. How did that come about?

I've had a song in a movie called *The Rookie* and a couple of TV shows, and the same guy who got those for me called and said, "do you wanna try writing a song for this movie called *Hidalgo*?", which I did, but I missed the deadline so it didn't actually make it into the movie! It was a really bad movie anyway.

[laughs] Really?

It's just slow. They tried to make this huge epic film but it was just loong and dull. I'd like to get a song on *The Sopranos*. I love that show and I'm half-Italian so they should ask me! *[laughs]*

How do you feel about programmes like The OC having such an influence on people's listening taste?

It's a goofy programme, but if they called and wanted to put a song on *The OC*, I'd say "yes ok, thank you". Jonathan Rice, who I just did a tour with, got to be known a whole lot better by people seeing his song on *The OC*.

There's a reference to the London Underground on Stagger Home. What did you miss most about our lovely capital?

Mostly I miss the people. Obviously, I was here for twelve years and I have a massive affection for English people. I think they're funny and tough, and the day of the London bombings, of course I called everyone I know and they were all like "oh yeah, it's fine, we're used to this. We just went down to the pub." And I was like, "you're not gonna stay home and be careful?" and they said "no, I'm gonna do what I always do!"... they make me laugh. So, yeah, I mostly miss the people. But last night I had a walk around the Tate Gallery and along the river. It's just such a beautiful city, and I know it has its aggravating

things, and I know you can't get a cheese sandwich at four in the morning, but I don't care. I'm interested in the feel and the history of the place. I go to the States and I can't help thinking, I mean Boston is a pretty old town and I love my country, but sometimes it feels a little soulless. When I go to Italy, I love it... it's old and it feels substantial.

Me too. I lived in Naples for three years.

You did? I've been working on my Italian for the last three years now so when I tour Italy I can speak Italian and I even do an Italian song onstage.

Wow! I can only say "ten slices of ham"!

[laughs] I'm sure that comes in handy... at moments! I've actually got some Italian friends coming tonight so I'm gonna play an Italian song. I'm sure I sound like Latka *[Andy Kaufman's character]* from *Taxi* or something when I'm speaking in Italian, but they appreciate the effort. At least, I think I'm communicating. They smile and nod their heads.

Do you think you'd ever come back to London to live?

I'll probably always have a foot here, y'know, I know too many people and there's too many people I love, and they respond to my music, which is part of my life. So I probably will.

Are there obvious differences between British and American audiences then?

In America, it's hard to say because Boston audiences are different from California audiences, different from New York... it's so big, so diverse, y'know. But, I think in general, when you get out of the major cities, people relax when they watch you and they will listen. As soon as you're playing in a major city, there's a lot of chin stroking and folded arms, y'know, go-ahead-impress-me's. Maybe one reason is, when you're in a city like London... I mean, how great is the music here? Who am I competing with tonight? What else is playing? There are so many amazing people so there's other places they could be. But if you're playing some tiny town in Montana, you're like "thank you for coming, we love you!". I like those audiences!

Are there any other female artists you feel a particular affinity for?

Well, I'm always banging on about Kate Bush of course. I feel really attached to

her, y'know, I love her. Of course, Patti Smith. I love Laura Nyro, I love Kristin Hersh. I feel like I should mention this really great Boston band called The Dresden Dolls.

Oh yes! Their Coin-Operated Boy is such an amazing song!

Yeah, it's a great song. And *[lead singer Amanda Palmer]'s* so dramatic, funny and saucy. Smart as, too. So there's quite a few, lots really.

So what's your take on the new Kate Bush? Do you think she's brave to come back after so long away?

I think Kate Bush is so far ahead of her time that she could take twelve years off and still be right in there. I've only heard the single but I've ordered the new record so it'll be waiting for me when I get home. She's just incredible. I mean, I have an emotional reaction just to her voice. When I hear it, it just does something to me. And I know a lot of people say that about Emmylou Harris, but I don't get that. I recognise that Emmylou Harris is a great artist but I just don't get that reaction from her. Maybe it's because I discovered Kate Bush at fourteen, and you know what that age is like, whatever you're playing just locks you in, right? So I'll always follow Kate Bush, even through highs and lows, goods and bads. *Hounds Of Love* is my favourite album... it's so hard to choose a favourite song. I love *Watching You Without Me*. It's such a spooky song, y'know. Her loved one's at the house, and she's died, obviously, and comes back to see the person waiting for her and says "you don't know I'm dead yet"... gives me chills! I'm getting chills just talking about it! I also really like this Canadian artist called Jane Siberry, amazing voice.

Oh, I love her song, It Can't Rain All The Time. Beautiful. Anyway, last question. A bit random but no matter... what makes you feel most free?

Definitely when I'm playing. When I'm playing and the audience is into it, and you're up there and you know you've got 'em. Then I feel like I'm in a comfort zone. And also when I'm with my family, and all my brothers and sisters are there and you're sitting around the kitchen table making fun of each other and laughing. It's those times when I get that "God is in his heaven and everything is right with the world" feeling. ■

When Oasis sang “There we were, now here we are” in 1995, when Britpop and ‘cool Britannia’ ruled the airwaves (no, that’s still not funny), they could hardly have predicted the resonance their words would have a decade later. In a year that has seen a reversal of fortunes for even that most derided collective, it seems that many have embraced the concept of a Britpop revival, brimming with nostalgic retrospectives painting the past red, white and blue. Yet, while commentators gush over the cultural significance of that Blur vs. Oasis stand-off and clamour for their own piece of rock history, the also-rans have received little more than cursory footnotes, and in the case of the many guitar-wielding females, are barely reflected in the critical rearview mirror.

Stephen Collings picks up the thread and asks where are they now?

Born out of the drug-induced rave and baggy scenes of the early 1990s, Britpop was partly a reaction against the continued dominance of American music, from the soap-dodging grunge acts to the misogynistic, brash poodle-permed rockers. Despite the scores of UK shoegazing bands who threatened a mainstream assault in the preceding years, none ever really materialised, and, ultimately, it was the fallout from the grunge hangover and the untimely death of Kurt Cobain, the genre’s brightest star, that turned the focus of consumers back to home shores. Whilst the resurgence of British music is a typically cyclic affair – how many times since the Sixties have the music press trumpeted impotent invasions of UK music “not seen since the Beatles”? – Britpop was one of the first truly postmodern musical movements, liberally borrowing from its antecedents from glam and mod-rock via punk. Photocopying decades wholesale, bands like Suede, Oasis, Blur and Pulp found themselves at the forefront of a musical renaissance, and for a few years in the mid-1990s, British music was vital again.

Originally touted as the “new wave of New Wave”, Britpop first hit the front pages in 1992 with the sordidly suburban Suede, whose caricature camp frontman Brett Anderson spouted bed-situationalist lyrics whilst doing unspeakable things with a microphone. But before they became the darlings of the press, Suede had a fifth member in one Justine Frischmann, rhythm guitarist and Anderson’s then-girlfriend. The affair was short-lived, however, and Frischmann soon decamped from the band after falling for a young Damon Albarn, then sporting a pudding-bowl haircut and fronting the early, baggy-purveying incarnation of Blur. At first embittered by her experiences of the music industry, both with Suede and vicariously through Blur, Frischmann flirted with the parent-pleasing route of studying for a degree in architecture, but opted instead to kick-start her own cause, recruiting drummer Justin Welch, punkette guitarist Donna

Matthews, and bassist Annie Holland to form Elastica. Immediately after they hit the fertile London indie scene in 1994, Frischmann and friends courted redtop headlines for Justine’s relationship with the ever more popular Albarn, but it was their brand of angular punk-pop, taking in influences like Television and Wire that propelled their self-titled debut album to number one, with blistering two-minute wonder singles like *Connection* and *Waking Up* also blazing a trail up the charts. Unashamedly English, Frischmann eschewed radio-friendly Americanisms in favour of colloquial Cockney, and with a sneer and a two-fingered flick at the camera, she fast became the female figurehead of the burgeoning Britpop scene.

While the Britpop barometer rags NME and Melody Maker fawned over Frischmann’s band, tipping them to lead a US invasion, indie contemporaries Sleeper were treated with cynicism as an exercise in style over substance, with one NME hack suggesting they were “a group made for people who fancy the idea of PJ Harvey minus the neurotica.” First puncturing public consciousness with their pop-culture T-shirts, Sleeper’s popularity almost certainly lay with their pin-up singer Louise Wener, who famously sported the legend ‘Another Female-Fronted Band’ across her chest. Although she actively courted attention, Wener was acutely aware of the ways in which her femininity was exploited, commenting to Top Of The Pops magazine, “Women in bands aren’t treated like musicians, people want you to be a model or a character – they analyse the way you dress and the way you look – you can’t just be a person in a band.”

That said, whilst Wener and her band epitomised the Britpop sound, complete with breathy vocals and “oh” affectations, singing about modern relationships on songs like *Inbetweeners* and *What Do I Do Now?*, they were never a driving force like Elastica. Armed with little more than a bag full of catchy pop tunes, they simply seemed content to go along for the ride.

But Wener, like the erudite Frischmann, always gave good copy and it was no surprise that later, amidst the Britpop hangover, she quit the industry to reinvent herself as an acclaimed author, scoring big with her bestselling novels *Goodnight Steve McQueen* and *The Perfect Play*.

Formed in 1992 by Sonya Aurora Madan, Echobelly also featured out black lesbian Debbie Smith on bass. Like self-proclaimed “clit-rock” band Skunk Anansie (fronted by the confrontational Skin), Madan, an Anglo-Asian, found that she and the band had to contend with the politics of both gender and race. With bands like Oasis patriotically sporting Union Jack guitars, the national flag inevitably became symbolic of the Britpop scene, but Madan, aware of its far-right associations, wore a Union Jack T-shirt sloganed with ‘My Home Too’. Lyrically, too, Echobelly were often political, but they also possessed an unheralded sexuality and beauty. Pointedly, the band’s first single, *Bellyache*, released in 1993, dealt with the emotional turmoil after abortion. Like many of their contemporaries, Echobelly’s unflinching stories were delivered, Trojan-horse style, through catchy guitar riffs and an upbeat fusion of rock and pop. Their second album, *On* (1995), coincided with the peak of Britpop, and featured the pogo-pop single *Great Things*, which almost read like a mission statement with the lyrics, “*I wanna do great things / don’t wanna compromise*”. And though wider interest in the band died out with the embers of Britpop, Madan and a somewhat altered line-up continue to make music and enjoy a loyal fanbase.

Like Elastica and Sleeper, Echobelly were/are a mixed-gender band, and as music writer and author of the highly-regarded *She Bop* and *She Bop II*, Lucy O’Brien, has written, “the attraction of mixed gender is that when it works at its fullest, a woman is paradoxically freer to be herself: attention is less on the ‘novelty’ tag, there isn’t the constant need to prove she can play an instrument. She can negotiate for equal space with the boys.” Indeed, many of the Britpop



bands took mixed gender to its extreme, and in the grand tradition of British pop icons David Bowie, Mick Jagger and Marc Bolan, a muddy diffusion of sexual identities worked in their favour. Dandified frontmen flirted with eyeliner, while the females, like Skin, Madan and Wener, adopted traditionally male characteristics, their confident swagger empowering women across the land to take centre stage.

For all its faults, Britpop also threw the spotlight on bands that, up to that point, had achieved only moderate success. Among the very earliest Britpop bands, the Sarah Cracknell-fronted Saint Etienne had skilfully fused New Wave indie and contemporary rave, but achieved their greatest commercial success during the Britpop years with the hit single, *He's On The Phone*. They're still going too, of course, and their most recent album, *Tales From Turnpike House* (2005), has garnered a slew of career-best accolades. Formed in 1988 and signed to the influential 4AD label, Lush started out as a very different prospect. Fronted by singer/guitarists Miki Berenyi and Emma Anderson, they quickly achieved underground acclaim as a shoegazing band, and were one of the few who managed to weather the grunge scene and other musical waves. However,

by 1996 and the release of their magnificent *Loveline* album, Lush's sound had come into alignment with the constellation of Britpop, and along with this change in direction came bone fide chart hits like *Single Girl*, *Ladykillers* and *500 (Shake Baby Shake)*. Unfortunately, drummer Chris Acland committed suicide soon afterwards and the band felt compelled to dissolve. Anderson has since resurfaced in exciting indie-pop duo Sing-Sing, who release their second album, *Sing-Sing & I* in January 2006.

While the Britpop scene appeared to be a national Zeitgeist with bands springing up from Bristol to Burnage, it inevitably grew into an almost cynical exploitation of guitar-led bands, and eventually reached and surpassed the saturation point. As suddenly as it had exploded into existence, the scene began to fragment. The traditional lines of genre had become so confusingly blurred, even artists as disparate as Portishead and PJ Harvey were ensnared by the music press under the Britpop banner. Portishead, with their shy, smoky-voiced singer Beth Gibbons, were contemporaries of Massive Attack and Tricky in the Bristol-based trip-hop scene, and their introspective songs like *Sour Times* and *Glory Box* could not have been more at odds with happy-go-lucky Britpop anthems like Supergrass' *Alright*. PJ Harvey, meanwhile, had always chosen her own alternative route, but found herself courted by the establishment, which culminated in her sleek and streamlined Mercury Music Prize-winning album, *Stories From The City, Stories From The Sea* (2001), a sound against which she has since (true to form) rebelled.

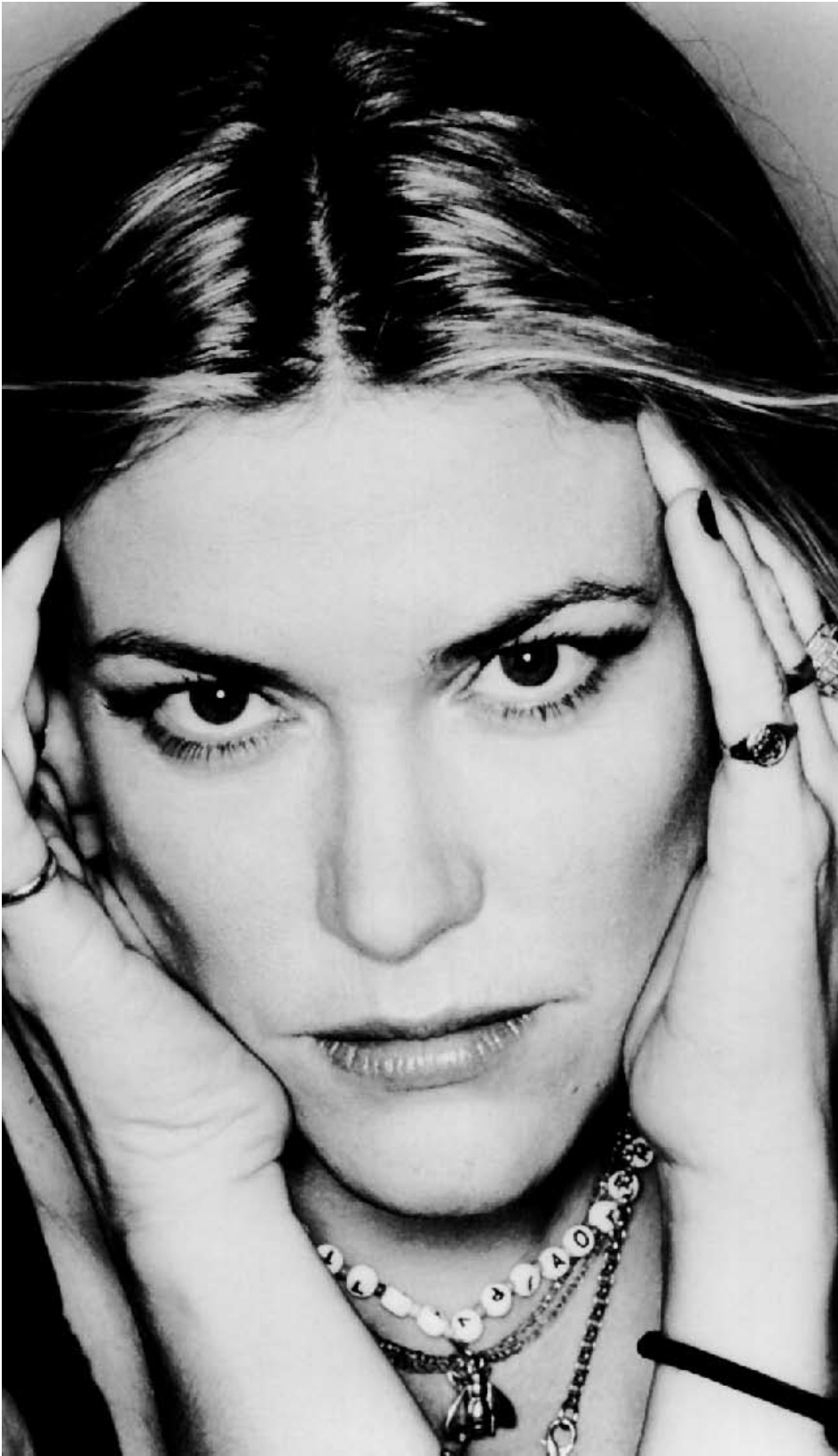
Both referential and reverential, the women of Britpop owed much to their predecessors and rock pioneers like Patti Smith, Debbie Harry and Chrissie Hynde, with Sleeper even recycling Blondie's *Atomic* for the celebrated *Trainspotting* soundtrack. Even though Britpop had usurped grunge in the affections of many music buyers, it also owed much to the sisters across the pond with Throwing Muses, Hole, Smashing Pumpkins, The Pixies and Sonic Youth all featuring prominent female members. Bands like L7, Babes In Toyland and Bikini Kill went further and featured all-girl line-ups, subscribing to the fashionable riot grrrl movement, which instilled a new brand of feminism into America's disaffected youth. However, many of the riot grrrl bands failed to capitalise on the initial enthusiasm, and

by the end of the decade, public interest in the movement had all but dissipated. These days, the legacy of those bands lives on in the likes of Sleater-Kinney and any number of bands to be found on the bill of the regular all-woman Ladyfest events.

By 1996, the UK was about to experience a new form of cartoon-lite feminism as the Spice Girls introduced the term "girl power" into the global lexicon. Empowering teenagers and spawning the start of a new pop revolution, by the time Geri Halliwell sported a Union Jack dress at the Brit Awards in 1997, the bubble of Britpop was ready to burst. The naked ambition that had once made these new bands so exciting had for the most part degenerated into a cocaine blizzard of self-indulgence, and the dilution of quality was an unhappy consequence. In 1995, Britpop seemed to have a purpose, and coupled with a renaissance in British art and fashion, there was an idealism to encourage change, not least after fifteen years of Conservative rule. By the time of the 1997 election, however, the New Labour machine had hijacked the cultural cache, with campaign literature proclaiming 'New Labour, New Britpop'. Music was always meant to be a reactionary force, but as Noel Gallagher schmoozed with the reds at 10 Downing Street, it seemed to have lost its way.

While bands like Blur began to look to the US again to inspire their eponymous 1997 album, the spirit of Britpop remained in a select few acts, notably the sister duo Alisha's Attic and pop-punkers Kenickie, who eschewed feminist politics in favour of blindingly good pop tunes. Kenickie had a brief but bright time at the top before internal frictions led to their breakup in 1998, with singer Lauren Laverne departing to forge a successful career as a music TV presenter, while Alisha's Attic soon grew tired of a chart environment ever more polluted by pop puppets miming to the songs of Swedish hit factories and quit in 2001. In a last gasp attempt to stay the execution of Britpop, the scene's great white hope came blasting out of the provinces of Wales.

Achieving underground success since 1993, Catatonia released their debut album *Way Beyond Blue* in 1996, which featured a number of instantly appealing pop gems, including the singles *You've Got A Lot To Answer For* and *Bleed*. However, despite encouraging airplay on Jo Whitley's Radio One show, none of the singles had any impact. Any column inches in the music press



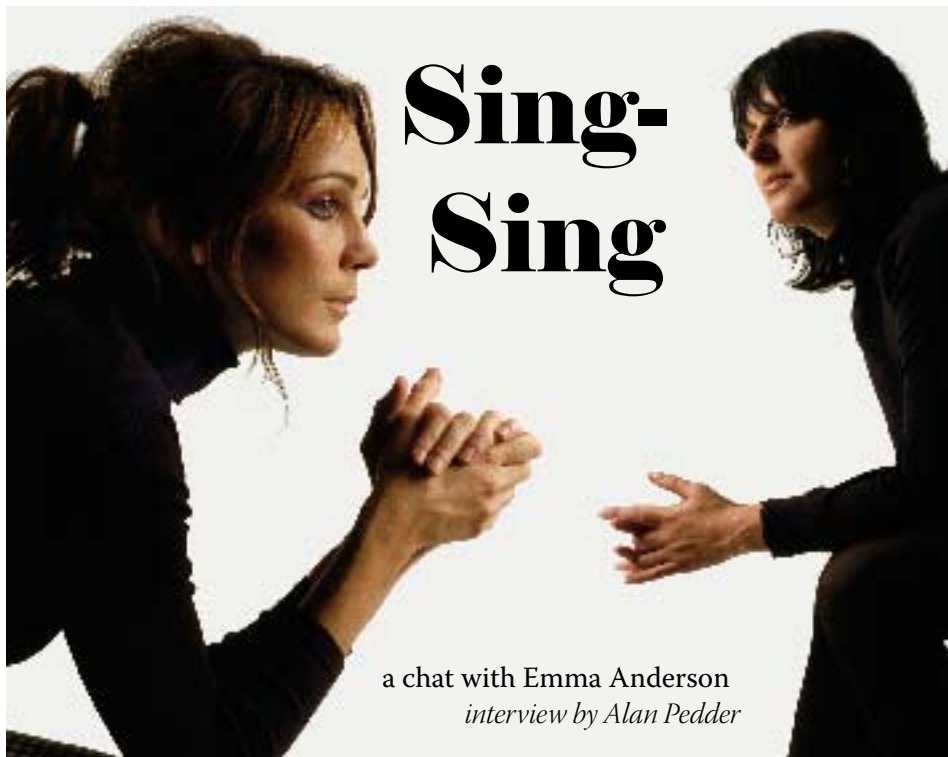
were instead dedicated to their irrepressible singer Cerys Matthews, whose legendary drinking sessions and fighting prowess unfairly detracted from their music. By 1998, while many of their contemporaries were suffering from some pre-millennial tension, Catatonia were scoring top-ten hits with the anthemic *Mulder & Scully* and

Road Rage, and Matthews's exaggerated Welsh tones did nothing but endear her to the nation. Before long, however, and like many bands before them, the success that had eluded them for so long went straight to their livers. Plunging headlong into the excesses of the lifestyle to make up for lost time, a particular low point came when

Matthews posed for a provocative photoshoot for beery lads' mag, FHM. Ultimately, the toll was taken and after cancelled tours in 2001, the band called it a day with Matthews citing "anxiety and exhaustion". A happier Cerys returned in 2003 with an understated and unjustly underrated solo album, *Cockahoop*, dipping a toe in the world of country. Having taken some time off to become a first-time mother, Matthews's second solo effort is due for release in 2006.

By the time the year 2000 rolled around, the Britpop dream was over. After 74 years at the forefront of British music, Melody Maker published its final issue as nu-metal and skate-punk took the mantle of soundtracking teenage rebellion. By 2001, the UK music press had turned its attention back to the US, fawning over the New York scene epitomised by bands like The Strokes and Kings Of Leon, while the home charts became dominated by pop phoenix Kylie Minogue, Britpop hanger-on-turned-last-laughter Robbie Williams and, of course, whoever had won the latest reality TV show. Blighted by heroin addiction, Elastica shuffled line-ups and stalled on the "difficult" second album before their split in 2001. These days, Justine Frischmann is returning to university to study psychology of art, and occasionally crops up on TV discussing modern architecture. She's not entirely done with music either, however; she recently wrote songs with former flat-mate Maya Arulpragasam, better known as MIA, whose debut album *Arular* was among those nominated for this year's Mercury Music Prize. Donna Matthews, meanwhile, has formed a new band, Klang, who released their debut mini-album *No Sound Is Heard* in May 2004 to mixed reviews.

With Franz Ferdinand, Babyshambles and the Kaiser Chiefs sprucing up the sales figures nicely, the once again salivating homegrown music press have felt the urge to proclaim a Britpop revival. Who are we to argue, but it begs the question yet again, where are all the women? Who will step up and be the UK's answer to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Sleater-Kinney et al? Fearsome Scottish rockers Sons & Daughters? The artsy, difficult Electrelane? How about the underachieving Duke Spirit? The Go! Team? If a Britpop revival is really on the cards, an Elastica-shaped breakthrough is urgently required. ■



Sing-Sing

a chat with Emma Anderson
interview by Alan Pedder

Lush's first single, well, mini-album came out in 1989, followed by your first proper album in 1992... which pretty much preceded what is generally recognised as the Britpop era. Was the whole 'movement' obvious to you as it developed?

I think we were quite aware of the bands that were around, especially as we knew some of them. Blur we'd known since 1990... Miki became quite good friends with Jarvis [Cocker] and we got to know Justine Frischmann... and I went out with Justin from Elastica before he joined the band. But we didn't sit down and go "ooh, we've got to make music like that." I think it just permeated what we were doing, simply because it was around at the time. I think there are elements of Britpop on *Lovelife*, but it's certainly not completely Britpop. There might have been a slight sort of conscious decision to maybe up the ante a bit and make a slightly more commercial record, but the style of it was never discussed.

Were you under any pressure from the record company at all?

No, they weren't like that. There's not many labels like 4AD anymore.

Did you personally feel a part of Britpop or did you take the whole media concept with a pinch of salt?

It's weird. When I look back on Lush, some people say "oh, you were a Brit-

pop band" or "oh, you were a shoegazing band", but we never really felt part of any of it, which I think actually I quite like. I think the Boo Radleys suffered from that a bit, they got the shoegazing tag and then the Britpop tag. I didn't really pay much attention, and if we were gonna make another album it was going to sound pretty different anyway. It wasn't a conscious decision to try and jump on any bandwagon at all, it just kinda happened like that. I think the preceding album, *Split*, was quite an introverted record, with a few seven-minute tracks on there. I think we wanted to move away from that a bit.

Do you think the Britpop tag helped or hindered the band overall?

It probably did both. When you get labelled, it probably helps you in some ways because people think "oh, another one of that ilk" and it hinders you in the way that some people might think "oh, but they're not as good as Blur, not as good as Elastica", y'know. It's six of one, half a dozen of the other. You've got to take it all with a bit of a pinch of salt. I mean, I think the fact that we were going for seven years and we managed to keep our heads above the water through all these different movements... Britpop, grunge, shoegazing... I think we had a thread that pulled us through them all. I think we just made some good records.

Even now it seems that women in successful guitar/indie bands seem to be the exception rather than the rule, and even fewer seem to be taken seriously. Did you ever feel your musicianship was undermined by certain quarters of the music press?

I didn't really. I think one of the things about being on 4AD was that there were a lot of women on the label, and certainly being part of that label didn't make you feel like that. The whole women thing, I never really thought about it a lot. Obviously, another movement that sort of happened around that time was riot grrrl, and we got slagged off by riot grrrls because we weren't punky enough, y'know, and it's like, for God's sake. So, yeah, I never really thought about it. But now, I know what you mean. You read the NME and there's hardly any women. It's so male.

Do you think there'll be another time when popular music captures the national mood in the way that Britpop seemed to?

It's funny, at the moment people are starting to say there's like a second wave of Britpop at the moment, like The Futureheads, The Rakes, Bloc Party... Kaiser Chiefs probably spearheading it all. Isn't there supposed to be some kind of new national movement of guitar bands? I've been in this business for so long now that I've seen things come and go. People will get bored of this and they'll be looking to America. Then they'll be bored of America and look back to Britain again. It goes in these cycles. Before Britpop it was all Nirvana, and after Britpop tailed off, they started looking towards America again. It's just normal, I don't even think it's a bad thing. It's probably quite healthy.

What are the rest of the band doing now? Are you still in touch?

Miki... I'm not in contact with but she's got two children. I don't know what she's doing workwise. Phil is very busy, he's in around five different bands. He's also involved with putting out back catalogue stuff and he works a bit with Mojo, Q etc. Steve lives in Ireland with his wife and two children... twins!... he's not involved in music at all.

I was wondering what inspired the name Sing-Sing? Not the mysterious old death house prison in New York?

Someone I knew had put out a demo and called it Sing-Sing. I kind of knew about the prison but mostly I just liked the word

because it's sort of pretty but it has that darker meaning. Kind of like Lush I suppose. So I think that was it really, nothing more than that.

I noticed that you and Lisa pretty much compose the songs separately. Do you have different ways of working or does it just turn out that way?

In some ways, it's like when I was in Lush, but in Sing-Sing, there is a little bit more interaction with the songwriting. When we're in the studio, I'll contribute bits to Lisa's songs and she'll add bits to mine. But in Lush, that didn't really happen at all, it was very rigid. Sing-Sing is a bit more of a studio band anyway. We sit in front of a computer and make the record, we're not like a four-piece indie band that does it in a rehearsal room first. But it's good, I enjoy it a lot this way. You're sitting there and it's easygoing. You can play with things, mess them up, delete things. It's very liberating! Except when it breaks!

Yikes, have you ever lost any songs that way?

No, only once. We did a B-side with this kind of a friend of a friend of a friend in his house in bloody Upton Park or somewhere. We actually got quite far in before it crashed and he hadn't saved it. So we were thinking "you idiot", but somehow he managed to retrieve it all. Took him a while but he got it back by some rescue thingy. Mark, who we normally work with, is quite good at saving!

Now, the new album was originally released in the summer via your own label, exclusively through your website...

Yes. Oh, and Rough Trade had a few copies. That's why we're re-releasing it in January with better distribution and on iTunes. But up to now, people have really only been able to get it through the website.

But before that you were bounced around five or so labels. That must have been really frustrating!

Yeah, the first album came out on Pop-tones, but before that we were on around four different labels. It was a real pain in the arse! Even when it did come out, it wasn't promoted very well.

I know! I've never actually seen an official copy, I've only got a promo.

It's deleted now too, which is a real pain. Eventually we'll get it back and probably

re-press it so you can look forward to that. It's a good album, and it still sounds fresh as well, I think.

How on earth did you keep going?

We just did! There was always something going on. America was always quite interested. We've got a lot of fans in America I think, from my Lush days. I did a lot of touring there and there was a lot of "oh, when are you coming over?" and we signed a deal there in 2002, toured there a couple of times. So when it was getting really frustrating here with all the labels and contracts, we always had that and the fans. That contact with the fans and knowing that people do want to hear your music. It's the best reason to do it really. There were a couple of occasions when I thought "oh God, this is too much!", y'know. But then you're sitting there about two days later and you're thinking, "oh, but it would be a real shame to stop doing it now". So, we didn't.

Hooray! I've heard the Sing-Sing fans are a pretty dedicated bunch. Didn't you fund the sessions for this album with their help?

Yeah, really we couldn't have done it without them. I mean, we put our own money into making an EP, the *Madame Sing-Sing*

EP, thinking if we could sell x amount then we'd have enough money to make an album. But people were sending in cheques for like £100, \$200! It was amazing. We were kinda overwhelmed by it really. It's so nice to have that support.

A lot of people in your position, having had so much trouble with record companies, have given up trying to front their own music and retreated to a behind-the-scenes songwriting role for other artists. Would you feel stifled by that?

A lot of people have suggested this to me, and it's certainly crossed my mind. I'm not ever discounting it but it would be a very different process because you'd have to be thinking about writing for a market. I don't think you'd be writing so much from the heart anymore, you'd be having to think "oh, what's commercial?". And apparently, it's quite difficult to get into. They tend to use the same people, and I've heard that people like Liberty X will go in and they'll demo, like, thirty or forty songs and then they'll just decide. So you'd probably be sitting there going "vote for me!", so I don't know. But to be honest, if I wrote a brilliant song, I'd prefer it to be for an act I was involved in to be doing





it, not somebody else really. *[laughs]* If I wrote a brilliant song! I think I've written some alright songs! The irony is that a lot of the stuff you hear isn't brilliant. Y'know, sometimes I listen to the radio and think, I could write that crap. And people go "why don't you?," and I kinda just don't want to lower myself to it. I do like some stuff in the charts though, y'know, the real out-and-out pop. I'm not a snob like that.

With your fully independent set-up, how do you hope to reach a wider audience?

This release in January is getting distribution so people will be able to get it on Amazon and iTunes. We've employed a PR agent and we've got a plugger. There is kind of a limit to what we can do because we haven't got the money. We can't really take out ads in all the magazines or this, that and the other, y'know, but we're going as far as we can. We've got an Australian deal and it's already out there. And we've signed an American deal; it's coming out there in February.

Who's your label in America?

Well, you probably haven't heard of it. It's called Reincarnate Music, and it's actually run by this guy who used to be my agent when I was in Lush. And a guy who works for them used to work for 4AD in America, so it's great that I know them.

So what do you think is more important these days; an effective online presence, regular live shows or radio play?

God, if I had to choose one of them, I

think it'd have to be radio play. I think if you're all over the radio, you're really getting into people's minds. I mean, to have an effective online presence you have to sit them in front of a computer, and live shows, I think you have to be at the right place at the right time really. We haven't even got an agent for bookings. We're playing a few shows at the moment, just acoustic, but I think you have to tour and really, really work at it for it to help. If you're on the radio, you're pretty much made really. I think it's different depending on the genre. For out-and-out indie, I think maybe the live thing is the most important. A combination of all three is pretty good! *[laughs]*

Are you getting much radio play?

Yeah, even with the first album we got Xfm A-listed with one of the singles, *Feels Like Summer*, and bits and pieces here and there. And then with the new album, we made *Lover* a free download and sort of said it was a single and Steve Lamacq made it his Single Of The Week on 6Music. We've done some sessions for Gideon Coe, Tom Robinson on 6Music, and we've got a Radio 2 session coming up in January which is really good.

So with the album getting that wider release early next year, what's on the cards for you?

Well, it's kind of difficult because Lisa's going to have a baby in February!

That was gonna be my next question!

Yeah, so even though it's coming out, we can't really do anything for it. We can't really play live, not properly anyway, and we certainly can't tour. So, realistically, I think we're just gonna think about writing the third album.

[laughs] That was gonna be my next question too!

So we're gonna see how far we can get with just press and radio and the online thing. Touring is pretty much out of the question! But I think we've got everything in place now for the third album. I mean, getting everything together for this album took a little while, y'know, distributors, press etc., but now we've got a team, it should be quicker and easier to do it! ■





Jane Monheit

At the tender age of 22, jazz vocalist Jane Monheit dazzled listeners with her debut album *Never Never Land*. Five years and three more well-regarded albums of standards later, she is back with not one but two new albums: a Christmas collection, *The Season*, and a well-timed retrospective. **Aaron Alper** was lucky enough to catch Monheit before she set out on tour and, for a few moments, got to pick the brain of the woman behind the vocals.

*There's so many Christmas albums out. What was the inspiration behind **The Season**?*

Well I've always been one of those people that is totally obsessed with Christmas. I always knew I'd make a Christmas album and it seemed like the right time to do it.

What's your favorite Christmas song and why?

Probably *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. I love it like the way I love *Over The Rainbow*; it's one those incredibly classic, beautiful pieces of music.

When was the exact time that you discovered jazz as a vocal means?

Really from the very beginning. I grew up on jazz and we always played it in the house so these were the first tunes I was learning when I was two or three years old.

Did any other vocalists help you to form your style?

I guess it would be Carmen McCrae, Mel Torme, Frank Sinatra, people like that..

And who do you sing along with at home that your fans might be surprised at?

I'm a big fan of singers like Bonnie Raitt and Joni Mitchell but that's not too unusual. I've got a lot of weird records. Björk would be one. I was a big Nine Inch Nails freak for a while [laughs].

So what's next on your schedule?

Well we're leaving tomorrow to start a tour for *The Season* and then we may be going into the studio in the Spring.

What kind of record will that be?

I don't know. Maybe something different. We're thinking of doing a different kind of project rather than an album of standards. We're not really sure yet.

Would you try anything besides jazz?

I really love all kinds of music but there only two things I wouldn't try: metal and opera.

Ok, final question: what's the one thing you want for Christmas this year?

Oh gosh. You know what I want? I want to go on a trip somewhere! ■

Stocking Fillers!

Step into Christmas, the admission's free!



Allison Crowe

What's your favourite memory of Christmas?

My favourite Christmas memory is of a jazz jam on Christmas Eve that our friends, the Christensens, host every year. I've been there, singing and playing, every year since I can remember. It's always a lot of fun, and filled with music!

How are you celebrating Christmas this year?

This year I'll be celebrating Christmas at home in Nanaimo, Canada, surrounded by family and my best friends. 2005 has been a GREAT year, filled with excitement and love and music and life-changing events. I've visited lots of Canada, and, for the first time, toured cities in Europe. Yup, it's been a great year.

Where would like to be for Christmas in 10 years' time?

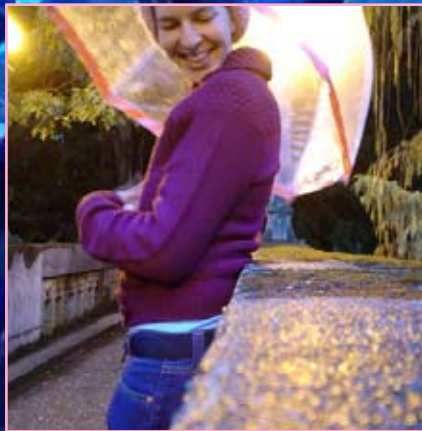
I have no idea where I'd like to be for Christmas in 10 years time, but, as a state of mind, I would like to just be happy! Not too lofty a goal, I suppose, but it's the truth! And, by then, I hope I am still doing what I am doing now, just more of it! I want to be making music for people, now and for all my years.





Do not forget to put the stuffing into whichever flying creature you plan to consume before you put it in the oven. I am thinking of last Christmas, when I for some reason thought I had bought a pre-stuffed goose, and was about to throw out a packet of stuff I found in the fridge until I realised it was in fact the stuffing for said goose. By now, the bird had been in its birdy sauna for a good 30 minutes, and all I'm saying is that putting your hand up the backside of a hot goose is *NOT FUN*.

Nerina Pallot



Rosie Thomas

Sheila Saputo's snowball cookie pizza

Ingredients:

- 1lb sugar
- 10 Twinkies
- 1 pack sausage meat
- 1 can of tomato sauce
- 1 shop bought pizza base

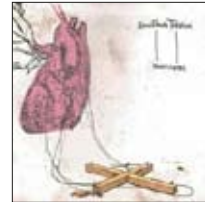
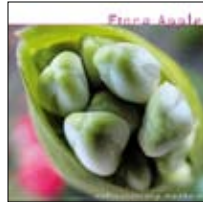
Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 400°C
2. Spread tomato sauce thickly on base
3. Mash Twinkies and mix with sugar
4. Dice the sausage and add to mixture
5. Bake for 10 minutes
6. Liberally sprinkle with red and green M&Ms and serve

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Famous '05

In the year that Kate Bush made a song of the digits of π as only she could, it surely must be fitting that the numbers fell in her favour in this, our very first ever inaugural debut neonatal end of year poll. Woo! Yes, to quote those crrrrazy Cranberries, everybody else is doing it, so why can't we? The votes are in, the envelopes are straining with the sheer excitement, so let's not dilly dally further. The winners and runners-up in the Wears The Trousers readers poll numero uno are...



ALBUM OF THE YEAR

Kate Bush - Aerial

Runners-up:

2. Fiona Apple - *Extraordinary Machine*
3. Martha Wainwright - *Martha Wainwright*
4. Tori Amos - *The Beekeeper*
5. Madonna - *Confessions On A Dancefloor*
6. CocoRosie - *Noah's Ark*
7. Sleater-Kinney - *The Woods*
8. Vashti Bunyan - *Lookaftering*
9. Ani DiFranco - *Knuckle Down*
10. Emiliana Torrini - *Fisherman's Woman*
11. Shelly Poole - *Hard Time For The Dreamer*
12. Imogen Heap - *Speak For Yourself*
13. Sons & Daughters - *The Repulsion Box*
14. Goldfrapp - *Supernature*
15. Rilo Kiley - *More Adventurous*
16. Roisin Murphy - *Ruby Blue*
17. The Cardigans - *Super Extra Gravity*
18. Nerina Pallot - *Fires*
19. KT Tunstall - *Eye To The Telescope*
20. Diane Cluck - *Oh Vanille/ova nil*
21. Rosie Thomas - *If Songs Could Be Held*
22. Sheryl Crow - *Wildflower*
23. MIA - *Arular*
24. Aimee Mann - *The Forgotten Arm*
25. Hanne Hukkelberg - *Little Things*



SINGLE OF THE YEAR

Emiliana Torrini - Heartstopper

Runners-up:

2. Kelly Clarkson - *Since U Been Gone*
3. Kate Bush - *King Of The Mountain*
4. Goldfrapp - *Ooh La La*
5. Imogen Heap - *Hide & Seek*
6. Bjork - *Triumph Of A Heart*
7. Fiona Apple - *O' Sailor*
8. The Pipettes - *Dirty Mind*
9. Feist - *Inside & Out*
10. The Cardigans - *I Need Some Fine Wine...*
11. Madonna - *Hung Up*
12. Sugababes - *Push The Button*
13. KT Tunstall - *Other Side Of The World*
14. Emiliana Torrini - *Sunnyroad*
15. Shelly Poole - *Totally Underwater*
16. Ladytron - *Destroy Everything You Touch*
17. KT Tunstall - *Suddenly I See*
18. Roisin Murphy - *If We're In Love*
19. Mara Carlyle - *I Blame Dido EP*
20. Rosie Thomas - *Pretty Dress*
21. Sheryl Crow - *Good Is Good*
22. Laura Veirs - *Galaxies*
23. Nerina Pallot - *Damascus*
24. Natalie Imbruglia - *Shiver*
25. Mariah Carey - *We Belong Together*

- Runners up:*
- 2. CocoRosie
 - 3. Tori Amos
 - 4. Goldfrapp
 - 5. Emiliana Torrini
 - 6. Nerina Pallot
 - 7. The Organ
 - 8. The Pipettes
 - 9. Rilo Kiley
 - 10. Ember Swift

BEST LIVE ACT
Sons & Daughters

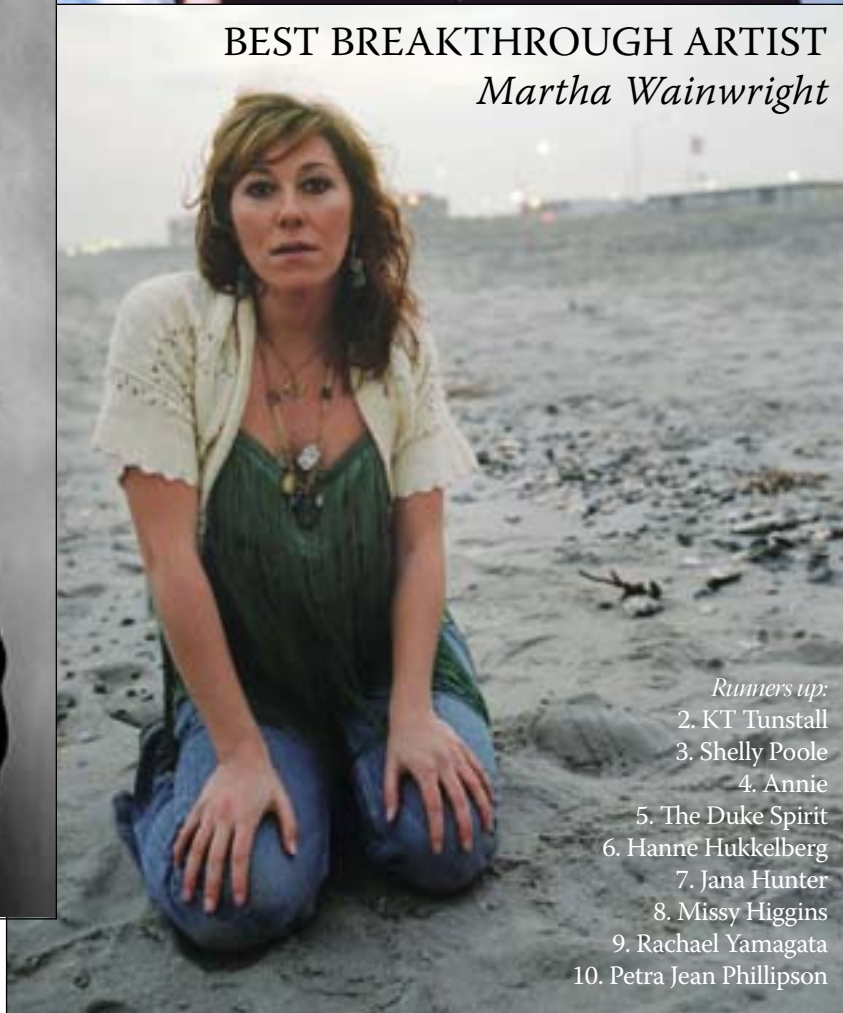


WOMAN OF THE YEAR
Kate Bush



- Runners-up:*
- 2. Vashti Bunyan
 - 3. Patti Smith
 - 4. Kylie Minogue
 - 5. Martha Wainwright
 - 6. Tori Amos
 - 7. Bjork
 - 8. Madonna
 - 9. Melissa Etheridge
 - 10. Alanis Morissette

BEST BREAKTHROUGH ARTIST
Martha Wainwright



- Runners up:*
- 2. KT Tunstall
 - 3. Shelly Poole
 - 4. Annie
 - 5. The Duke Spirit
 - 6. Hanne Hukkelberg
 - 7. Jana Hunter
 - 8. Missy Higgins
 - 9. Rachael Yamagata
 - 10. Petra Jean Phillipson



1. The Pipettes

Polka-dotted trio on a retro girl group pop trip. Think Phil Spector in his prime, the Brill Building era and just plain ol' wholesome fun.

Australian rock sensations fronted by the almighty Juanita Stein. Signed to Bella Union and their self-titled debut is on its way.



4. The Howling Bells



2. The Organ

Often compared with The Smiths, Joy Division and The Slits, Canada's The Organ have just signed to Too Pure. Album due in February.

These co-ed funsters don't need a drummer, they tap dance instead! Debut album *Wild Like Children* finally coming to the UK in February.



5. Tilly & The Wall



3. Be Your Own PET

Nashville's finest decidedly un-country export, fronted by Jemina Pearl, NME's coolest woman of 2005. Self-titled debut out January 30th.

This spooky, quirky brainchild of singer Natasha Khan will charm your heart right out of your chest. For Björk and Cat Power fans.



6. Bat For Lashes

Picks for '06

Six bands, six solo artists, one massive year.



1. Jenny Lewis

This year, Rilo Kiley's invincible frontwoman is leaving the boys with their toys and stepping out solo with melodic and lyrical wonder.

Friend of the Wainwrights and a part-time Johnson for Antony, JAPW is the oddball moniker of one Joan Wasser. The EP is great though!



4. Joan As Police Woman



2. Emmy The Great

We knew she was destined for big things and now she's signed to Drowned In Sound. An album's in the works, so prepare to get excited!

Finnish sci-fi cabaret wonder Heidi Kilpelainen is loved by Björk and Alison Goldfrapp. The musical lovechild of Bowie and Grace Jones.



5. HK119



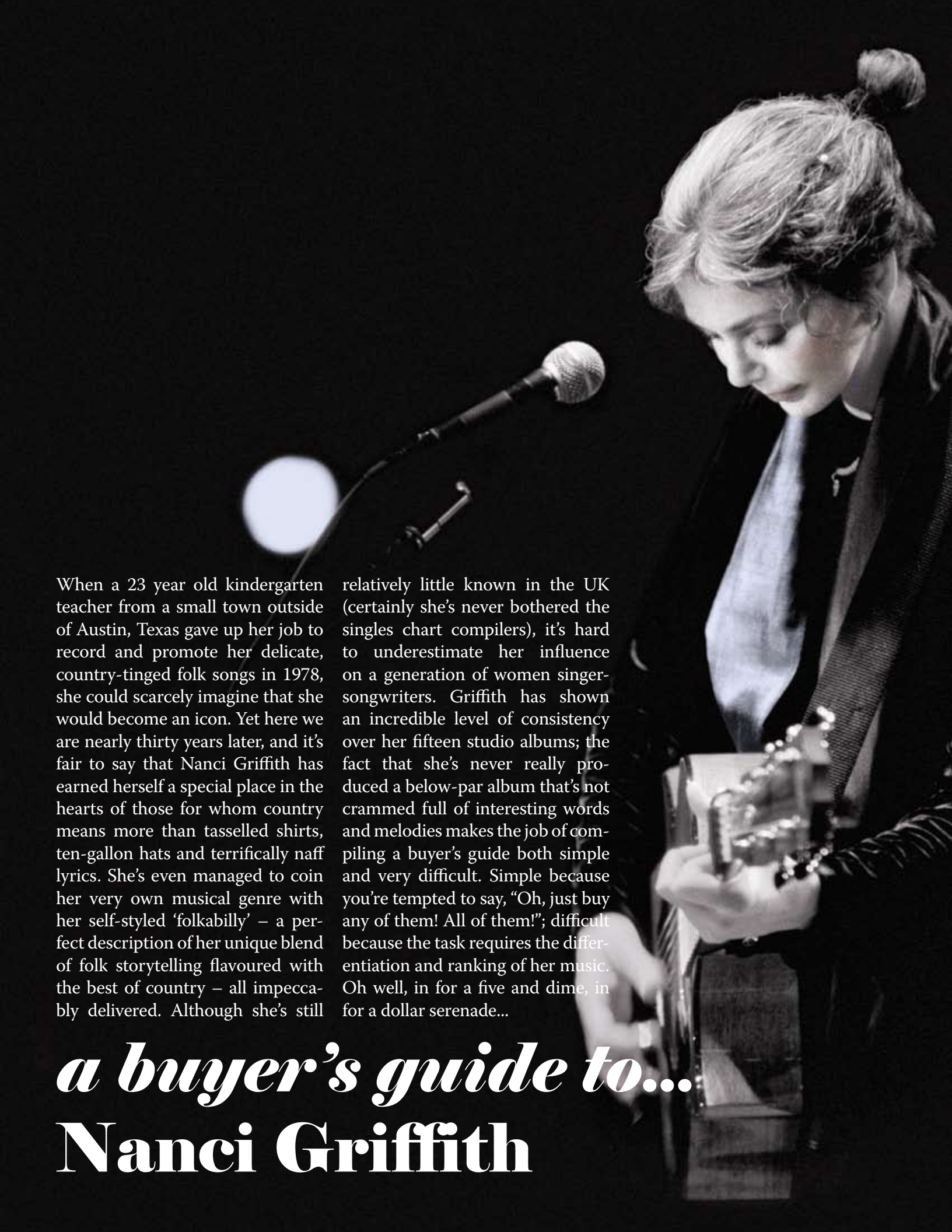
3. Corinne Bailey Rae

Hotly tipped jazz/soul singer with an almost childlike voice that drips with a sweet, delectable languor. Debut album out in March.

With her very own Welsh brand of antifolk, Julia Harris is definitely one to watch for the future. For fans of Ani DiFranco especially.



6. Julia Harris



When a 23 year old kindergarten teacher from a small town outside of Austin, Texas gave up her job to record and promote her delicate, country-tinged folk songs in 1978, she could scarcely imagine that she would become an icon. Yet here we are nearly thirty years later, and it's fair to say that Nanci Griffith has earned herself a special place in the hearts of those for whom country means more than tasselled shirts, ten-gallon hats and terrifically naff lyrics. She's even managed to coin her very own musical genre with her self-styled 'folkabilly' – a perfect description of her unique blend of folk storytelling flavoured with the best of country – all impeccably delivered. Although she's still

relatively little known in the UK (certainly she's never bothered the singles chart compilers), it's hard to underestimate her influence on a generation of women singer-songwriters. Griffith has shown an incredible level of consistency over her fifteen studio albums; the fact that she's never really produced a below-par album that's not crammed full of interesting words and melodies makes the job of compiling a buyer's guide both simple and very difficult. Simple because you're tempted to say, "Oh, just buy any of them! All of them!"; difficult because the task requires the differentiation and ranking of her music. Oh well, in for a five and dime, in for a dollar serenade...

a buyer's guide to... **Nanci Griffith**

CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT



Flyer

Elektra, 1994

Arguably her best album, *Flyer* is chock full of beautiful songs that, even at their most melancholic, are infused with hope and strength of spirit. Released after Griffith's flirtation with a more mainstream sound on *Storms* and *Late Night Grande Hotel*, and though unmistakably contemporary sound (thanks to the production of Peter Collins, better known for his work with the likes of Rush and Gary Moore) it retains the country-folk essence that Griffith excels with. The album also includes some stellar contributions; Emmylou Harris and the Indigo Girls guest, as do Adam Duritz of Counting Crows, U2's Adam Clayton and Larry Mullen Jr., REM's Peter Dinklage, The Chieftains, Mark Knopfler and Tony Levin.



Lone Star State Of Mind

MCA USA, 1987

Griffith's first album with MCA proved to be her real breakthrough. As the title suggests, the approach is firmly rooted in the country sound she'd been developing since *Once In A Very Blue Moon*. *Lone Star State Of Mind* stands out for its memorable tunes and world-class performances. It also features the original and best recording of the much-covered, *From A Distance*. Here, the song glides along with tender piano

and gentle guitar. There's none of the bombast of the Bette Midler version or the overbearing saccharine production of Cliff Richard's rendering. Other standout tracks include the title track, the beautiful depression-era ballad *Trouble In These Fields* and a re-recording of the title song from her debut, *There's A Light Beyond These Woods* (Mary Margaret).

PRETTY DARNED SPECIAL



Other Voices, Other Rooms

Elektra, 1993

As a collection of covers paying tribute to her songwriting heroes, Griffith's first album after moving to Elektra was an unusual but inspired choice, and a welcome return to her folkabilly sound. The choices take in a diverse range of artists, from Bob Dylan and Ralph McTell to John Prine and Emmylou Harris. Where *Other Voices...* succeeds is the palpable sense of Griffith's enjoyment of the material. In fact, so infectious is this feeling that even the more peculiar choices, like album closer *Wimoweh*, seem charming rather than odd.



Last Of The True Believers

Rounder/Philo, 1986

This last album before her move to MCA shows all the hallmarks of an artist growing in confidence and maturity. Again, it's full of great bluegrass-tinged country-folk tunes performed by Nashville's best, many of which

have become long-time fan favourites. Standout tracks include the brilliant title track, *Love At The Five & Dime's* poignant tale of young lovers, *More Than A Whisper*, *Love's Found A Shoulder* and *The Wing & The Wheel*. And, yes, that is Lyle Lovett waltzing with mega-platinum songwriter, Diane Warren, on the front cover. Stranger things have happened. my friends.

WORTH A POP



Storms

MCA USA, 1989



Late Night Grande Hotel

MCA USA, 1991

The lack of support (or even appreciation) afforded to her *Lone Star State Of Mind* and *Little Love Affairs* albums by the Nashville music press and country music radio prompted a move to MCA's pop division in Los Angeles. This led to the two most atypical, mainstream albums in the Nanci Griffith canon. Whilst their sound is markedly different from her earlier works, there's no dearth of great songs; *It's A Hard Life* *Wherever You Go* and *Listen To The Radio* are particular highlights. *Storms* employed Eagles producer Glyn Johns and featured guest spots from former Eagle, Bernie Leadon, Phil Everly and legendary country guitarists Jerry Donahue and Albert Lee. *Late Night Grande Hotel* moved even further from Nashville in both sound and geography, with the main recording sessions being held in

the UK. The mainstream AOR production by Rod Argent and Peter van Hook seemed to almost completely divorced many of the songs from Griffith's trademark country sound, save for unmistakable Texas twang of the vocals. Still, the album stands on its own merits and features contributions from Tanita Tikaram and Phil Everly.

ALSO RECOMMENDED



Poet In My Window (Rounder/Philo, 1992), *Once In A Very Blue Moon* (Rounder/Philo, 1994) and *Little Love Affairs* (MCA USA, 1988) for classic, early country-flavoured Griffith. In addition, *Other Voices Too: A Trip Back To Bountiful* (Elektra, 1998) is a worthwhile second set of folkabilly cover tunes and *The Dust Bowl Symphony* (Elektra, 1999) is a nice retrospective collection of songs re-recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra.

LIVING IT UP



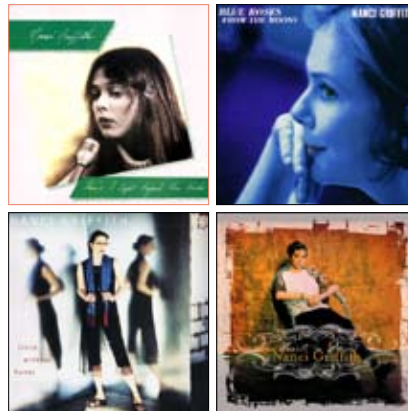
One Fair Summer Evening
MCA USA, 1988



Winter Marquee
Rounder, 2002

These two live records are quite different prospects. The more recent *Winter Marquee* canters through the back catalogue with able musical muscle from Griffith's usual band, the Blue Moon Orchestra, and conveys her live show well. *One Fair Summer Evening* sees the singer in a more exposed setting, with only keyboards, double bass and harmony vocals as backing. This wonderfully intimate experience is added to even further by Griffith's sometimes rambling musings and twanging Texas narration. Perhaps not one for the uninitiated, but a little gem of an album for those more accustomed.

FOR THE FANS



Griffiths' debut, *There's A Light Beyond These Woods* (Rounder/Philo, 1978), is a fine set of tunes that is only overshadowed by the quality of what came immediately after, but should be checked out afterward. *Blue Roses From The Moons* (Elektra, 1997) is an album which, with the collaboration of Buddy Holly's backing band The Crickets and the Blue Moon Orchestra, should be amazing but somehow falls short. The two most recent albums, *Clock Without Hands* (Elektra, 2001) and *Hearts In Mind* (New Door/Universal, 2004), are

both good, workman-like sets of songs and, while there's nothing wrong with them, don't seem to hold the magic of the earlier discs.

A TOE IN THE WATER



There are numerous compilation albums out there, all of which mine similar areas of Griffith's catalogue – notably the MCA years. But whilst many of these are a good starting point and great value for money, *The Complete MCA Studio Recordings* (MCA/Universal, 2003) narrows the options to one. This 2CD collection, available in many places at single album prices, gathers together the complete *Lone Star State Of Mind*, *Little Love Affairs*, *Storms* and *Late Night Grande Hotel* albums with some rare tracks and B-sides, all of which are generously remastered. For anyone looking to dive into the oeuvre of Nanci Griffith, there can't be a better buy. Snap one up before MCA comes to its senses and realises what it's doing! Others are: *The Best Of Nanci Griffith* (MCA, 1993), *Wings To Fly & A Place To Be: An Introduction To Nanci Griffith* (MCA/Universal, 2000) and *From A Distance: The Very Best Of Nanci Griffith* (MCA, 2002). ■

Download these:

1. From A Distance
2. Trouble In The Fields
3. Last Of The True Believers
4. These Days Are An Open Book
5. This Heart
6. Speed Of The Sound Of Loneliness
7. From Clare To Here
8. It's A Hard Life Wherever You Go
9. Listen To The Radio
10. Gulf Coast Highway
11. Outbound Plane
12. Love At The Five & Dime (live)

Kate Bush

Aerial

EMI

★★★★★



Absence, it seems, really *can* make the heart grow fonder, even in the music press. Think about it: if Kate Bush had continued making records at regular intervals over the last twelve years, she would almost certainly have been subjected to even harsher critical judgement than the cold shoulder shrug that greeted her last two albums, *The Sensual World* (1989) and *The Red Shoes* (1993). Reviewers of those records at the time accused Bush of operating below her capabilities, though both albums were in fact full of inventive and rewarding music. All these years down the line, however, it seems that all has been forgiven, and the belated release of *Aerial* has been treated by certain publications as something akin to the Second Coming. For Bush's fans too, every year of silence that passed made the prospect of a new opus ever more tantalising, yet more unlikely. All of these factors conspire to make *Aerial* unquestionably the year's most anticipated album. But can any one record withstand such weight of expectation?

The answer, happily, is an emphatic "yes". Careering from the domestic to the epic, from the inside of a washing machine to the bottom of the ocean, *Aerial* offers listeners all the wit, whimsy, weirdness and wonder (not to mention the impeccable musicianship) of Bush's very best work. In fact, just as Elvis in first single *King Of The Mountain* transcends the trappings of fame, wealth and possibly even death to take his place on some Parnassus of the mind, so *Aerial* surpasses the hype, sitting above it a bit loftily but willing to reveal its admitted-

ly complex beauty to any listener prepared to give it the time and attention it deserves. There hasn't been an epic pop album of comparable ambition and artistry (yes, and length) since Tori Amos' *The Beekeeper* earlier this year. This is a record to lose yourself in.


Actually, make that two records. For, in a nostalgic nod to Bush's beloved vinyl era, *Aerial* is a double album, one which, twenty years on, duplicates the structure of 1985's much revered *Hounds Of Love*, its two parts comprising a set of "independent" tracks and a song cycle. While the album preserves the stylistic verve and heterogeneity of her earlier releases, there's a new and greater spaciousness to the arrangements, leaving more space for the distinctive vocals. Though more restrained than ever, Bush's voice retains its remarkable capacity for drama and metamorphosis.

Along with her singing, one of the greatest aspects of Kate Bush's music lies in the wonderful idiosyncrasy of the subject matter of her songs, and on this score too *Aerial* doesn't disappoint. On the first disc, *A Sea Of Honey*, the bracing *King...* segues into *Pi*, a eulogy for an obsessive enumerator and almost certainly the most seductive maths lesson in history with Bush cooing numbers and decimal points over a chugging organ motif. The misunderstood *Mrs. Bartolozzi* is an even more vivid character sketch; the song is not "about" a washing machine, but offers an oblique portrait of widowhood in which the memories of domestic duty and the freedom of the sea may or may not assuage the protagonist's current isolation. Meanings are similarly fluid on the brooding, cinematic *Joanni*. With its arresting battle imagery, the song may nominally be "about" Joan of Arc, but Bush's phras-

ing of the title also conjures links with another significant Joni. The decidedly funky *How To Be Invisible* is the record's most playful moment, with its witty witch's spell and wry, knowing comment on Bush's own "obscurity."

Informed by the birth of her son and the death of her mother, respectively, two of the loveliest songs on *A Sea Of Honey* are also the most personal. *Bertie* feels like something of companion piece to Amos' *Ribbons Undone*, an unadulterated expression of maternal delight and pride as Bush repeats "you bring me so much joy" over Renaissance strings, the simplicity of the statement accentuating her emotional intensity. The stunning *A Coral Room* is a shivers-down-the-spine piano ballad that moves from an underwater city to Bush's intimate memories of her mother, and offers a meditation on the passage of time. With its references to cities "draped in net" and hands trailing in water, the song contains some of her most striking imagery yet. Indeed, in keeping with the sparser approach to instrumentation, there is a new clarity and precision to her songwriting on this record. You see that shirt on the washing line, that spider climbing out of a jug, Joanni "in her armour."

The second disc, *A Sky Of Honey*, is a sublime nine-track sequence that traces the passage of a summer's day, from afternoon to sunset and night and on to the following morning. Birds chirp, Bush chortles, Rolf Harris sings! It's unlike anything you've ever heard, and yet pure and unmistakably "Kate," as life-affirming as *The Ninth Wave* was unremittingly bleak. Parts are almost overwhelmingly evocative; listening to it, you feel your senses being sharpened one by one. Bertie kicks things off, directing his parents' attention to a "sky...full of



birds.” Indeed, birdsong is a central motif, whether sampled or mimicked. Light is another central theme, and as the cycle progresses patterns develop and images recur. “This is a song of colour,” she sings on the glorious *Sunset* as a piano refrain gives way to a delirious flamenco interlude, while *Prologue* finds her at her most lushly romantic, “talking Italian” over a Michael Kamen orchestral arrangement. Just when you fear it’s all becoming too New Age ambient, a bewitching melody or killer chorus swoops in to orientate you. The shifts through moods of reflection, sadness and exhilaration are quite stunning.

Vaughn Williams and Delius (a previous Kate Bush song topic) are presences, and the album blurs the boundaries between musical genres as assuredly as it blurs the distinctions between night and day, dream and reality, forging a space, as one song would have it, *Somewhere In Between*. The record concludes with the joyous, pulsing title track and Bush’s urgent desire to go “up on the roof,” an image of physical and spiritual transcendence to match the one that the album started with. By now “all of the birds are laughing”; so is Kate, and so are we.

As Bush herself intimated in a recent interview, “music should put you in a trance frenzy,” and, at its best, *Aerial* does precisely that. Put quite simply, it’s an extraordinary achievement that once again extends the boundaries of popular music. Of course, there are longeurs and minor indulgences, but it wouldn’t be a Bush record without them, and for her admirers, even the so-called “flaws” have an air of reassurance. Twelve years may have been a long time to wait, but this kind of art is built to last. Tellingly, even after eighty minutes of music, you can’t wait to hear the whole thing again. **Alex Ramon**

Laura Cantrell
Humming By The
Flowered Vine
Matador
★★★★½



Country music is a much maligned genre, and not without some justification. The gross excesses of the Nashville country scene are enough to turn the stomach of even the most hard-bitten music fan. However, for every “Billy Bob Stetson” or “Dwayne Yokel” with their tasselled shirts, ten gallon hats and horrific mullet haircuts, there’s been a Nanci Griffith, a Steve Earle, a Mary Chapin Carpenter or a Lucinda Williams who has been there to haul the genre rightly back from the ridiculous to the sublime. Laura Cantrell thankfully resides in this latter category. Indeed, she has received such widespread acclaim that many regard her as the rising star of the alt.country genre. Influential DJ John Peel proclaimed her debut album, *Not The Tremblin’ Kind* (1999) his “favourite record of the last ten years, and possibly my life” and Elvis Costello quickly enlisted her as a support act and was quoted as saying “If Kitty Wells made *Rubber Soul* it would sound like Laura Cantrell.” High praise indeed.

Humming By The Flowered Vine is Cantrell’s third album and her first for large indie label Matador, in whose pastures she runs alongside some less than likely label-mates, including Cat Power, Belle & Sebastian, Mogwai and Guided

By Voices, and is fearlessly brimming with the confidence of an artist who knows she’s coming of age.

Though her style is pure country, drawing on much of the language of the genre – slide and steel guitar, high third harmonies, traditional folk ballads, fiddle and accordion – Cantrell never allows these elements to add up to a cliché, but rather blends them successfully with a contemporary bent, though sometimes choosing one path or the other. Fittingly, this seems to reflect her life’s journey. Having emigrated from Nashville to attend college in New York City, Cantrell kickstarted her long-running college radio show *Tennessee Border*, which explores both the history of country and its diverse modern expressions, and learnt her trade playing in the city’s trendy coffee bars alongside more folk-based artists. Remarkably, her first two albums were recorded whilst holding a full-time job in a Wall Street investment bank.

Without the day job devouring her time, Cantrell has turned in her finest album yet. The opener, *14th Street*, commences proceedings with a light pop-country paean to her adopted hometown and features exquisite harmonies from Mary Lee Kortess of Mary Lee’s

Corvette. Second track, *What You Said*, has tinges of bluegrass, with Kenny Kosek’s fiddle and Jon Graboff’s mandolin hinting at the breadth of styles to come. There’s slow-burning rock (*Letters*, an obscure Lucinda Williams original), post-war Western swing akin to the likes of Bob Willis & His Texas Playboys with pedal steel and fiddle aplenty (*Wishful Thinking*) and a traditional murder ballad from the 1920s (*Poor Ellen Smith*, also covered by the likes of Kristin Hersh). The pairing of *And Still* and *Khaki And Corduroy* packs some serious emotional weight, with the latter perhaps just nudging it for the album’s most affecting contribution. Here, acoustic guitar and bass, brushes and sparse piano create a melancholy evocation of memories of lost times and old friends.

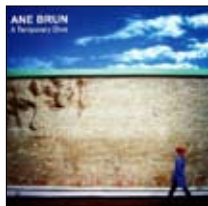
Elsewhere, *California Rose* is Cantrell’s own tribute to Rose Maddox from the Depression-era group, Maddox Brothers & Rose. It’s an unforgettable story of that indomitable spirit of a strong woman forging her way against the odds. The biggest surprise here comes with the closer, *Old Downtown*, which fuses some pretty diverse styles into a delectable slab of modern country rock, as perfect as it is unexpected. It takes some imagination to mix early Steve Earle-style guitars with a heavily syncopated, almost Madchester drum and bass groove, and then to seamlessly segue to an outro of eBow guitars and pedal steel combining into a psychedelic, ambient soundscape. Oh, and all this comes complementary to classic Americana lyrical imagery. It’s easy to see why Cantrell is seen as both curator and innovator within her chosen field.

Humming By The Flowered Vine neatly establishes Cantrell as an alt.country force to be reckoned with. The production by JD Foster, former bassist for Dwight Yoakam, brings out the best of Cantrell and her musicians, delivering an album of great sonic clarity. There’s no filler here either; the disc spins for just 39 minutes, leaving the listener hungry for more rather than fully sated. With songs this strong and backed by a bigger label, Cantrell will almost certainly garner wider, more mainstream recognition and success. Here’s hoping this propels her onto equal or greater achievements. **Trevor Raggatt**

Ane Brun**A Temporary Dive**

DetErMine

★★★½



Norwegian singer-songwriter Ane Brun loves her acoustic guitar Morgan so much that she named her 2003 debut album after him. While he's not the titular hero on this follow-up to that stunning introduction, Morgan's haunting twang pervades each of these ten songs like a breath of fresh air. If troubadouresses are your thing, *A Temporary Dive* will grab your attention from the start – Brun has a highly distinctive, ensnaring voice that sets her apart from others in her field. The sheer organic nature of her music is nothing short of praiseworthy in an industry where greedy producers can get a bit button-happy when twiddling their knobs. Part of the praise must go to Brun herself who turned down several major-label offers to release the album on her own DetErMine Records, defiant in more ways than one (the Norwegian roughly translates to “it is mine”). More praise still must be heaped upon producer Katharina Nuttall, who was also at the helm of *Spending Time With Morgan*. Her sparing approach allows Brun to really step away from the squeaking clean wheels of the manufactured bandwagon, opting instead to concentrate on sounds you can almost touch, made with instruments you can name. It's classy and stripped-down, yet fuller sounding than one would expect.

As the title suggests, the intervening months since the release of her debut have not been easy. Several of these songs are the musings of a downtrodden wanderer. *My Lover Will Go* is a prime example of her sadness, seeping into your brain like a rising tide. On *A Temporary Dive*, she sings of tumbling into darkness and clawing back up, all the while surrounded by gorgeous glockenspiel and cello. Baby-faced Ron Sexsmith turns up to duet on *Song No. 6* (actually track nine), a song that Ane says was written for a friend's wedding and is a rare happy love ditty. That's sweet, but both it and *Where Friend Rhymes With End* seem to jar with the well-crafted flow of the rest of the album with their more up-tempo vibe.

Elsewhere, she is lyrically preoccupied with confinement (*Rubber & Soul*) and enforced realism (*Balloon Ranger*), but it's never a grim proposition. The one non-original, *Laid In Earth*, is an adaptation of a classical aria lifted from Henry Purcell's 17th Century opera, *Dido & Aeneas*, and it's beautifully complemented by Malene Bay-Foged's heartbreaking string arrangements.

The only real complaint about *A Temporary Dive* is that it's rather too short at just 38 minutes. I was left wanting to hear a lot more. Given the ecstatic reception the album was afforded in her native Scandinavia (it went straight to the top of the charts – remarkable for something so devoid of artifice), Ane Brun could well have a slow-burning hit on her hands. She's already performed live with AB-BA's Benny Andersson and supported US country star Mary Gauthier and our very own PJ Harvey, so there's no doubting her commitment to the leg-work. This is an ideal soundtrack for your own emotional reckonings, so indulge in these exceptional sounds and make your way towards the light.

Beth Dariti**Shelly Poole****Hard Time For****The Dreamer**

Transistor Project

★★★★



For those who only know sister duo Alisha's Attic for their late Nineties run of hit singles, this solo offering from the younger half Shelly may well pleasantly shock. Gone is much of the quirk so characteristic of their early singles that unequivocally polarised critical opinion, and what steps forward from the shadows is a much breezier, beautifully human record from a woman who appears to have progressed into the next phase of her career with unmistakable grace. Those who followed the Attics to the conclusion of their shelf life with third album *The House We Built* (2001) – their most critically praised and, ironically, their commercial flop – will perhaps be less taken aback. Shelly has carried across the strongest elements of that collection's sophisticated songwriting into her solo work, crafting a peach

of a record that's dreamy without losing focus or being overly detached. Certainly there are echoes of Alisha's Attic here, but this time Shelly self-harmonises and keeps proceedings clean and uncluttered.

One of the secret pleasures of Alisha's Attic was discovering their B-sides, which were frequently more spontaneous and exuberant than their album output, recorded as they were mostly outside of record company meddling. Such was the quality of many of these footnotes that one of them justly reappears here, albeit in a considerably tweaked, polished and remoulded form, on the downloadable single *Little Wonder*. Digging up a few key lines and melodies, the result is a sweeping and majestic track that showcases Shelly's more relaxed and natural vocals, fully at ease with her new style. Quitting the cigarettes may have helped smooth away the grit that suited the Alisha's Attic mould, but Shelly clearly revels in these more gentle surroundings.

Stylistically, the songs touch mainly on folk-pop with their shimmering and addictive melodies, but there are also shades of palatable jazz showing a fondness for the likes of Rickie Lee Jones and Joni Mitchell. The title track trades almost spoken word verses with a nagging chorus and woozy production, while the rolling ethnic percussion of *Totally Underwater* is positively finger-clicking good. Other highlights include the yearning lamentations of *Don't Look That Way*, the sumptuous love song *If You Will Be Pilot* and the pop-tastic *Lose Yourself*.

Two duets with young New York Italian singer-songwriter Jack Savoretti bookend the second half of the record; the first, *Anyday Now*, is the finer of the two and takes its inspiration from the Meryl Streep/Robert Redford movie *Out Of Africa*, but that's not to say that the closer, *Hope*, is no good. Each track has something to recommend it to a wider audience than will probably hear them, which is a real shame. *Hard Time For The Dreamer* is a real coming of age record and a blissful listen, and with such maturity and confidence contained in these ten songs, it's hard to believe that Shelly hasn't always been a solo artist. **Rod Thomas**

CocoRosie
Noah's Ark
Touch & Go
 ★★★★★



Sailing down the Seine to find where broken hearts go, the sisters Casady have thrown their audience the most delicate of lifelines, proportionate only to the furthest stretch of their patience. So while the short-fused among us may well crash and burn at the first bonkers lyric (“*all of the aborted babies will turn into little bambies*”) or cracked, unearthly vocal, it’s best to leave them steaming in their own incomprehension than try to defend or explain why this ship is worth keeping abreast of. You see, the trouble with albums like this is that there are almost too many talking points. In this case, let’s start with Melissa Shimkovitz’s extraordinary artwork. Though at first it may seem a little off-putting, like much of the album itself, it proves deliciously clever and playful on closer inspection. It’s quite something to name your record after a Biblical icon and then subvert that with seemingly smacked out unicorns in a bisexual threesome, sodomy included. Still not convinced? How about the fact that the Bible repeatedly refers to these horned horses, despite the fact that they never existed? And look, isn’t that the star of David on the forehead of the “filling”? Provocative, no?

Notice also the diamonds dangling from the pierced nipples of the female and the blingtastic gold logo, both presumably nods to the rudimentary hip hop elements of CocoRosie’s music. Even more so than on last year’s debut, *La Maison De Mon Rêve*, Bianca and Sierra play up to that influence – *Bisounours* features some of the most seductive rapping you’ll ever hear, half creamily crooned by French MC, Spleen – but they also broaden their palette. So while the farmyard animal noises (*Bear Hides & Buffalo*) and bizarre interludes (*Milk*) remain, these are toned down in favour of genuine substance. That said, it’s hard not to view this album as a sequel to the first, or rather the flipside, for while *La Maison...* had its moments of darkness, this could be that house in a parallel, night-

marish universe, the Casadys flung so far over the rainbow that no slippers could ever return them.

Be in no doubt that death, criminality and dangerous sex are the on-board currency here; *South 2nd* recounts the violent murder of a Brooklyn teen at the hands of other children, the anything-but-techno *Tekno Love Song* is a crush with eyeliner lament complete with weeping autoharp, whilst closer *Honey Or Tar* puts a new spin on obsession. Lighter moments come with the forced naivety and tweeness of the title track and the keening chorus of *Armageddon*, both of which feature the distinctive tones of Diane Cluck, who contributes to the verses of the former her sweetest, highest vocal. Devendra Banhart also makes several appearances, singing in French, English and Spanish. Best of all the guests, however, is Mercury Music Prize winner Antony (sans his Johnsons) who enlivens former B-side *Beautiful Boyz* with his soulful, wavering vocals wringing every ounce of poignant tragedy from the sad sorry tale of (in every sense lost) prison lovers.

Noah's Ark is a stark, brave and affecting record that flirts with the surreal and the all-too-real in irresistible fashion. It won’t appease *La Maison...* haters, but I get the impression that the Casadys care little for everybody-pleasing, route one pop songs. And why should they when their ability to sink you into their art is so hand-somely peerless? **Alan Pedder**

Dar Williams
My Better Self
Zoe

★★★★½



Brimming with the usual mélange of moods and merriment, Dar Williams’ sixth studio album, *My Better Self*, comes two years after the acclaimed *Beauty Of The Rain* snuck up on our hearts. Clearly, she hasn’t been resting on those laurels in the meantime; *My Better Self* is a confident return, smooth to digest and yet layered beyond its first audition. On this evidence, Williams could hardly be accused of omphaloskepsis (it’s the new navel-gazing, tell your friends!), pausing to

deliberate over karma, fated meetings and the ever sorrier political state of the world. But this is an album of personal growth too, and many songs bear a measure of elegant sadness. Moreover, it seems that Williams may have spent the last two years purposefully ingratiating herself with fellow musicians, perhaps sociably hosting jams and gatherings and making muso friends with a will to collaboration – selected guests include Ani DiFranco, Patty Larkin, Soulive and Marshall Crenshaw. It’s the team efforts here that really shine, and certainly provide some of the mellower moments as joined forces serve up a pair of Pink Floyd and Neil Young covers.

In keeping with her established style, opener *Teen For God* is crammed full of fast-paced lyrics backed by a hyper-melody that bouncily announces Williams’ arrival. Things quickly shift down several gears with the calm and serene *I’ll Miss You ‘Til I Meet You*. Featuring a beautiful slow vocal layered over an expansive array of instruments, including melodica, piano, guitars and percussion, it’s up there with the best of the album. The other clear standout is her duet with Ani DiFranco, their take on Pink Floyd’s *Comfortably Numb* standing out with grace as a somewhat sobering reflection of the times.

Overall, *My Better Self* takes the underlying pop current in Williams’ canon and pushes it further to the surface, with the folk:pop ratio almost equal on this offering. Lyrically less playful and ever more mature, she has stitched together songs that combine social and environmental issues with the more personal passions of love and hate. But it never turns didactic, the extra maturity suits her and she’s never seemed more confident. Musically, too, she has stepped up her already well-rounded and appealing delivery, which works well in the context of the plusher instrumentation and welcome collaborations.

So don’t be disconcerted by the album’s lack of a consistent feel – that the moments of calm and beauty rub shoulders with lyric-stuffed dizziness and up-tempo strumming are simply nothing other than charmingly and characteristically Dar.

Helen Griffiths

At the risk of plunging straight into the pull quote, if there's any justice in the world, *Year Of Meteors* will be the album that breaks Laura Veirs through to a wider audience. Following a trio of acclaimed collections, including last year's stellar *Carbon Glacier*, Veirs plugs in to her more experimental side, melding ambient electro with traditional singer-songwriterisms, but crucially does so without dropping or fumbling the melodic ball. Throw in her sideways-looking, intelligent lyrics and quirky similes and it all adds up to more rather than MOR. Perhaps it's partly her unusual background that marks her out from the crowd. After all, it's unlikely that there are many artists in the Seattle alt-folk underground who speak fluent Mandarin and have a postgrad-level grounding in applied geology.

Certainly, Veirs' way with a lyric flits from the Zen-like and philosophical to the mundane and seemingly irrelevant, yet somehow revealing. And that's often with the space of a single song. Take *Secret Someones*, for example, in which she ponders a restless horizon before casually asking what you make of the drummer's haircut. All of this propelled along by a beautiful jazz-tinged backing track set to a garage beat and punctuated with distorted guitar stabs and feedback. It's an ambitious mélange that's never quite matched elsewhere but is heartening evidence of the album's inventive spirit.

Opener *Fire Snakes* starts out with dreamy acoustics reminiscent of Suzanne Vega, particularly in the phrasing, but Veirs soon raises the bar with beats and bleeps that signify a defiance to be easily pigeonholed. Further textures are woven in with hammered dulcimer and Eyvind Kang's haunting viola, amassing and ascending to an engaging climax. Similarly, the obvious first single *Galaxies* kicks off with vocal and solo guitar (albeit this time spiky and distorted), contrasting nicely with the smooth beats, keyboard vibraphone and analogue synth sounds that follow.

Happily, Veirs never errs toward the pretentious in her music and the obscurist in her lyric. Each song is quickly appealing and the arrangements, though dense, are also swiftly accessible. Indeed, it would be easy to listen



Laura Veirs
Year Of Meteors
Nonesuch
 ★★ ★ ½

through the entire disc and be unaware of the complexity (and downright oddness in places – the heavy riffing viola on *Parisian Dream* for example) of the sounds, so seamlessly do they become a part of the music. Similarly, the ambiguity in the lyrics allows space for the listener to draw their own meanings and fasten their own values to the frameworks provided. Even better, this multi-layered approach only serves to make the simpler tracks, *Spelunking* and *Where Gravity is Dead*, all the more striking, particularly as they bookend the measured brutality of *Black Gold Blues*. Viola has never sounded so menacing! *Lake Swimming* draws the album to a mesmeric close, save for the almost obligatory “hidden” track; in this case,

a short, protean version of what was to become *Magnetized* with a performance for which Veirs could reasonably be accused of phoning in... but in a good way.

The skilful production from Tucker Martine, also the drummer in Veirs' backing band, The Tortured Souls, turns what could so easily have been a sonic mess into a record of great beauty. Every performance is impeccably nailed, from Veirs' vocal and acoustic guitar to Steve Moore's keyboards and Karl Blau's bass and electric guitar. It's gratifying then that *Year Of Meteors* has been deservedly lauded from all corners of the press and should comfortably ensconce itself in many a shortlist for album of the year. **Trevor Raggatt**

Madonna
Confessions On
A Dancefloor
Maverick
★★★★



Watching our lady Madge recently has been a somewhat bipolar experience. For a woman we've all grown up thinking was the spunkiest, most confrontational star this side of Grace Jones, she can appear frighteningly fragile in interviews. The less-than-impartial video diary I'm Going To Tell You A Secret would have you believe the opposite, but one is still left with the nagging feeling that for the first time in long time, Madonna wants our approval. It's hard to use the word 're-invention' here without feeling faintly nauseous. Every new Immac blade is a reinvention chez Ritchie. It's a shame because *Confessions On A Dancefloor* marks her biggest change in direction since of *Ray Of Light* (1998), and is much welcomed. The last two stocking-fillers were peppered with great tracks but leadened by duds and a lack of consistency. Here, we have 56 minutes of pure dance. Dance dance dance. Out go the ballads and in comes the lycra. A coherent album – my oh my!

As a dance album it is quite something. Presumptuous to the point of having a separate, mixey-mixey single-track version, *Confessions...* goes for

broke on the stomper ticket. Mixing early Eighties disco, light electro (the "electroclash is passé" memo clearly hit her desk), outlandishly catchy riffs and choruses, the album triumphs on both tunes and production. *Get Together* is smoother than Rocco's bottom, *How High* is the Madonna vocoder track that works, *Sorry* is more infectious than Thailand's pigeon mating season and *I Love New York* boasts a riff so acutely rambunctious that Rachel Stevens has all but given up the game and gone home. And that's before we even get to the much-publicised samples. Michael Jackson and Donna Summer both feature on records that don't get them into trouble for the first time in years, whilst Abba give only their second nod of consent for a sample (although the first time was for a Fugees b-side, so perhaps one just has to catch Björn at the right moment). What could have looked like creative kidnapping actually melds effortlessly into the mix, joining the danceathon with a cheeky smile. This is an album that seriously doesn't take itself seriously, you see.

And then the comedown. Like all good Chinese meals and gin-fuelled

one night stands, one wakes up the next morning with a feeling of mild dissatisfaction. Questions start to creep in: the Madonna on *Confessions...* is nowhere near the London-based, tweed-wearing, pheasant-murdering, homely gal presented to us in repetitive media coverage. Does she still hop down clubs and prance around on dance machines? Really? Her voice is not at its strongest either, and her over-reliance on computer trickery gives the album an unfortunate homogenous slant. The paradox being that, whilst it sounds like almost anyone could be singing, no-one else has the nous to pull this album off in the first place.

The energy behind *Confessions...* brushes aside the doubts in a rapturous, arm-swinging boogie... at least for now. She may be trying too hard, but that still makes for a more satisfying listen than most. If this is Madonna's last boogie, it would be churlish to sit on the sidelines. The most unfortunate thing about this Madonna release is the proliferation of New Cool Phrase 'bingo wings'. Ladies and gentlemen, it's not big and it's not clever. Please cease forthwith. **Ian Buchan**

The Cardigans
Super Extra Gravity
 Stockholm Records
 ★★★



Although The Cardigans' last album, *Long Gone Before Daylight* (2003), was a dark gem of a record consisting mainly of bleak and distinctly 'grown-up' lyrics set to acoustic pop tunes, commercially it was a relative dud. Whether this injustice knocked the confidence of Nina Persson and co. is unclear, but something has gone awry in between that record and this, their sixth in just over a decade.

Never one-dimensional, The Cardigans have always been a pop group with a slightly sinister side (after all, they are famously fans of Ozzy Osbourne and Black Sabbath), and that lyrical edge remains; opener *Losing A Friend* dwells upon mortality and sets a black-humoured tone. The trouble here is that the music is too often tortured as well; the sweet sound that used to set the band apart from their peers has dissipated almost entirely. Gone too is the icy electronic sheen of their 1998 *Gran Turismo*-era hits, *My Favourite Game* and *Erase/Rewind*. Instead, the band have opted for a more pedestrian pop-rock sound that proves somewhat unengaging over the length of the record.

That's not to say that this is a bad record; it simply suffers in comparison with the past achievements of a very talented band. The witty lyrics of *Godspell* stand out strongly, attacking the perils of organised religion (or the "great big swindle" as Persson refers to it) with vigour. Elsewhere, the driving wall-of-sound force of *Good Morning Joan*, tempered by sweetly tinkling bells, is sublime. However, revisiting a track from *Long Gone...* as the band do on *And Then You Kissed Me II* is a mistake; gone is the infectious pop melody that the first instalment possessed, only to be replaced by a drawn-out and discordant inferior with strangely hollow backing. The band themselves have described the relationship of *Super Extra Gravity* to its predecessor as an obnoxious teenager to its mature older relation. Unfortunately, this acne and all approach has exposed some of their less attractive qualities.

Anticlimactically, it turns out that the lead single from the album, the spiky and brilliantly titled *I Need Some Fine Wine & You, You Need To Be Nicer*, is also its finest track. On the bright side, however, it's an undeniably fine composition, and like *Super Extra Gravity's* other highlights, it serves as evidence that The Cardigans can still write sophisticated, bristling pop songs for adults, even if they now do so with slightly less consistency.

Danny Weddup

Tegan & Sara
So Jealous
 Sanctuary
 ★★★½



By virtue of their alt-folk roots and association with the Lilith crowd, Canadian twins Tegan and Sara Quinn have often been awkwardly shoehorned into a genre packed with more acoustic, earnest types by some quarters of the music press.

On this, their third album, the duo go all out to put that stereotyping to bed, serving up a simultaneously modern yet thoroughly retro feast; it's post-punk New Wave seen through a glistening, contemporary filter. So while there are acoustics and harmonies aplenty, its references diverge from those of Sarah McLachlan, the Indigo Girls and the like. Instead, *So Jealous* evokes fond memories of Blondie, the Buzzcocks, Martha & The Muffins, 'Til Tuesday (before they went electro), early U2 and even the Ramones, and yet many of these songs would not sound out of sorts on a record by Avril Lavigne.

Spiky rhythm guitar, authentic New Wave beats (courtesy of Chris Carlson's clanking bass tones and Rob Chursinoff's metronomic drums) and, perhaps most crucially, subtly hummable tunes are sprinkled liberally throughout. The production by fellow Canadians and occasional New Pornographers Joan Collins, David Caswell and Howard Redekopp gleefully nails the contradiction of a lo-fi vibe in crystal clear sound, perfectly matching the modern retro ethos.

You Wouldn't Like Me eases us in gently with folkly rhythm guitars, but these

rapidly transmute into a driving pulse that any classic New Waver would be proud of. *Take Me Anywhere* continues yet further into such territory, seasoned with a healthy dose of lyrical self-loathing.

Despite many of the songs using deceptively simple and repetitive chord structures, they deftly sidestep monotony through their clever use of arrangements, vocal interplay and dynamics. A good example is *Where Does The Good Go*, a song that builds hypnotically until the twins wind up trading lead vocals on a round using the song's signature melody. First single *Speak Slow* welds Buzzcocks guitars onto a Nirvanaesque chord sequence, setting them off with a sing-a-long bubblegum chorus recalling Toni Basil's *Mickey*. Other standout tracks include the multi-layered title track, the poppy *Downtown* and the sweetly mellow *I Know I Know I Know*.

The sisters take turns with the lead, though they interweave and double their parts so often that the question of "lead" becomes somewhat moot. The vocals, with their oddly seductive nasal tones and dissonance, work particularly well in the context of the pop-punk arrangements and attractively blend when one is bouncing off the other. This natural voice distortion persists throughout and works to temper the shock of the few songs where the feat is achieved by electronic means. Elsewhere, guitarist Ted Gowans and former Weezer bassist Matt Sharp's Moog synth add further nice touches and texture.

If a complaint is to be made, it's that despite being scattered with hooks and quirky melodies, the songs aren't always instantly ingratiating. On the positive side, this means that *So Jealous* is not only an easily accessible collection of songs, but it also gives itself room to grow in your affections.

Originally released in the US last year, it's high time that UK audiences discovered why *So Jealous* made so many Best Of 2004 lists. With a generous fourteen tracks spread across the album's 45 minutes, Tegan and Sara amply prove that the glorious art of the three-minute pop song is alive and well and residing in America's northernmost neighbour.

Trevor Raggatt

Diane Cluck
Countless Times
 Voodoo-EROS
 ★★★★★



Keen *Wears The Trousers* readers must surely be aware by now of the esteem in which Brooklyn native Diane Cluck is held around these parts. They might also think, wow, another album so soon after the last? Is the woman superhuman? The responses to which can only be “sorta” and “no, of course not, don’t be daft”. For while the exquisite *Oh Vanille/ova nil* was rightfully acknowledged as such only this past Spring, the songs were written and recorded back in 2003, leaving plenty of growth time for this much anticipated follow-up. As it turns out, Cluck has expanded little stylistically, opting instead to plump up her peripheries and reinforce (distil, even) everything she was already great at. But *Countless Times* is so much more than just a retread of familiar ground. It’s a manifesto of simplicity, a dossier of yearning. It’s the diary of an ancient force, the sound of a traditionalist pushing a hand-pulped paper envelope gently.

Melodic innovation and off-kilter, bewitching harmonies have long been Cluck’s calling card, resolutely all-frills-barred. Indeed, there are instances on *Countless Times* where it seems she is pecking even at the barest bones of her songs, as if ill content to have us taste anything but their marrow. Even the production is barely there, retreating from the cleaner but still careful sounds of *Oh Vanille/ova nil* – here, the Brooklyn traffic rumbles into a song or two, her fingers squeak on the fretboard, she laughs. It’s amateurish as done by an expert, i.e. by intention.

Most songs rely solely on Cluck’s caressing and tender way with an acoustic guitar, coaxing out a subtle, distant sound, and by doing so leave a lacuna for the gorgeous voice-as-instrument reveal. The stellar combo of *Sylvania* and *A Phoenix & Doves* illustrate this best, the former a wistful paean to the vanishing simple life she acquired a taste for growing up alongside Lancaster County, Pennsylvania’s Amish communities. It’s a rural and lyrical delight with line after line of drama and

bucolic soliloquy (“on your own *Sylvania* homestead / if that be your belief / you can claim you own it / though you bought it from a thief”). Other standout tracks include the plaintive, multi-tracked *Love Me If Ye Do*, the heart-warming *Wasn’t I Glad!*, and the insistent, salvational *United. The Way You Were*.

The deal-breaker for the Cluck non-converted will likely come with the album’s unusual conclusion – two songs and a no-show (listed as *Countless Times*) built haphazardly around a single funereal motif. This is Cluck at her musically most naked; awkward, unsettling and yet bizarrely contagious, it throws itself to the lions of speculation. The first “movement”, *My Teacher Died/Countless Times*, would seem almost like a failed take of the second, simply *My Teacher Died*, were it not for its curious and complex roundelay-style arrangement and alternative lyrics, but sit through that and the more focused second dose will get you right in the heart with its humble admission: “there are no superstars / there is no Superman / there’s only everyone / I learn from who I can.”

Overall, whilst many of the songs on *Countless Times* perhaps lack the immediacy and hooks of those on *Oh Vanille/ova nil*, they are every bit as engaging once marinated in over the course of a few listens. You might not even notice until you sing a line that takes you by surprise, and therein lies its beauty. In a cold and stoic world that sledgehammers its populace with constant blinding stimuli, such secret declarations are all the more alluring.

Alan Pedder

50 Foot Wave
Golden Ocean
 4AD

★★★★½



Fifty feet is pretty big if you think about it, and by thinking I mean googling, and by googling you’ll find it’s an oddly common anecdotal measure. Only the other week, for instance, a man was walking his dog Charlie along the Great Orme cliff in Cardiff when he heard a splash from the ocean 50 feet below. “Gosh, did you hear that, Charlie”, the man may have wondered before realising that yes, Charlie had indeed

heard it because Charlie was it (www.dog-sinthenews.com, we love you!). But while some might find such a chestnut of interest, we at *Wears The Trousers* are suckers for useless, distilled fact. Indeed, to this reporter, drilling through to the no-frills zone provides as much lascivious pleasure as a tabloid gossip column does to others. So, here we go again... 50 feet is equal to the world record for women’s triple jump, a third of the height of the leaning tower of Pisa, the distance from the chin of the Spynx to the sand it sits on and the size of a certain Queenie, according to our Peej. Oh, and it’s also the height to which this remarkable band aspire.

50 Foot Wave are two-thirds Throwing Muses (singer/guitarist Kristin Hersh and bassist Bernard Georges) and one-third drummer Rob Ahlers, and this is their first full-length album following last year’s delightfully noisy eponymous EP. Put quite simply, the trio’s deliveries are tight and piping hot, and what the songs of *Golden Ocean* lack in the complexity shown by some of their peers, the band’s dynamic power and crisp, razor-sharp playing more than make up for it. But that’s not to say these tunes are simple, no sir. They’re sneaky and infectious, coming up from behind to smack you with a six-string and leave you begging for more.

Those more familiar with the Muses and with Hersh’s intermittently sedate solo work may have difficulties reconciling the snarling frontwoman of 50 Foot Wave with their beloved indie rock heroine and married mother of four. *Golden Ocean* is fast and nasty in comparison, drenched in the feedback and power chords that can turn an ugly grunge-rock duckling into a bloody great vicious black swan. In my view, rock has been missing the hissing for far too long (same goes for handclaps, but more about that some other time). Every song seems to have some kind of story behind it, but that layer is better absorbed once your body recovers from the initial reverberations.

Golden Ocean may just awaken the inner mosh monster in everyone who hears it. *Long Painting* and *Dog Days* in particular conjure the blinding strobe and pointy elbows of a lost youth. It’s that rare rock beast that succeeds in really making a statement and will amply reward any Daisy Chainsaw, Husker Dü, Pixies or L7 fans looking for something familiar but new. **Endre Buzogány**

Vashti Bunyan

Lookaftering

FatCat

★★★★½



Whilst the story of Vashti Bunyan, the great lost child of the late Sixties folk boom, has been well rehearsed in the press in the run-up to the release of *Lookaftering*, the bare bones of it surely bears repeating here. Discovered by enigmatic Rolling Stones manager Andrew Loog Oldham, her 1970 debut *Just Another Diamond Day* is widely upheld to be one of British folk's great unheralded works. At the time however, commercial success proved elusive and both it and Bunyan were unceremoniously shelved by record company, Decca. Disillusioned by the experience, she forsook further dalliances with the industry and has spent much of the last three decades enjoying the seclusion of a simple family life in Ireland. However, a CD reissue of that album in 2000 sparked renewed interest in her work and, by way of recordings with Animal Collective, Devendra Banhart and Piano Magic, among others, has inexorably led to this highly anachronistic follow-up.

Certainly, *Lookaftering* is an interesting prospect. Very much a period piece dislocated in time, it retains much of the feel of *...Diamond Day* and boasts the same hallmarks of early Seventies production values. Comparisons with Sandy Denny and other folkies of the era are easily justified both stylistically and sonically. The seemingly mini-

mal production by Max Richter allows plenty of room for the broadly acoustic, almost orchestral instrumentation to breathe, all the while keeping Bunyan's exposed and fragile vocals floating in the foreground.

The arrangements themselves are mostly sparse and hauntingly beautiful; bucolic countermelodies abound, with oboe, recorder and Joanna Newsom's harp all making an impression on various tracks. And Newsom isn't the only member of the neo/psych-folk glitterati to make an appearance, Devendra Banhart, Adem and Kevin Barker of Espers also lend a hand, in some cases further reinforcing the early Seventies heritage of the influences at work. In particular, Banhart's slide guitar on *Wayward* is strikingly reminiscent of Jerry Donahue's playing on Sandy Denny's *Fotheringay*.

When searching for adequate descriptors of Bunyan's performance, adjectives like intimate, tender, delicate and fragile spring readily to mind. However, it is these very facets that are the greatest flaw of the album. Too often it seems her fragility tips over into hesitancy and weakness, in some cases lacking self-confidence and commitment to the notes. This is most apparent on *Wayward* where the vocal seems particularly weak and somewhat at odds with the tenor of the words.

Whilst some may see such a criticism as churlish or missing the point of the album, it raises valid questions; one wonders whether some of the effusively glowing reports of *Lookaftering* have been too heavily viewed through the filters of an evocative back story, rather than appraising the album on its musical merits alone. I was left with the nagging curiosity as to how these songs would have fared if sung by the likes of Mary Black, Christine Collister, June Tabor or the late, great Sandy Denny – the likely response being five star performances no less full of tenderness or vulnerability.

That said, *Lookaftering* remains an amazing feat and a truly beautiful album. It's a throwback to an age of greater innocence, evoking visions of Julie Christie as *Far From The Madding Crowd's* Bathsheba Everdene, softly focused and shining amid some golden pastoral idyll as it wends its way through a rural dreamscape. For all its failings, the songs remain entirely beguiling and *Lookaftering* is sure to remain one of the most haunting and affecting discs of the year. The closer, *Wayward Hum*, brings the disc to a fitting close. Part meandering lullaby, part quintessentially English whimsy, it somehow summarises all that comes before in a wordless, absent-minded way. Gorgeous. **Trevor Raggatt**

The birth of Fiona Apple's third album follows what you might call a somewhat complicated pregnancy. If you were prone to brazen understatement, that is. Originally finished in the summer of 2003, already four years on from 1999's attention-grabbing *When The Pawn Hits The Conflict Blah Blah Blah...*, the Jon Brion-produced originals were rejected by (quite possibly deaf) Sony executives because they couldn't hear a single. So, rather than put faith in their already multi-platinum selling charge, the tapes were allegedly put in a box stamped 'Don't Open Ever, Or Else' and locked in a big steel vault. Wisely, Brion leaked this information to the fans, who promptly drummed up an unprecedented protest and bombarded the suits at Sony with thousands of plastic apples, each bearing the name of an outraged signatory. Things became more curious when a leaked version of the album found its way into the hands of a radio programmer and subsequently onto the internet. Rumours then abounded that Apple had given up music altogether, but when Brion claimed that some of the leaked MP3s were not his originals, a rat was swiftly smelled.

As it turns out, Apple had sort of given up. In her own words, she was "sitting [on her sofa] watching Columbo in my bathrobe!", but after the Free Fiona campaign filtered through to her, that famous fiery spirit reignited and the gears of *Extraordinary Machine* finally started to shift once more. Two new producers, Mike Elizondo (Eminem, Macy Gray, Nelly Furtado) and Brian Kehew (Beck, Air, Eleni Mandell), were brought in and the album underwent a near-complete reconstruction. Ultimately, despite a painful gestation that could have destroyed its cohesion, it's a relief to find that the album

delivers what it was always meant to – pure, unadulterated Apple.

With its odd rhythms and joyful tones, the utterly unique opener and title track spelunks along merrily and will knock flat anyone who still believes that Apple is some dark and tortured queen. Here, her vocals have grown thicker and loftier with age and she sounds, well, happier than ever. Fans of the leaked MP3s will recognise the hallmarks of Jon Brion's production, the only other relic of which, *Waltz (Better Than Fine)*, rounds out the album in style. Of course, the angsty Apple of old is here too, and her highly publicised break-up with film director Paul Thomas Anderson is an obvious inspiration. The melancholic *Window* positively drips with despair, while the fine first single *O' Sailor* is an archetypal break-up song that finds Apple lamenting with a maturity never before seen. In fact, it is the lyrical content that elevates *Extraordinary Machine* above her earlier work. Gone is the well-thumbed thesaurus-inspired, bloated teenage verse that pocked many of her previous songs; Apple is a woman now and rather than soak in her own sadness, she uses her words more strategically, battling the blows of a broken relationship with a logical finesse.

The beauty of having *Extraordinary Machine* out there in both its forms is that it should just about please everyone – fans have the liberty of cherry picking their favourite versions, be they the bold Brion originals or this stately, more considered collection that Apple herself is so proud of. Although it may not be the pinnacle of what she is capable of, the promise and ebullient sadness of these songs marks an impressive entry in the oeuvre of an artist quite extraordinary too.

Aaron Alper & Alan Pedder

Fiona Apple
Extraordinary
Machine
Sony BMG
★★★★





Sheryl Crow Wildflower

A&M/Universal

★★★½



For those who hastily wrote her off after 2002's mostly insipid *C'Mon, C'Mon*, the staggering success of Sheryl Crow's hits collection the following year must have begged a reappraisal. Certainly, this first new material since then bears the weight of eager expectancy, not least because of her highly-publicised relationship with fiancé and seven-times Tour de France winner, Lance Armstrong. But although the album's title alludes to the nature of their relationship ("no matter how chaotic it is, wildflowers will still spring up in the middle of nowhere", Crow explains), anyone fearing a sick-making sludgifest will be gladly put at ease.

From the first bar of opener *I Know Why*, it's clear that Crow is very much back in the game. Setting the tone for what's to come, it's a warm, relaxed affair set amid a swirling orchestral backdrop courtesy of Mr Beck Hansen Sr., David Campbell. With the exception of the resolutely soft rockin' *Live It Up* with its commanding Eighties chorus, Campbell's arrangements infuse every song and are certainly an interesting addition to Crow's sound. This is best appreciated by comparing the woozy *Chances Are* ("I was lost inside a daydream / swimming through the saline") with an earlier version that appeared as a B-side to *Soak Up The Sun*, or the bonus acoustic run-through of the title track with its almost fully orchestral counterpart. Yet despite the hype and emphasis placed on Campbell's contributions, his work is often hidden somewhat by the rather lavish production.

Lyrically, *Wildflower* often harks back to the introspection and self-exploration that made *The Globe Sessions* (1998) so compelling, shying away from the third party pop cultural narratives that made her name. But while *The Globe Sessions* sounded akin to a freshly gouged wound (with extra added salt), *Wildflower* is riddled with a sense of hope. Even in the George W Bush-bashing *Where Has All The Love Gone* ("I saw the flag roll by on a wooden box"), it's there in the tone of her voice. Across

the album as a whole in fact, Crow has never sounded so tender, retaining her strangely appealing slight strain for the high notes that serves especially to emphasise the vulnerability at play.

Though *Wildflower* wilts a little in the middle with *Letter To God* and *Lifetimes* in particular falling just the wrong side of average, there's more than enough substance to songs like the Beatles-esque *Perfect Lie* and the heart-wrenching *Always On Your Side* to justify these falters. Not wild then, but mellow and classy, this ranks among her best work to date. **Michael Banna**

Rachel Lipson Pastures

Mecicco

★★★★



The reasons why most singer-songwriters would balk at and rail against the adjective "sweet" appear to be self-evident. The term seems almost a nullification of having something to say, a catch-all for the mild, meek and soon forgettable. Then, as with every rule, an exception sometimes happens along, twirling fancy free and twee beyond belief but utterly astute and devastatingly relevant. Rachel Lipson is one such exception, coming on like an amalgam of Kimya Dawson, Rosie Thomas and shades of Suzanne Vega. The sheer simplicity of her laconic, almost deadpan enunciation is the stuff that either steals your heart or sends you running feeling too pure back to *The Teaches Of Peaches*. But graze awhile in Lipson's quiet acres and you'll find the lectures of *Pastures* equally appealing. With a finely detailed wisdom that never trips the homily detector, Lipson's minutiae are everyone's minutiae, but told with a worldview that's all her own.

Whether on the seemingly George "God made me do it" Bush-bashing *A Blessing* or the advisory *Oh Little Sister*, she is constantly disarming and aware. But *Pastures* works best when Lipson deals in heartbreak, the triptych of *What Won't Wait For You*, *I've Sat At The Table* and *He Knows The Way To The Golden Road* providing an exquisite lesson in the dispassionate delivery of a raw and deeply-felt subject. Cropping

up on the first of these songs and again on *The End Of The Summer* is David Herman Düne, to all intents and purposes antifolk royalty, chiming in with gorgeous ukulele and perfectly imperfect, tender harmonies. Also adding his voice and credibility is good friend Jeffrey Lewis, who shared the album's only co-writing credit for the child-like duet, *The Eagle*. It's followed by the heartwarming, home-recorded album closer, *Will They Remember Your Name*, on which Lipson lapses into fits of giggles while trying to get some children singing a round.

While it's true that Lipson's vocals are a little one-trick pony and that it simply wouldn't work if the music itself were more convoluted, the overwhelming innocence inspires. As a snapshot of a deceptively rich, modern fableteller, *Pastures* really works. Definitely one to watch then, she may put Cadbury out of business yet. **Alan Pedder**

Lampshade Because Trees Can Fly

Glitterhouse

★★★½



Part-Danish, part-Swedish combo Lampshade first formed in 2000, but it was not until singer-songwriter Rebekkamaria joined a year later that the band began to make headway. Since then they've had a hit single in Denmark with the title track of this, their debut album, and become the toast of the indie music press, radio and national TV. The album's unusual title comes from a poem by Danish author Martin A. Hansen and is supposed to reflect their solid and simple yet grandiose music.

On first impression, *Because Trees Can Fly* is thickly layered with intensely repetitive and atmospheric soundscapes, mainly constructed through judicious use of electric guitar and drums, with the occasional sounding of a trumpet, keys or glockenspiel melody. Most of what's on offer are fairly predictable, basic post-rock compositions, choosing to work with dynamics and impact rather than taking the listener on an expressive, rewarding and melodic journey.

Certainly, there is little doubt that the band's wild card (if not meal ticket)

is the voice of Rebekkamaria, a Björk-like (or rather, Björk-inspired) wonder that both anchors and elevates the band. Her light and frail vocals make for an appealing contrast with the heavy, driving guitars, although sometimes her singing is embedded within the sound, rendering it more of a melodic instrument than a conduit of intelligible words. However, she sometimes has a tendency to overemphasise her vocals, excessively emoting and coming across as slightly contrived.

Though Lampshade clearly know how to rack up the intensity with dynamics and layers of sound, their repertoire and instrumentation does lack variety. Whenever they do take an alternative approach or slightly alter the instrumentation, authentic emotion and creativity shimmers through the guitar-and-drum-crammed surface like delicate sunbeams. Essentially a sometimes impressive guitar act fronted by a little girl with a sweet, soft voice, if they're given time to develop, Lampshade might well be worth looking out for in the future.
Anja McCloskey

Garbage
Bleed Like Me

A&E/Warner Bros.

★★★½



When it comes to the fortunes of Garbage, this reviewer appears to be in something of a minority. While their decade-long career has witnessed an inexorable fall from favour of their moody para-gothic industrial machinations that, to these ears, was never wholly convincing, for me they have matured like a reasonable cheese. So while they've always been on the outer shores of my tastes, this latest release has them fighting the tide and moving further inland.

Making albums has never been easy for Shirley Manson and co. – this is only their fourth in a decade and arrives a full four years after 2001's unworthy *BeautifulGarbage*. During that time, Manson's marriage collapsed and the band themselves were close to implosion. Drummer Butch Vig went so far as to quit the sessions entirely, and was temporarily replaced by old Nirvana buddy, Foo Fighters' Dave Grohl,

before Vig returned just a few months later, seemingly re-energised. Although opener *Bad Boyfriend* retains Grohl's punishing drums, *Bleed Like Me* is very much a Garbage record, albeit an older, more attractive proposition. The sequencing is appealingly well balanced and the genres it careens through are less ill-advised than those of *BeautifulGarbage*. There's a hint of playful New Wave revivalism (*Run Baby Run*), metal-tinged power chords (*Why Do You Love Me*), synth-pop mechanics (*Metal Heart*) and, most refreshingly, the sinister acoustics and pained whispered vocals of the standout title track. It's a guise worn well and should be further explored if the rumours are wrong and this isn't their swansong.

Recovering from the commercial near-suicide of *BeautifulGarbage* may have seemed insurmountable even to the casual observer, and *Bleed Like Me* can certainly be criticised for knowing its audience a little too well (or at least assuming it does). But, the terrible Janet Jackson boobgate-inspired *Sex Is Not The Enemy* aside, that's not entirely misjudged. The album provides a decent quality:guff ratio with its danceable, festival-friendly riffs and, if it is to be their last as a unit, a fitting farewell.

Endre Buzogány

Kate Rusby
The Girl Who Couldn't Fly

Pure Records

★★★★



Objectivity is rarely an option where the music of Kate Rusby is concerned. Since her deserving nomination (and, for that matter, cruelly robbed loss – Talvin Singh, where are you now?) as the “token folkie” for the 1999 Mercury Music Prize, she has released album after album of exquisitely winsome, unsullied beauty, and this, her fifth, is no exception. In fact, if you've liked any of her previous releases, why read any further? Part with that cash! So sure-footed is she that to question the consistency of this album is to verge on the blasphemous. Rusby knows what she loves and what she does best, and by happy coincidence, enough people seem to agree wholeheartedly. Yet despite the unbroken, no repairs approach, there

are enough clues here to make us aware that, yes, she's still growing.

Though always a strong collaborative artist, most of Rusby's pairings have been with artists themselves immersed in the British and American folk scenes, with the exception of Ocean Colour Scene's Simon Fowler's guest vocal on 2003's *Underneath The Stars*. Here, not only has former Blur guitarist Graham Coxon provided the album artwork, but Roddy Woomble, lead singer with Scottish rockers Idlewild, improbably appears on no less than three tracks. As ever though, the most important collaborator is Rusby's husband, John McCusker, an impressive multi-instrumentalist and member of The Battlefield Band. With an array of talented musicians, Rusby's pure, endearing vocals are deftly backed by double bass, harmonium, euphonium, flutes and whistles, all serving to blur the distinction between the results of Rusby's own evolving songwriting and those of a more traditional nature. So much so that it's easy not to realise on first listen that seven of these songs are her own.

As is her wont, Rusby also throws a cover into the mix – previous albums have seen reinterpretations of Suzanne Vega's *The Queen & The Soldier*, Richard and Linda Thompson's *Withered & Died* and *Old Town* by Iris DeMent – and this time it's not a great deal more leftfield. The jazz standard, *You Belong To Me*, has been recorded by everyone from Ella Fitzgerald and Judy Garland to Tori Amos and Bob Dylan, and Rusby does it justice in her own unflourished, mellow style. Elsewhere, *Bonnie House of Airlie* is a thundering blood feud epic based on the tale of “Bonnie” Prince Charlie, *Game Of All Fours* tells the engrossing tale of a high-stakes card game between a girl and boy, and *Wandering Soul* is a rousing number reminiscent of *Canaan's Land* from *Little Lights* (2001) that was previously issued on the soundtrack to the BBC series, Billy Connolly's Musical Tour of New Zealand. It should have you and anyone else in the vicinity singing along with gusto. Take it from me, the practice will come in useful should you ever see a Rusby live show – she'll be right impressed!

One of the standout tracks, *A Ballad*, is a significant change in pace and subject, telling the story of a bride who discovers her cheating husband-to-be

up to no good on the morning of their wedding. But rather than getting her parents to seek him out and clout him, as is the norm in English folk, she does herself in; cheerful it's not, but unendingly gorgeous. And don't worry, if that gets you down, the cute little hidden track, *Little Jack Frost*, is the pick-you-upper theme tune to the BBC's adorable Christmas animation that lit up the schedules last year.

Is Rusby herself the girl afraid to fly? Certainly, not musically, but apparently so – the title was inspired by a conversation with a friend about a trip to the Maldives. So whilst it might take a hypnotist for that boduberu and Indian pot dance album to materialise, for now *The Girl Who Couldn't Fly* simply reaffirms our faith well-placed in Rusby's very special brand of Britishness. **Matthew Smith**

Alanis Morissette

Jagged Little
Pill Acoustic
Maverick

★★★



The first thing that came to mind when Alanis Morissette announced that she would be releasing a 10th Anniversary edition of her 1995 multi-multi-million selling debut *Jagged Little Pill* was that her label, Madonna's famously loss-making Maverick Records, needed to boost their profit margin and quick. Certainly, this record is either a genius marketing ploy on their part or a genuine sign of Morissette's affection for the songs, for rather than just repackaging the original along with a few live songs, four-track demos and a DVD of the lacklustre *Jagged Little Pill Live* tour documentary, Morissette and her original producer Glen Ballard huddled back into the studio together to re-record the album as an all-acoustic feast.

To be honest, my expectations were not high. If any album was era-defining, *Jagged Little Pill* was it. Its angry sturm and drang brought me into womanhood; yes, I was one of those girls punching my fist into the air with a feminist "fuck yeah!"; even though at age eleven I had little to really rave about. How pleasantly surprising then that *Jagged Little Pill Acoustic* is a minor revelation in itself. From the first opening note, Alanis' own growth,

both personal and musical, is clear. Although some songs hardly differ in terms of arrangement, the addition of some subtle orchestration and the obvious replacement of snarling electrics with gentle acoustic guitars all gels together for a very mellow and easygoing album, perfect for accompanying a long glass of Grenache.

Jagged Little Pill Acoustic runs to precisely the same order as its blueprint, and the opener *All I Really Want* is a highlight in its new skin, recalling her epic 1998 album *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, with its Eastern influences and dancing strings. This does however, mean that the version of *Your House* here must rank as the least unexpected hidden track in history. In spite of this, it varies on its previous theme by ditching the poetic a cappella and presenting itself as a gently strummed ditty. Elsewhere, the infamous single *Ironic* has undergone a slightly wincing lyrical change reflecting society's progression into the Queer Eye age ("It's like meeting the man of my dreams and then meeting his beautiful husband") but otherwise is melodically intact and pleasant enough.

Considering the original's inescapable ubiquity, this remake seems almost like a hits collection. But while best ofs and greatest hits often leave this listener cold, *Jagged Little Pill Acoustic* clearly maps out Alanis' musical journey over the past decade and serves as a reminder of a great collection of songs. **Beth Dariti**

Rachel Stevens

Come & Get It

Polydor

★★★



Take seven unnaturally polite post-pubescents, add generous helpings of hit factory pop droppings and garnish with guidance from Simon "Svengali" Fuller. Leave mostly uncovered for a few years before separating the mixture and leaving to cool. Seize a generic pop princess cookie cutter and voila! you too can make yourself a Rachel Stevens. With so little of her debut solo outing *Funky Dory* (2003) clinging favourably to the tastebuds, Stevens has everything to prove with this second dish, and while it's still no eureka mo-

ment in the evolution of pop music, she succeeds at least in dispensing with flogging the now lifeless S Club horse. With *Funky Dory* essentially just a retread of her days of sharing the limelight, Stevens' solo career looked dead in the water. Cue a hasty reinvention and a few "borrowed" ideas from the likes of Goldfrapp, and all of a sudden there was life in the proverbial old dog yet.

The 'frappian single *Some Girls* is repeated here for the benefit of fans not willing to shell out for the bolstered reissue of its predecessor. Indeed, this feels rather less like an album than a meticulously planned strategy for total chart domination. How often is it these days that you get four singles released in the run up to a record? It's just as well then that the songwriters and producers behind it (including Karen and Shelly Poole, Richard X, Rob Davis and former S Club hitmakers Jewels & Stone) have managed to conjure up some tunes well worthy of attention. In particular, Richard X's Eighties retro-electro influence really makes its mark. In a similar vein to Goldfrapp's *Ooh La La*, most recent single *I Said Never Again (But Here We Are)* calls on late Eighties glam-a-likes Adam & The Ants and combines their influence with some rather dubious but entertaining lyrics. Elsewhere, *Je M'Appelle* is a spiky mid-tempo R&B number that suits Stevens well, while the pseudo nursery rhyme *Secret Garden* displays a vocal style heavily borrowed from Kylie Minogue's *Chocolate* – although this may have been intentional given that both songs sprang from the pen of Karen Poole. Making an unapologetic play for the fantasies of Stevens' young male fans, *Crazy Boys* teases with its chunky beats and solid bassline underpinning her moans and groans.

While the songs are, for the most part, amply strong enough to carry her, Stevens' struggle for success has always been marred by the music coming second to her image. Sure, it's worked for others, but somehow she lacks the likeability factor that separates Kylie from Dannii and Robbie from Gary. Targeting the loins of the boys won't necessarily translate into healthy sales if she cannot endear herself to the sisterhood also. Even with some of the finest songwriters in pop putting rockets under Rachel, you can't help feeling that some of *Come & Get It* has gone to waste on something of a damp squib. **Andrew Stewart**

Two years is a long time in the music industry and, as it turns out, ample time too for significant changes in the world of Heather Nova. Since her last album *Storm* snuck up quietly on 2003, she has relocated from the UK back to her childhood home of Bermuda and given birth to her first child, Sebastian. These are the sort of life events that songwriters inevitably draw upon in creating their art and *Redbird* unmistakably reflects a consummate artist maturing in her craft.

That said, opener *Welcome* is something of a throwback to the turn of the millennium. Co-written with Dido, the track was originally included as a bonus incentive for the delayed North American release of 2001's *South*, but has not hitherto been available on this side of the pond. Much of the criticism levelled at that album was aimed at its overly slick production, and *Welcome* is no slouch in that department. Yet despite basking in samples, scratches and swirling, unfurling loops, it was easily the most dynamic and accessible of *South's* suite of songs, and is no less wonderful here. But don't be fooled by its glossiness (courtesy of production trio The Matrix, who've worked with Avril Lavigne and Britney Spears), it's not a true indication of the further delights to come. Then again, neither is what comes next.

I Miss My Sky is not so much a song as a five-minute operetta that Nova claims to be the pinnacle of her songwriting achievements to date. She may not be entirely wrong either, it's an astonishing piece of music. Based on a conspiracy theory that aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart did not perish in the Pacific Ocean, but that she and co-pilot, Fred Noonan, crash-landed on an atoll, living out their remaining days in isolation. Earhart looks back on the events that brought her to this place, muses on the thoughts of those left behind and rails against the injustice of being confined to a small patch of earth when her true home is in the freedom of the sky. The intimate story effectively parallels universal themes of frustration experienced by those prevented from living out their destinies by cruel circumstances. The bare-boned acoustic intro builds inexorably to a climax of pain and desperation, with Sophie Solomon's plaintive violin

Heather Nova
Redbird
Big Cat
★★★★½



tracing haunting countermelodies beneath the impassioned vocal.

The rest of the album treads the stripped-back rock path that Nova last journeyed on *Storm*. Yet despite their more conventional nature than the double-barrelled opening salvo, they are nonetheless strong and extremely satisfying. Inevitably, motherhood rears its head on several tracks; *Motherland* and *Singing You Through* give voice to the primal feelings of protectiveness and responsibility that a mother feels for her child, while *Mesmerised* reflects the overpowering, simultaneous emotions of vulnerability and strength evoked by the experience. The gentle lullaby of closer *The Sun Will Always Rise* also dwells in this context, offering a soft and comforting hymn of reassurance that the light will forever prevail.

Although couched in the familiar context of a mainstream pop/rock structure, *Redbird* demonstrates Nova's continuing confidence as a songwriter and lyricist. The title track successfully produces a subliminal evocation of the colour red and its vibrant sym-

bolism through the lyrical references to roses, pomegranates, flames, roses, rubies and lust. On *Overtuned*, Nova proves surprisingly adept at marrying a talking blues song to a backing that's equal parts Oasis and early Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers – no mean feat! Elsewhere, the London Community Gospel Choir convene to bring a sense of uplifting majesty to *Done Drifting* and *A Way To Live*.

In the past, Nova has covered everyone from The Beatles to The Clash, Nick Cave to Neil Young, and here opts for a fairly straight cover of Chris Isaak's *Wicked Game*. Yes, you read that correctly. Even more bizarrely, it is oddly effective. Whilst all the trademark twangy, Duane Eddy-like guitar parts remain firmly in place in a backing track that's so close to the original it's barely distinguishable, Isaak's blue yodel vocal stylings are replaced by Nova's pure falsetto and render the song utterly lovely. Overall, *Redbird* is an accomplished work and her strongest collection in years that re-establishes Nova as an artistic force to be reckoned with. **Trevor Raggatt**

Cat Power
The Greatest
Matador
★★★★½



In case you didn't know, Cat Power is the very singular Chan (pronounced "Shawn") Marshall and she's something of a wilful enigma. Since emerging in 1995 with *Dear Sir*, she's released a string of albums so acutely recognisable as her own, where universal themes – you know, life-loss-love, the tension between creativity and artifice, the whereabouts of the toothpaste cap – are explored using lo-fi instrumentation often as sparse and direct as her lyrics are oblique and wrong-footing. Possessor of a prematurely timeworn voice that somehow manages to be both rich and soulful and aridly aching at the same time, her records encompass hushed folk balladry, country stylings, blues sensibilities, and moments of spiky almost-punk. Critics being what they are, Marshall's highly personal mix of styles has seen her fetéd in certain quarters as one of the planet's foremost songwriters; but for me, she often sounds like a sulky adolescent who's discovered the recording studio in a weird uncle's woodshed.

But what's this? For her no-it's-not-a-Best-Of new effort, *The Greatest*, Marshall decamped to Ardent Studios in Memphis, previously graced by Bob Dylan and Stax Records among others, and

enlisted the help of some genuine soul veterans: Mabon "Teen" Hodges, Al Green's songwriting partner and guitarist, his brother Leroy "Flick" Hodges on bass, and drummer Steve Potts of Booker T & The MGs. Certainly, this marks a different approach to her previous record, 2003's *You Are Free*, an enjoyable if rather inconsistent effort which featured Dave Grohl on drums and (*ulp!*) Eddie Vedder on vocals. Whether she's simply after a bit of mainstream accessibility or getting back to her roots, maaan, the added space and warmth imparted by her new band is apparent from the first notes of the opener. *The Greatest* starts with meditative piano then adds pattering drums, flecks of strings and half-heard backing vocals before Marshall gets to musing on the vagaries of her chosen career: "*Once I wanted to be the greatest/No wind or waterfall could stop me/And then came the rush of the flood/The stars turned you to dust*". Such a declaration of bravado and disappointment echoes what I've heard of her live shows, where she's almost legendary for clamming up and departing the stage in tears; but something in the new-found sunshine of the music gives some hope of reconciliation between her studio and live personas.

The clement weather brightens further on second song, *Could We*, as bursts of Memphis horn illuminate the song's gentle swing. *Lived In Bars* starts off more mopey and more like your usual Cat Power fare, but halfway through she gamely hitches up her skirts and starts to dance upon the tables. Almost. Elsewhere, there's a couple of songs that wouldn't sound out of place on previous albums, such as the piano ballad *Where Is My Love* ("*In my arms, finally*") and the spare *Hate*, beamed from a Southern porch through a poisonous whisky haze ("*I hate myself and I want to die*"), and on these we're back in the woodshed.

Overall, however, this album encapsulates everything that's positive and risky about such a project, in which an established outsider attempts to refract her muse through a different prism by reconnecting with her musical heritage. Marshall's music on *The Greatest* is undeniably likeable and pleasant, which may be almost an insult to aficionados of her earlier work. But whilst there is no question of a Liz Phair-esque U-turn, the fact of the matter is that most people will find these songs more palatable than any of her previous missives, thereby making it a convenient entrypoint for the curious to start. **Adam Smith**

June Tabor
At The
Wood's Heart
Topic
★★★★



Following 2003's stunning *An Echo Of Hooves* and this year's wonderfully diverse and comprehensive boxset, *Always*, June Tabor returns with another excellent collection of material that extends and transcends folk music boundaries. Rather than the focused, intimate balladry of *...Hooves*, the range of song choices on *At The Wood's Heart* better recalls those of her earlier albums *Angel Tiger* (1992) and *Aleyn* (1997), mixing songs both ancient and modern, all of which are given cohesion by the performances of Tabor and her musicians Huw Warren (piano), Martin Simpson (guitar), Mark Emerson (viola/violin), Andy Cutting (accordion), Tim Harries (double bass), Mark Lockheart and Iain Ballamy (saxophones). This accomplished ensemble brings a loose and fluid jazzy texture to the arrangements and sensitive accompaniment to Tabor's always spot on vocals.

Though considerably less bloody than the death-soaked *...Hooves*, shades of darkness abound on the majority of these dozen, mostly traditional songs – the bitter lovers' quarrel in Johnny, Johnny, the agony of a lost love in *Ah! The Sighs* and the pain of betrayal in *She's Like The Swallow*. On the McGarrigles' enduring *Heart Like A Wheel*, Tabor turns the "wreck a human being" lyric into a chilling refrain, making the song sound a good deal bleaker than any previous version. Light relief – of sorts – is provided by a spirited Chaucerian roundel (*Now Welcome Summer*) and a splendid rendition of the Duke Ellington standard, *Do Nothing 'Til You Hear From Me*. The album rarely strays from a sense of vulnerability however, and the closer *Lie With Me* is a touching and heartfelt plea for romantic reciprocation.

Tabor's ability to blow the dust from decades old ballads and standards is evidenced throughout. Her sense of drama and the authority of her singing remain unequalled on the contemporary folk scene – no-one delivers a line like "Stand off - for you are deceitful"

(on *The Banks Of The Sweet Primroses*) with more magnificent, withering disdain. At the same time, her interpretation of a gorgeous new Bill Caddick song, *The Cloud Factory*, is one of the warmest, most moving songs she's ever performed in her 30-year career. An engrossing and beautiful album then, *At The Wood's Heart* is another distinguished addition to her exemplary catalogue. **Alex Ramon**

Stars
Set Yourself
On Fire
City Slang
★★★½



Set Yourself On Fire is the third full album from talented Canadian indie-pop quintet Stars, although only the second to get a domestic release, and over six months late at that (and with an inexplicably hideous new sleeve). Whilst they haven't moved far from the keyboard-driven electropop of 2003's *Heart*, there's a deliciously fuller sound at work with some beautifully crafted orchestral additions that never overpower or become pompous, as can often happen when rock bands try to add a string section (are you listening Oasis?).

Of course the real fuel to Stars' fire is the vocals, and there's eerily tight harmonising aplenty from Amy Millan and Torquil Campbell, sometimes to the point where it requires a finely-tuned ear to even tell that two people are singing. While the gentle, melodic opener *Your Ex-Lover Is Dead* seems to be more of an intro than a song, recalling The Delgados in places, its string-soaked self-help mutterings could well put off some listeners worried that the rest of the album may be as dreary or, worse, unpleasantly saccharine. It's a strange choice for second single and certainly doesn't live up to the great title, but if you take Millan's breathily delivered assertion that "live through this and you won't look back" as a plea to stick with it, you'll be taking good advice.

The reward comes swiftly as the band shifts up a gear or two for the title track, a masterful slab of quirky pop that crests along beautiful soundscapes while successfully avoiding

the perennially attendant pitfall of dullness. The only criticism is that Stars seem overly keen on excessively long outros that often so completely change the mood of the piece that you forget what the main part of the song was like. In this case, two minutes of Campbell languidly repeating "20 years asleep until we sleep forever" over tired piano and slide guitar, whilst undoubtedly lovely, simply does not thrill.

First single *Ageless Beauty* is something of an insidious toetapper. It may not impress on the initial listen or two, but your head will surely nod without you knowing and, like me, you may even find yourself typing in rhythm and your feet competing to be most active. Providing rare relief from Stars' favourite theme of broken hearts and failed relationships, this one's actually about getting together. Another highlight comes successively with *Reunion*, the chorus of which is an uplifting joy as Campbell chimes "all I want is one more chance to be young and wild and free". Don't we all. Elsewhere he sighs, "I had six too many drinks last night", but if this is what happens when the man is hungover, I shall personally take him out on a massive bender before the next album.

Thematically on another level entirely, *He Lied About Death* is an edgy, spiky anti-Bush song. It's slightly out of keeping with the tone of the rest of the album, but nonetheless stands out for the right reasons as a great little rant that deals more with political passion than reasoned debate with lines like "I hope your drunken daughters are gay!". Its second half verges on a discordant noise assault, but never becomes unlistenable and certainly sustains the mood of the track. Perhaps this is where the record should have ended, however, as it leaves the concluding trio of songs feeling somewhat hollow and even a little boring.

Stars produce well-realised, enchanting, pretty indie pop-rock mostly dealing with the endlessly engaging subject of the battle of the sexes, and in doing so have produced a listenable, likeable and often affecting record, only slightly let down by a few too many unnecessary fillers, which would have been better placed as B-sides, and those occasional off-topic outros. **Scott Millar**

The Corrs

Home

Atlantic

★★★★½



It may only be a year since their last studio outing but Ireland's "acceptable face of cloning" are back with a new set of lilting, celtic-inspired tunes. The Corr family's background in traditional Irish music has never been far from the surface of any of their recorded output, although, since their 1997 breakthrough, *Talk On Corners*, it has been increasingly submerged under washes of lush pop production. However the appropriately entitled *Home* takes the band full circle, concentrating on the music which they grew up with and the deep musical heritage of the Gaelic peoples.

These twelve songs comprise a selection of nine traditional Irish and Scottish folk tunes along with covers of three modern tracks with a "folk royalty" or Irish connection. The idea for an album of predominantly traditional music came from drummer Caroline, in response to the reception that the jigs and reels that are regularly slipped into live sets evoke in audiences around the world. It also allowed the family an opportunity to pay tribute to their late mother, from whose songbook a number of the traditional songs were sourced.

Stylistically, the album steers a conservative course. This is no cutting edge fusion of folk and other jazz and rock forms à la Iona or Capercaille. The arrangements are straightforward, with the band having taken a mostly "live in the studio" approach to the basic tracks (i.e. overdubs added only later and sparingly). In that respect, this could be almost any mainstream folk album from the last twenty years, but when you add in Andrea Corr's distinctive and undeniably beautiful vocals, Sharon's singular fiddle playing and the trademark vocal harmonies, this is very much a Corrs album. Production duties are taken by Suzanne Vega's ex-husband, Mitchell Froom, who has worked with the band on a number of occasions. However, his sonic stamp on the album seems minimal. Anyone expecting the multi-layered pop arrangements of *In Blue* (2000) and *Borrowed Heaven* (2004) or Crowded House stylings will be disap-

pointed. Only on *Spancill Hill* are there echoes of his work with the Finn Bros. in the *Weather With You*-like acoustic guitar lines – until it transforms briefly into a reel. Additional string arrangements penned by veteran arranger Fia-chra Trench and provided by the BBC Concert Orchestra are subtly sprinkled across the tracks along with other traditional instruments, low whistles, uilleann pipes and makes for an easy on the ear and attractive sound.

The traditional tracks are well chosen, including some beautiful traditional melodies dating back through the 19th Century Irish diasporas (*Spancill Hill*) to the bardic era of the likes of harpist Turlough O'Carolan. In particular, *Buachaill On Eirne* has always been among the most haunting of Irish melodies. Other tunes like *Haste To The Wedding* and *My Lagan Love* have oft been mined in the past by those, like landmark Celtic-rock band Horslips, wishing to bring ancient melodies to a modern audience. Even Kate Bush has covered the latter.

The modern songs, too, are interesting choices. The Corrs version of *Heart Like A Wheel* may not go down in history as the greatest cover of Anna McGarrigle's song but it is well done. Richard Thompson's *Dimming Of The Day* is particularly touching and tender – Sharon's sensitive and faltering vocal nestling among simple acoustic guitar and string backing. The oddest choice for inclusion on the album is the track currently attracting the most radio play – *Old Town*. Why an obscure track from a Phil Lynott solo album should have been covered on this album and their MTV live set is a mystery. A straight cover of the original, it sits a little uncomfortably among the other folkier tracks. However, as the band have said in interviews... somehow you'd miss it if it wasn't there. Certainly it's a hitherto undiscovered gem and it's perky piano, string and brass motif lifts the album before it slides into the exquisite melancholy of *Dimming Of The Day*. Plus it does show that there was more depth and poetry in the late singer's writing than the self-parodying cod metal into which Thin Lizzy descended in their later years.

It would be easy enough to damn *Home* with faint praise – this isn't a ground-breaking album in any way.

Adjectives spring to mind like "pleasant", "enjoyable" and, dare I say it, "nice". However, these don't do justice to what is essentially a fine set of traditionally based tunes which make for a very enjoyable, if undemanding, listening experience – and, when it comes down to it, there's nothing wrong with that.

Trevor Raggatt

Petra Jean

Phillipson

Notes On: Love

Grönland

★★★



Warning! Do not listen to *Notes On: Love* on an otherwise happy and bright summer's day. The chances are that this debut solo album from Petra Jean Phillipson will pass you by completely between squinty looks up to the sun. A more appropriate setting would be within the cold, dark spaces of a winter's evening as you lie cocooned and thoughtful. This is an album for which the setting must be perfectly aligned. It's obscure and delicate sounds are reminiscent of Adem, and these are coupled with wavering, haunting vocals, not enormously discrepant from those of bearded folkie Devendra Banhart. Keen ears may even recognise Phillipson's vocals, though distinctive in kind, from her earlier work with artists such as Martina Topley-Bird, The Beta Band, Mad Professor, Marc Almond and David Holmes (Phillipson was formerly the lead vocalist for his briefly successful Free Association collective).

So, once ensconced in your hiemal surrounds, earphones close by, and thus the mood perfectly set, *Notes On: Love* will take you on a closing journey through the eight-year chapter of Phillipson's life for which it has been gestating. It's a chapter told through intimate songs, curious attention-grabbing lyrics (e.g. "I want to have a penis for a day") and sounds that inevitably warrant comparisons to Billie Holiday and the UK's more famous PJ, Ms. Harvey. Standout tracks include the Harvey-esque *Independent Woman*, *Nothing If Not Writing Time*, which is reminiscent of Martha Wainwright's lovely ascending melodies, and *Into My Arms*, a Nick Cave cover into which

Phillipson's voice delicately wanders with much success.

No doubt owing a great deal to the production talents of former Verve guitarist Si Tong, the clean and uncluttered atmosphere works well with the album's foreboding. However, *Notes On: Love* won't be to everyone's taste. It's certainly in no hurry to become familiar, particularly during the second half for which it is harder to find time. Phillipson herself admits to the dark, heavy tones that shade and sometimes overshadow this release. Yet it is these sentiments that are precisely what she was aiming for – the challenges to the listener originate from what are indeed her notes on love. Thus, just as love can be immense and bewitching, so can this collection. **Helen Griffiths**

Leela James
A Change Is Gonna Come
Warner Bros.

★★★★



I stole this album. I didn't mean to, it's not even really the kind of thing that usually does it for me. It looks pretty unassuming – girl on the front, big hair, she looks like a lot of other girls who turn out not to be very good. This one turns out good though. Her old-fashioned brand of soul is well worth the thievery stain on mine, which is not, of course, to condone or encourage that kind of bad behaviour. I'm just saying...

It's a dangerous thing, calling the first song on your album *Music* and then namechecking Aretha Franklin and Chaka Khan before the chorus even kicks in, and she probably wouldn't get away with it if she were a bit less good. Lucky for Leela James that her voice is unremittingly extraordinary. Smooth as a James Bond chat-up line and emotional as a wounded animal, gritty and rich in all the right places. Like a really good cup of coffee. They picked *Music* along with cheery tune *Good Time* as singles, but to me it's the angrier, darker numbers *Ghetto* (with Wyclef Jean) and *Didn't I* (with Kanye West) that suit her best and really stand out. She just sings it like she means it, and she has the kind of voice – technically spectacular and coming from somewhere a

little bit deeper in her chest than your regular starlet – that can properly pull off lines like “*low down dirty*”. Not many people can do that in a serious manner, but Leela drips just the right kind of bluesy back porch sincerity. Ain't nothing like the truth.

As an album, *A Change Is Gonna Come* probably misses out on real greatness, but only narrowly. A few of the songs are not, I suspect, very good under the fancy production. Don't get me wrong, they're still great to listen to because Leela James sings on them, but if you're a sucker for a big chorus you'll probably find yourself skipping through quite a few tracks. On the other hand, some of the songs are just great to dance to, and screw the chorus – *Rain*, for instance, has a guitar hook hooky enough that you don't really care that no-one could be bothered writing a vocal melody worthy of it.

The songs are interspersed with little acoustic country blues and gospel interludes that sound like fried chicken and the ghost of Leadbelly, wonderful in themselves and also providing a counterpoint to '60s-soaked soul numbers like *Prayer* and the title track, a cover of Sam Cooke's 1964 hit that is well-delivered, if a little uninspired. Thrown into the mix, too, are a few real curiosities like a delightfully unexpected cover of No Doubt's *Don't Speak* that pisses all over the original. It's like she's squashed about a hundred years' worth of American music into one album, and so perhaps it's not surprising that in many ways this is an album full of clichés – there are some very standard lyrics, R&B sprinkles on more than one track, and she does thank Jesus and her parents in that order on the sleeve notes.

A lot of good things are being thrown together on *A Change Is Gonna Come*, but innovative it is not. However, in the same way that rigid metrical form can in the right hands produce the best poetry, the kinds of traditions that Leela James is tapping into provide a platform that really works to showcase her talents. An ungenerous critic might say that it is an album unsure of what it wants to be, but then again, it's pleasing that albums are still being made that really do defy petty pigeonholing.

Dana Immanuel

The Like

Are You Thinking What I'm Thinking?
Universal IMS

★★★



Neptotism has never been cuter thanks to this Los Angeles trio. All daughters of famous musical fathers (Mitchell Froom, Pete Thomas and Tony Berg), The Like's punk-chic good looks and sassy sense of style make for great eye candy, but considering their connections, talent was not necessarily a prerequisite for a record deal. Luckily The Like do have talent and have inherited some musical inclinations from their prominent poppas. *Are You Thinking What I'm Thinking?* is quality girl-rock fodder that, whilst not being stellar under any circumstances, presents them in a promising enough light.

Mostly, the album employs the archetypal pop formula, portrayed with just a hint of girl power, and is utterly soundtrack prone. *Once Things Look Up* delivers a shimmering MOR vibe, with vocalist Z Berg sounding like a teenaged Sarah McLachlan. *The One* is an uptown take on the Eighties, its warm orchestration reminiscent of Modern English's *Melt With You*, whilst both *Falling* and *Too Late* share a lite feminine swagger. The only true misdirection lies in Wendy Melvoin's sometimes overcompensating production. The droning guitars and faded drums don't mix well with Z Berg's soft soprano, and as a result, many of the songs never gain momentum; in particular, album closer *Waves That Never Break* and *(So I'll Sit Here) Waiting* seem to stop before they start. The music itself is not bad; it is simply presented in a less than ideal way.

Ultimately, both the album and The Like themselves come off as a bit average, but unlike many pop acts today, they have talent and are never disingenuous in their music. Factor in their youth and the fact that most bands never nail their sound on their debut, and *Are You Thinking What I'm Thinking?* is more a step in the right direction than a defining moment in The Like's career. Perhaps one day they will make the shift from eye candy to ear candy, and make music that allows them to step outside the shadows of their famous fathers.

Aaron Alper

Sing-Sing
Sing-Sing & I
Aerial

★★★★★



At the turn of the millennium, a bright pop phoenix arose from the ashes of Britpoppers Lush in the form of the shiny Sing-Sing, a whip-smart collaboration between songwriter/guitarist Emma Anderson and former Mad Professor associate, Lisa O'Neill. Released on their own Aerial imprint through Sanctuary Records, their debut album *The Joy Of Sing-Sing* (2002) inexplicably vanished, even with a second push when signed to Poptones. Five years on, the duo are back with an astonishingly strong set of modern, intelligent pop that takes no prisoners.

Lover gets proceedings off to a flying start with a slab of Blondie-meets-The Bangles punk-pop combining driving drums and bass with an insidiously memorable chorus set off with luscious background harmonies. *Come, Sing Me A Song* successfully blends Bond villain strings and horns with perky acoustic guitar to create a flawless pop song with a lightness that never grows cloying, while *A Modern Girl* encapsulates the best Eighties and Nineties pop; coming on like the Lightning Seeds with Associates-style piano chops, it sets out a manifesto for the Bridget

Jones generation. The quirky *Mr Kadali* lopes along wistfully contemplating a quick fix for life's little hassles, punctuated with voiceovers from the eponymous spiritual healer. Then, just when you think you've got the measure of the girls, Sing-Sing try to wrong-foot you. *Ruby* kicks the door of assumption to the floor and throws around the furniture with a louche and sleazy slice of disco metal that the Scissor Sisters would kill for.

Normally with a "side one" this strong, the fear of anti-climax kicks in, but thankfully *Sing-Sing & I* completely assuages. *I Do* and *Going Out Tonight* retain the Lightning Seeds pop feel but add in the indie and electronica influences that reflect their musical backgrounds. After a mellower moment provided by *Unseen*, *The Time Has Come* is a rites of passage drinking song with a boozy sing-a-long chorus, complete with bierkeller ambience, contrasting nicely with Lisa's tender and vulnerable verses.

The album rounds off with *When I Was Made* and *A Kind Of Love*; the former a joyous pop song recalling the likes of Belle & Sebastian or even the

Divine Comedy, complete with harp 'pling's and an instrumental coda, and the latter a complex, beautiful and contemplative song that echoes O'Neill's work with the Mad Professor.

It's hard to praise *Sing-Sing & I* highly enough – every song is a potential hit single. O'Neill's vocals are pure and sit well in the mix, at times conjuring a looser Kate Bush and at others Isobel Campbell, and are woven into an effective, harmonious web with Emma's graceful backing coos. Despite the use of synths, samples and electronic effects throughout the album, the production is never permitted to steal the show, but serves the songs and coaxes out their subtleties.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Sing-Sing is that the songs burrow into your consciousness, quickly becoming your internal soundtrack. After just a couple of listens, they seem so utterly familiar that it's almost inconceivable you haven't known them for years. Sing-Sing are precisely the type of talent required to rescue the UK pop charts from the turgid, manufactured product that currently holds them in thrall. **Trevor Raggatt**



Vienna Teng Warm Strangers

Zoe

★★★★★



Classically trained pianist Vienna Teng initially discarded her instrument of choice as a means of making a living, but after graduating with a computer science degree and enduring a stint as a cubicle-bound software engineer, it somewhat inevitably called her home. With the help of the internet, Teng soon made a name for herself on US college campuses and websites, and in 2002, her debut album *Waking Hour* was released in North America to critical acclaim. Whilst that record was certainly characterised by beautiful melodies and well-performed, haunting autobiographical pieces, at times it seemed to suffer from its own pomp and pageantry. The ethereal music was formulaic and the songwriting loose and occasionally repetitive. It's safe to say then that Teng has grown further in the intervening months, and *Warm Strangers* (originally released in the US in 2003) shimmers with elegant and tender songs illuminated by their intelligent and imaginative lyrics.

Poetic opener *Feather Moon* starts off with prominent but simple minor key piano, much in the vein of Little Earthquakes-era Tori Amos, before Teng's beautiful voice is allowed to gently envelop the listener. Elsewhere, however, Teng lets the piano take a lesser role in many songs, becoming part of the blend rather than the focus. Most notably on *Hope On Fire*, the album's rhythmic centrepiece, she steps up to the plate primarily a vocalist and a pianist second, with positive results. So while her main strength still lies in her skilled musicianship, Teng is growing as a vocalist and is certainly no lightweight as a songwriter. Throughout the album, the finely detailed orchestration is diverse and adds considerable strength and force to music that in previous efforts has smacked of preciousness.

Lyrical, too, *Warm Strangers* is a clear progression. Whilst *Waking Hour* was filled with personal vignettes, Teng stretches herself to explore the stories of others; so while *Shasta* tells the tale of a pregnant woman, *Homecoming* puts her

in the shoes of a preacher. Most affecting, however, is the devastatingly beautiful a cappella track, *Passage*. The story is spun from the viewpoint of a woman who is killed in a car crash but watches as those she loved move on through the mourning process. Each lyric follows her lover, mother and sister through various forms of grief, from: "*my mother trembles with the sobs whose absence seems absurd, my sister shouts to let her see through the cloud of crowd surrounding me*" to the heart-wrenching conclusion of "*my lover hears the open wind and crawls blinking into the sun*" and "*my lover very much alive, arms wrapped now around his wife.*"

On the downside, Teng still slides from time to time into the well-trod lighter fare of latter day Sarah McLachlan, and Tori Amos aficionados might recognise a number of the chord progressions and vocal tricks. Emotionally, too, Teng's clear and distinct intonations sometimes feel removed from the feelings that she is attempting to express. Yet, in spite of these minor caveats, *Warm Strangers* is a treasurable album of undeniable talent from an artist becoming less tentative in finding her own voice. **Loria Near**

Hem Eveningland Liberty

★★★★★



The story of Hem is as warming as their music. Brought together by their love of Americana and alt.country music, songwriter Dan Messe and producer/engineer Gary Maurer placed an advert in a local paper for a like-minded vocalist, leading to their discovery of the very talented Sally Ellyson, who, despite possessing a truly affecting voice, had been too shy to sing in public. Together with Steve Curtis, George Rush, Mark Brotter, Bob Hoffnar and Heather Zimmerman, they released their articulate and folksy debut, *Rabbit Songs*, in 2001. In contrast, *Eveningland* is an opulent, lush and stronger album; a long-tabled banquet with Ellyson's vocals the centrepiece, somehow managing to be both intimate and closed, sultry and breezy, often within the same song.

Over the sixteen-track smorgasbord, Hem infuse into these tunes a variety of influences, from the gentle Seven-

ties country-pop of The Carpenters to the more contemporary hints of Natalie Merchant post 10,000 Maniacs. The Slovak Radio Orchestra also pay a visit, their delicate strings adding considerable texture and depth, thrusting the songs to great cinematic heights. Fittingly, the songwriting imbues every song with vivid and beautiful imagery - from the heartbreaking lines of lost love in *The Fire Thief* ("*Sometimes a heart can break and make its own relief, the way a cold dark night invites the fire thief*") to the images of the traveller in *Pacific Street* ("*Well I don't know you except in the way a traveller knows a traveller, the way a station can tempt you to stay and spend some time inside it*"), each song seems like a standalone artwork, as if each were a four-minute film. Nothing is more representative of the cinematic style than the all-too-brief instrumental, *Eveningland*, which rises and swells mid-album to wrap the listener in sound. Elsewhere, the band weave the sounds of a lullaby into *Lucky*, infuse a Randy Newman-esque pop sensibility into *Receiver*, and ably reflect the longings of the great country balladeers such as Loretta Lynn in the stunning *Dance Me Home*.

Hem take chances as well, gracefully lending the Johnny and June Carter Cash duet *Jackson* a sleepy wistfulness that the roughhewn original has never before known. Though the song was made famous as a playful, rocking tune about a misdemeaning man whose wife makes sure her voice is heard ("*Go on down to Jackson, go on and wreck your health*"), Ellyson sings the part as a seductive taunt, preserving the sense of a woman scorned, but without the original's inherent violence, and the best part is it works. Album closer, *Carry Me Home*, is a murder ballad that focuses not on the crime, but rather the healing from the traumatic event. Even with such a morbid topic, the song leaves the listener reveling in hope as Ellyson softly sings the refrain "tell me nothing's wrong there".

Disappointingly, the UK release doesn't seem to feature the hidden track available elsewhere, an a cappella version of the traditional number, *Now The Day Is Over*, that Ellyson sings with an exquisite slight tremble. That minor grumble aside, *Eveningland* is a superb collection of songs that, despite the prevailing themes of love long lost and death, still contain a rare sense of hope and uplift that will comfort you for hours. **Loria Near**

Deerhoof

The Runners Four

ATP

★★★★



More than almost any other band you care to mention, Deerhoof take an obvious, unfettered joy in what they do. In a career spanning over a decade, the band have applied a particle condenser to pop and noise forms, creating albums populated by dense song-nuggets that turn so many corners, throw so many shapes and spit out so many ideas that one wonders what some of their peers do all day. Take *Running Thoughts* from this latest opus; after a jangly cycle down a Sixties country lane, the wheels abruptly come off and the tune dissolves into humming keyboard drones overlaid with spooky, fried guitarwork. That this is Deerhoof's most focused and cohesive, even straightforward, effort thus far gives an idea of the fractured sensibilities on offer.

It's undoubtedly true that a more stable line-up in recent years has tamed the wilder fringes of the group's approach; formed in 1994 by the only constant member, drummer Greg Saunier, Deerhoof's revolving line-up has settled around Saunier, bassist/vocalist Satomi Matsuzaki and guitarists John Dietrich and Chris Cohen. With this new constancy have come albums such as 2004's *Milk Man* – a concept album about an evil milkman who kidnaps children and hides them in the clouds – that have eased up on their wilder tendencies in favour of heavily skewed guitar pop laced with a sugary sweetness and gnarly crunch. Both have always been important facets of their sound, but with less of a ten-cats-and-a-firework-in-a-sack approach, the music of Deerhoof has become more assured and less unpredictably dizzying.

The Runners Four continues this trajectory, and there's an immediate inkling that Deerhoof are consciously developing. There are 20 songs and 57 minutes here, nearly twice the white-dwarf density of any of their previous efforts. But the way the guitars circle and shimmer around Satomi's candy-cloud vocal on the beatless opener, *Chatterboxes*, serve to allay fears of any newfound flabbiness. By the time the

lumbering groove and sunny Sixties pop sheen of the ensuing *Twin Killers* and aforementioned *Running Thoughts* have gone by, it's becoming obvious that whatever their new modus operandum may be, the band are more than comfortable with it.

Funnily enough, given their burgeoning fascination with the flowerier reaches of Sixties music and Satomi's airy vocal style, it's only when singing duties are shared by the, er, stags that the sweetness of their sound starts to grate. *You Can See* and *Odyssey* are the worst offenders, the latter saved somewhat by slyly needling harmonics. Elsewhere though, along with a couple of trademark sugar-rush songlets, are some of Deerhoof's finest moments. *Siriustar* is the trad indie quiet/loud dynamic rewritten by Willy Wonka, surging from not a lot to technicolour fuzzout with a cute smile and a chocolate kiss. *You're Our Two* raids the sharps cabinet once more to set Satomi's paranoiac vocal against multiple stinging guitar lines, and the closing *RRRRRRRight* is a chipper, garagey adieu.

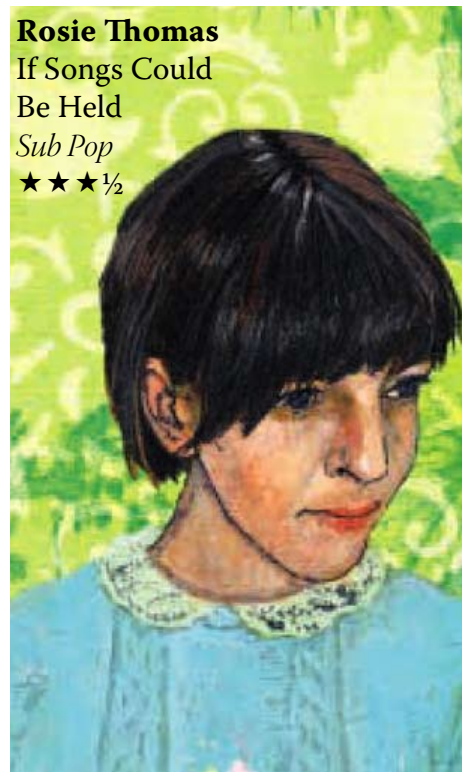
Describing Deerhoof is a bit like nailing jelly anyway, which is one of the things that makes them so unique. All you need to know is that you should go and buy this album and listen to it lots, because it's really good. Couldn't be simpler. **Adam Smith**

Rosie Thomas

If Songs Could Be Held

Sub Pop

★★★★½



The songs of Seattle native Rosie Thomas can bear such disarming simplicity that some might be tempted to write her off as simply saccharine fodder for Radio 2. But to do so would be a grave disservice to both the listener and the artist, whose softly softly approach and tender earnestness is one of her greatest assets.

That said, *If Songs Could Be Held*, her third album for Sub Pop, is considerably more complex and layered than anything up to this point in her career, and it is clear that she has gained in both confidence and skill. It's no surprise then that Thomas made a concerted effort to add some extra strings to her bow, moving to Los Angeles, away from her immediate circle, and forcing herself to try new things. From the first moments of opening track *Since You've Been Around*, the stylistic leap from 2003's *Only With Laughter Can You Win* becomes blindingly obvious. Delicate and lyrical, it's an unequivocal success, the instrumentation and vocals jostling to be the most adored like the sides of a diamond held up to the sun.

Despite the new compositional complexity, Thomas doesn't stray far from the highly personal subject matter that's been her stock in trade. As she herself sings on the raw but focused *Guess It May*, she is "still learning what love is", and one gets the impression that this has always been her concern, that her music is a constant exploration of the nature of love. As ever, Thomas' multi-faceted voice surprises and delights throughout. Highlights include *Let It Be Me*, a warm and sweetly sung duet with UK singer-songwriter Ed Harcourt, and the closing track *Tomorrow*, in which Thomas' simple, fragile vocal is complimented by a minimal yet strong arrangement.

As is the case with her previous albums, a few of these songs find the music itself unequal to her lyrics and vocals. For instance, *Loose Ends* is a wonderful extended metaphor set to an underwhelmingly gentle country backing, while *Time Goes Away* is a poignant reflection on the fleeting nature of love and happiness that's set to an unfortunately clunky piece of piano. However, in both cases, Thomas' shining performance leaves these lacking arrangements firmly in the shade, allowing the listener to linger long and savour a strong impression of beauty.

Clare Byrne



Camille
Le Fil
Virgin France
★★★★★

The word 'chanteuse' is bandied around rather too often these days, but rarely does an artist fit the bill more perfectly than 27 year old Parisian Camille. Though she is arguably most famous for singing on Nouvelle Vague's self-titled album of bossa nova interpretations of New Wave classics, *Le Fil* is actually her second solo release. The title translates as "the thread", pointedly relating to the hum that flows constantly throughout the record, undulating beneath the complex and luscious vocal layering and melodies, creating a fluid and bound piece of art. Though the album is sung almost entirely in her native tongue, a few strands of English appear in some songs, but French speaking friends assure me that, though the lyrics are indeed wonderful, the allure of *Le Fil* lies in its complex and beautiful sound.

One of the album's most striking elements is the heavy dependence on a cappella arrangements. Conventional instruments have a limited presence, comprising mainly of bossa nova per-

cussion and occasional horns and slap bass, but it is the diversity of Camille's vocal arrangements that make it so impressive. In particular, the richness and variety of her vocalisations on *Ta Douleur* are astounding and it's not hard to see why it was chosen as a single in France; as one of the most upbeat songs on the album, there is a wider berth for interesting noises – raspberries, squeals and squelches. Much like Tanya Tagaq's *Sinaa*, if it weren't for the 5" circular proof in your stereo, it would be hard to even entertain the thought that the human voice can make such sounds. On the slower songs (most notably *Vous*), the background ba ba bas and high-pitched vocals are reminiscent of the multi-layered and rich harmonies characteristic of Alisha's Attic.

But it's not just the voice parts that make *Le Fil* so spellbinding; the orchestral chord changes should not be underestimated, nor should Camille's clear understanding of how to write a moving piece of music. Opener *La Jeune Fille*

Aux Cheveux Blancs is the most luscious composition of them all; the orchestration is as pure as a sunrise, unscathed by sin and cynicism. The chordal and melodic movements are so genuinely perfect they'll make the hairs on your neck stand to attention. On the flip-side, Camille doesn't shy away from getting positively filthy, and *Janine III* is especially explicit; her rasping snarls are layered and looped, sounding for all the world like a group of bickering wrinkled women in a smalltown market square.

Le Fil often feels incredibly modern in the sense that the clarity and complexity of the vocals is fresh and original, but a folksy, traditional Gallic slant is also at play. Some of the melodies possess such worldweary wisdom that they may well have been passed down from generation to generation of singers. Rather like a thread, in fact. Even disregarding the lyrics completely, *Le Fil* is one of the most astonishing musical works of recent years. **Robbie de Santos**



Tori Amos

The Original Bootlegs

Epic

★★★★½



Should anyone have any doubts about what a commanding and provocative artist Tori Amos remains, they will surely be put to rest by these officially sanctioned “bootlegs”. Recorded during this year’s solo Original Sinsuality and Summer Of Sin tours, five of these double CDs were initially released exclusively online, and have now been packaged together as a comprehensive boxset (along with an extra bonus 2CD recording), offering yet another fix for Amos’ followers. Indeed, 2005 has been an amazingly fertile year for Amos artistically. With another brilliant studio album in *The Beekeeper*, an absorbing and stylistically innovative memoir in *Piece By Piece*, and now these releases, she’s in danger of spoiling us rotten. On these discs, culled from dates in LA, Chicago, Denver, Manchester, London and Boston, we find her singing (better than ever) songs both old and new, rarities and a series of creative covers - sufficient material to keep both die-hard enthusiasts and recent converts occupied for months. If you were at these shows (and surely not even Amos’s most devoted fans could have attended all of them) then these CDs offer a wonderful memento of some amazing musical moments. If you weren’t, it’s a chance to catch up on some of what you missed and to savour the enthralling experience that is Amos’s live show.

As skilful as she has been at integrating other instruments into her music over the years, there remains

something ineffably magical about Amos performing solo; the only time she shares the spotlight here is when she’s joined in quite spectacular fashion by the a six-piece gospel choir in London. With just piano, Rhodes and Hammond B3 organ to accompany her sinuous vocals, she’s at her most riveting, her ability to command an audience second to none. But is it any wonder that she’s so accomplished? Lest we forget, this self-confessed “road dog” has been performing for audiences since she was a teenager, and there’s a nice nod to those apprentice years in the ‘Piano Bar’ segments featured here, in which she performs her pick of the songs requested by fans via her website.

Among those receiving the Amos treatment are tracks by Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Madonna, Oasis, Bonnie Tyler, George Michael, Bon Jovi and Aerosmith (yes, really!), so it’s just as well that she has such a strong personality as a performer, and such finely-honed interpretive skills, that she stamps her distinctive mark on every one. “This could really be crap,” she warns before delivering a decidedly non-crap version of A Flock Of Seagulls’ *I Ran*. Particularly gorgeous are her takes on Jim Croce’s *Operator*, where she captures beautifully the combined bravado and vulnerability of the narrator, and *Like A Prayer*, which she invests with more genuine sexual and spiritual fervour than Madonna could ever hope to muster. There’s also some typically cherishable between-song banter in these Piano Bar interludes, including one already notorious diatribe. Who but Amos would have the chutzpah to lob some very descriptive insults at Morrissey in front of an audience of Mancunians? It’s one of many reasons to love her.

Another reason is that she’s amassed a back catalogue that ranks among the greatest in contemporary music, and which provides a very rich resource for her to mine

in live performances. Aside from her undebatable instrumental prowess, Amos has always been a terrific writer of songs that can be equal parts tender and savage, raw and healing, sad and sensual, and both her oldest and newest material gets a workout here. Highlights from her own repertoire include *Little Amsterdam*, sounding spookier than ever with its organ accompaniment; the baroquely beautiful *Yes, Anastasia*; the startling *Father Lucifer*; the buoyant *Take To The Sky*; the ever-green *Winter, Silent All These Years* and *Tear In Your Hand*; and the majestic *Cool On Your Island*. It’s fascinating, too, to hear new songs such as *Sweet The Sting* and *The Power Of Orange Knickers* stripped down to just keyboard and voice, and in the process sounding more themselves than ever.

It should be noted that there is, inevitably, quite a bit of repetition of material over the discs. *Original Sinsuality* kicks off every show, and we get several *Jamaica Inns*, *Space Dogs* and *Parasols* when we might wish for a *Pretty Good Year* or a *Northern Lad*. But, as Amos would no doubt argue, *Parasol* in Chicago on April 15th is not *Parasol* in Denver on April 19th, and the duplication of material does offer a valuable opportunity to compare different versions. Amos is such a spontaneous, in-the-moment performer that she never delivers identikit readings of her songs anyway, and the chance for listeners to play “compare and contrast” is one of the many pleasures offered here. Collectively then, these discs further demonstrate Amos’s sheer mastery of her art. From first note to last, you’re confronted with the slightly overwhelming sensation of hearing a performer at the very peak of her powers. While some critics continue to recycle tired complaints about “abstruse” lyrics and “excessive” ambition, Amos just gets on with making some of the most adventurous, intelligent and extraordinary music out there. Long may she continue.

Alex Ramon

Iona**Journey Into
The Morn***Open Sky/Voiceprint*

★★★★



An ancient Celtic truism states that a three-stranded cord is strong and, stylistically, this is also true of Iona. Their output falls squarely into three clear categories – Celtic-tinged pop, ambient sounds and extended, distinctly prog-leaning musical workouts. While their more ambient works often draw lazy comparisons with the likes of Clannad and Enya, Iona's strength lies in a depth of focus that avoids the over-reliance on texture and arrangement (to the detriment of melody and song structure) that taints some of the Brennan family's oeuvre. This same focus and musicality also keeps their more progressive tracks safely shy of meandering pretentiousness.

The mid-Nineties were something of a transition period for the band, with the exit of co-founder Dave Fitzgerald and ex-Kajagoogoo bassist Nick Beggs and the temporary recruitment of Steeleye Span's Tim Harries and Australian woodwind player Mike Houghton. Yet, ironically, this time of upheaval produced one of their most coherent and accomplished albums, *Journey Into The Morn*. A key factor in this was the addition the now permanent Troy Donockley. Although he had contributed uilleann pipes and low whistles to previous Iona albums, full-time membership helped steer the group in a more authentically folk and progressive rock direction, all the while retaining their accessible sound. This welcome reissue on the Voiceprint label gives listeners a timely opportunity to re-examine this important phase in their career.

After the gentle prelude of *Bí-Se I Mo Shúil*, a pair of joyous, upbeat pop songs presents itself in the form of *Irish Day* and *Wisdom*, both of which are complemented by traditional Celtic instrumentation. The more trance-styled *Everything Changes* follows, before the tender, acoustic guitar-driven *Inside My Heart* raises the stakes, with singer Joanne Hogg interweaving sublime self-harmonies and countermelodies before the intensity builds and the electric guitar of Dave Bainbridge enters and soars above it. The album's symphonic centrepiece, *Encircling*, is an astonish-

ing piece of modern prog rock spanning eleven minutes with three separate movements: the ethereal *Lorica* takes as its basis the Celtic "breastplate prayer", while the traditional instrumentation and rock backing of *Tara* evokes the ancient stronghold of the kings of Ireland. *Caim*, the "encircling charm", symbolises an all-encompassing religious love, spiralling down to a tranquil conclusion.

A further thematic thread runs through the second half of the album, with many songs inspired by the 8th Century Irish hymn, *Be Thou My Vision*. Final track, *When I Survey*, acts as a coda, melding sacred 18th Century lyrics with the American folk tune better known as *The Water Is Wide*, hinting towards the source of the morning to which the journey takes us. This final song, an enduring live favourite, once again highlights the impressive strength and beauty of Joanne Hogg's vocals and the power of her performance. Backed only by djembe, keyboard and e-Bow pads, she wrings every drop of meaning out of the words and tender melody.

Journey Into The Morn also features some notable guest appearances from Clannad vocalist Máire Brennan, who contributes Celtic harp to the title track and vocal loops to others alongside King Crimson founder Robert Fripp's guitar synth and "Frippertronics" effects. A decade on, *Journey...* remains a stunning piece of work that almost defies classification by being neither folk, pop, prog or rock, whilst blending elements of all four; remastering has only enhanced its sonic sheen. Iona have that rare ability to seamlessly transcend many diverse styles and *Journey...* offers plentiful and rich reward for those seeking to expand their musical and spiritual horizons beyond the everyday. **Trevor Raggatt**

Múm**Yesterday Was
Dramatic, Today***Is OK Morr Music*

★★



It was only after the crushingly beautiful and critically revered *Ágætis Byrjun* (2000) by fellow Icelanders Sigur Rós that experimental foursome Múm gained recognition in the UK, helped in no small way by the fact that their second album, 2002's *Finally We Are No*

One, was released on the same label. But to dismiss them for riding on their countrymen's tails would be a mistake; in their own unassuming way, Múm were pioneers too, as this reissue of their 1999 debut proves, albeit for better or worse. Originally released on tiny Icelandic indie label Thule, it soon went out of print and, following a long and messy legal wrangle, the band regained the rights earlier this year and set about remastering the songs in preparation for this re-release on German label, Morr Music. Aside from the fact that Morr is owned by friends of the band, their roster includes some of the IDM (Intelligent Dance Music) genre's brightest leading lights, many of whom contributed to the Morr Music Múm remix record, *Please Smile My Noise Bleed* (2001). A fitting home then, but what of the album itself?

Despite the newly-tooled tune-ups, *Yesterday...* only serves to indicate how far the band has come in the last half decade. Disappointingly, twin sister siren-like vocalists Kristín and Gyða (who has since departed the band) Valtýsdóttir appear on only three tracks. But what tracks they are! The most glorious moments, for instance, the end of *There Is A Number Of Small Things* and the first few minutes of *Awake On A Train*, are breathtakingly beautiful. The former is so full of joy that it conjures the urge to run through a sunlit grassy field, while the latter accurately replicates that inner warmth you can feel when looking out from the window of a train over a glinting snowy vista as it sparkles in the sun.

Mostly though, the album sounds like exactly what it is: a bunch of teenagers sitting in a room playing with a synthesiser and a few acoustic instruments. Many of the songs have a single musical theme that is endlessly repeated and changes infrequently. As a result, it occasionally gets excessively tiresome, and some of the noodling sound effects are painful. Certainly, if their later records can be said to hold some debt to Sigur Rós, *Yesterday...* suffers from being a touch too in thrall of Aphex Twin. It has some nice enough moments, but is really for completists only. If you're new to the band, try the bewitching, aquatically-themed *Finally We Are No One* or 2004's simpler and wonderfully ghostly *Summer Make Good*. **Bryn Williams**

Inara George

All Rise

Morr Music

★★★★



When you're the daughter of a preternaturally-gifted musician, in this case, celebrated Little Feat guitarist Lowell George, there's a certain sense of destiny at work, and Inara George is certainly no stranger to the industry. Whilst at college she fronted a pair of indie bands, Lode and Merrick, both of which boasted a small but devoted following, despite at first having no intention of following in her father's footsteps, studying instead classical theatre. In the lead up to this, her debut solo album, George was singing back-up for Idlewild, Van Dyke Parks and Jackson Browne, the latter of whom returns the favour here. Then last year she enlisted the production skills of Michael Andrews, composer of the score to cult film *Donnie Darko*, and work on the album began.

The result? *All Rise* is a graceful, elegant album of mostly downbeat love songs that showcases George as a singer, songwriter and lyricist of considerable depth, carving for herself a distinctive niche without depending on reputation once removed. Most of the songs wrap comfortably around well-crafted melodies and inventive song structures, with George's vocal always the centrepiece. Comparisons with Suzanne Vega and Cat Power's Chan Marshall are not too far off the mark; George's wide vocal range keeps her from sounding sedate yet lends the songs a greater depth of feeling. On the opening combo of *Mistress* and *Fools Work*, she sings in the manner of a sultry but delicate coffee house chanteuse, while on guitar-pop numbers like *Turn On/Turn Off* and crown jewel *What A Number*, she proves she can rock out as well as anyone.

To her credit, George manages to convey strong emotions in her lyrics without burying the listener with overwrought and angst-filled metaphors. In *Mistress*, the narrator wistfully asks, "Will you take me as your mistress?/Sure and short of breath/Could you carry on your business?/Do you already know/The way to my door?/Cause you made your

way inside/A dozen times before." On the more upbeat *Genius*, she tackles the topic of feeling inadequate in a disarmingly simple manner, singing, "Everybody wants to be a genius/You're not the only one/With all the things that you might do which one of them will you get to?"

It's not flawless, however; there's a few minor quibbles that detract from five-star greatness. Though George throws in a hauntingly beautiful and sparse cover of Joe Jackson's *Fools In Love* to mix things up, there are points in the album where the songs seem to fit and flow together too well, to the point where it's sometimes easy to get lost in the tracklist. A bit more attention to the sequencing may also have solved the uneasy listening that is the album closer, *Everybody Knows*. While this might have better served its purpose as an experiment on a B-side or been allowed more time to grow before recording, here it almost feels like a throwaway. Though it shows a different side to George's songwriting, it rather unbalances the disc. Yet despite these caveats, *All Rise* is an accomplished, excellent debut album, and one that generously leaves plenty of room for growth whilst undoubtedly holding its own, with or without the pedigree.

Loria Near

Robyn

Robyn

Konichiwa Records

★★★★



You don't need me to tell you that the geopolitical trans-national region of Scandinavia is something of a hotbed for eccentric female talent, but who would have expected Swedish Nineties two-hit wonder, Robyn, to make one of the sassiest modern pop albums of recent times. While Britney and Christina were rising and falling, marrying slobs and getting pregnant, Robyn was still a pretty successful pop star at home. This, her eponymous comeback, is actually album number five, and is being tipped to make her an international star (again). Like Gwen Stefani, she has re-branded herself as the ultimate post-modern woman – feisty, complex, couture, insecure, self-aware. The similarities don't end there ei-

ther. Recalling Stefani's obsession with the Japanese Harajuku Girls, Robyn is similarly playful and outrageous on the pimpalicious, self-referential *Konichiwa Bitches*, which has been setting tongues wagging all over the place. She has even set up her own label, Konichiwa Records, in order to release this irrepressibly modern collection.

In the tradition of the most durable and iconic female pop personalities, Robyn enjoys playing with the listener's perceptions. As such, while opening track *Curriculum Vitae* is a two-minute ironic spoken-word intro hyping her as "the Queen of Queen Bees... two time winner of the Nobel Prize for the super foxiest female evah!", by the second song, the hard-nosed, sexy *Who's That Girl?*, we find her proclaiming "the girls are sexy, like, every day, I'm only sexy when I say it's ok," exposing her insecurities beneath her sneering ice queen façade. There's real magic in her collaborations with Swedish electro duo, The Knife, who received broadsheet acclaim for their electroclash-meets-calypto sound on last year's *Deep Cuts*. Their icy, heavy synth lines and pounding staccato drum machine rhythms give the songs a real edge, adding to the feisty sexiness that Robyn's vocal delivery conjures. They work with Robyn on over half of the album, with the remainder consisting of more conventional strumming pop/rock. However, due to the complex persona built up throughout the album, what may have seemed drippy were it anyone else, here comes across as touching and heartfelt. That said, the ballads do disappoint to an extent. They aren't bad as such, but in context seem less vital when the Knife-produced tracks are so strong and cutting edge. Tarnishing the carefully crafted concept of the album, they detract from the bold, eccentric statements made elsewhere.

While terrific, shamelessly pop albums like this and Stefani's *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* (2004) steer impressively clear of the (4 x single) + (12 x filler) = album formula that prevents most pop records from actually being amazing, they would benefit further from an even stricter degree of quality control. Fortunately, there's enough humour, sassiness and originality to *Robyn* to make it one of the most memorable pop albums in recent years and an unexpected delight.

Robbie de Santos

Rose Polenzani

August

Parhelion Music

★★★★



Like armchair travel through a newly-carved glacial valley, Rose Polenzani's fourth solo album, *August*, has a hushed itinerant quality that throws wide open the world, yet mostly remains cosily in an intimate comfort zone. With the wow and flutter of her earlier work all but assuaged – there's nothing here as tummy-tighteningly gripping as, say, *Shake Through To Ugly* from 1999's *Anybody* – *August* is Polenzani's melodic nucleus come to fruition.

Recorded entirely in her bedroom on 4- and 8-track recorders, these twelve persuasive songs are both as spare and yet far more pithy than that might suggest. Polenzani has always been an acute and lively lyricist, and the sentient imagery she brings to songs like *The First Time* and *And These Hands* infuse and lift them above their delicate beginnings. Elsewhere, on the decidedly unsettling diptych of *How Shall I Love Thee?* and *Girl*, she quietly rages, audibly struggling with her own mixed emotions. Best of all is the charming

Rolling Suitcase. Sure, it may in fact be about locking a boyfriend in the wardrobe, but it's so sweetly offset by toy percussion and romantic French accordion that you almost don't notice.

The one cover here is of little-known US singer-songwriter Josh Cole, who also adds his warped harmonica to the atmospheric of *How Shall I Love Thee?*. From the title in, his *Easter Hymn* is something of a religious experience in itself as he softly trades harmonies with Rose over gently plucked acoustics. Like Tori Amos, Polenzani has never shied away from mingling the sacred with the profane, but *August* seems to revel in a more humbled stance. Where many of her earlier songs have been heavy with passion originating from "a guilt-regret-religious-fervour-type feeling", tracks like *Easter Hymn* and *Sometimes* appear more mature and accepting of her beliefs. That said, *Explain It To Me* bears a hint of her former unease, complemented by keyboard sounds like a church organ possessed. It's a definite progression.

It's somewhat redundant to say that this is Rose Polenzani's most consistent album to date – all of them impress – but it is, and there's a seemingly simple explanation. Having held her own whilst touring as a member of Voices On The Verge (alongside Erin McKeown, Jess Klein and Beth Amsel), in addition to her spiritual growth, the Rose Polenzani of *August* seems more confident. In her own quiet way, she sounds larger than ever before, cleverly trading off the value of understatement. It's a neat and beautiful trick and one that demands recognition. **Alan Pedder**

Adrina Thorpe

elusive

Self-released

★★★★



On *elusive*, Californian singer-songwriter Adrina Thorpe delivers an impressive debut album, packed with thoughtful songs that are beautifully written, beautifully arranged, beautifully performed and beautifully sung. Drawing deep from the well of a host of great singer-songwriters, from Carole King through to Tori Amos, Thorpe succeeds without ever freefalling into the all too common trap of imitation. Rather, the album portrays a noble interplay of heritage and influence, and it's to startling effect. Musically, the songs range from intimate piano ballads, with their hints of her classical training, to more up-tempo pop songs, whilst lyrically touching on the all-encompassing concerns of life and spirituality.

Opener *Fly Fly Fly* is a slice of well-crafted pop, boasting the creamy production skills of Dave Bassett (Lisa Loeb, Jane Wiedlin) and Phil Swann (Lee Ann Womack), kicking the album off in uplifting fashion. The remaining nine songs then ebb and flow through moods and experiences ranging from the difficulties of being seen as more than just a daughter in *More Than Seventeen*, through loss and regret (*Wistful*, *Sorry* and *Correction* – the latter finding Thorpe in dependable Sarah McLachlan piano ballad mode, not surprising given that the Lilith era figurehead is Adrina's musical idol), to hope and redemptive love in *Elusive*, *Never Meant* and *With Hope*.

In the album's gentler moments, Thorpe's delicate piano playing weaves memorable harmonies and melodies around the poignant and heartfelt words, before soaring above the tight full band arrangements on the bouncier numbers. Though her vocals are both pure and clear, they bear an attractive hint of breathiness that makes for a very intimate sound. The production is entirely complementary to both the singer and songs, with the vocals sitting forward in the mix but still meshing well with the backing.

Having been composing since the age of six, Thorpe has had plenty of time to get her debut just so, and indeed it is a strong start, made all the more impressive for being independently produced. **Trevor Raggatt**

Allison Crowe

Live At
Wood Hall

Rubenesque

★★★½



Canadian singer-songwriter Allison Crowe's personal mantra adorns the cover of her latest album. That simple maxim is "Why music?" "Why breathing?", so personal is her connection with the music she writes and performs. This new record, her fourth in total, documents a two-night stand at the Robin & Winifred Wood Recital Hall in Victoria, British Columbia in March 2005, taking in twenty-three songs performed live in front of a small but fortunate audience.

Crowe was born and raised on Vancouver Island in Nanaimo, a town with two prior claims to musical fame – firstly, for having a deep heritage in brass band music stemming from its coal mining history, and secondly, for being the birthplace of jazz chanteuse, Diana Krall. Fortunately, Allison Crowe has forsaken the former influence and, despite being a talented piano player and singer and sharing stages with Krall, has taken a different musical route and mines very separate sonic seams. Her piano playing often perfectly complements the mood of each song, whether she is tracing delicate arpeggios and melodies or delivering bombastic chordal backing.

This double-disc set amply demonstrates Crowe's profound skill both as a writer and as an interpreter of other peoples' songs, the performances dripping with emotion as she wrings meaning out of both the words and music. Her own compositions range from simple, tender love songs (*There Is, By Your Side*) to insightful social commentary (*Whether I'm Wrong, Disease*), and all are delivered in a contemporary style. However, it is perhaps her cover versions that are most revealing of Allison Crowe, and a diverse selection they are too, ranging from her personal favourites and influences (Tori Amos' *Playboy Mommy*, Ani DiFranco's classic *Independence Day* and *A Murder Of One* by Counting Crows) to show-tunes *Bill* and *I Dreamed A Dream* from *Les Miserables*, via the oft-covered *Imagine* and *Me & Bobby McGee*.

It's the Counting Crows cover that really highlights her skills as an interpreter. Crowe strips the song back to its skeleton and delivers a performance that completely convinces. In her version, the refrain "All your life is such a shame, shame, shame/All your love is just a dream, dream, dream/Open up your eyes" is utterly divorced from the original's lightly hopeful interpretation, becoming instead a cry of pure despair from a heart that can see clearly the life which she is missing. It's a heart-rending tour de force.

Live At Wood Hall easily holds the listener's attention throughout its near 110-minute duration, but whilst it has certain claims on the status of masterpiece, it is perhaps a flawed one. Although Crowe's vocal ability and accuracy are beyond reproach (her use of portamento to attain certain notes is exquisite and has a hugely powerful effect that she wisely resists overusing), there are moments where she fails to reach the odd high note. However, this is completely forgivable in the live context of the album. Larry Anshell's production and engineering serve to give a transparent and intimate document of the concerts – this is no ProTool'd and AutoTuned plastic pop opus but a real musician creating a real performance. Where Crowe's tuning is a little errant, it is not because of a lack of ability, but rather because raw emotion seems to overwhelm the technical aspects of

the delivery. Another nice technical touch is that all of the applause and intros are recorded as separate tracks, thereby allowing the listener to edit them out with some nifty programming if they so wish.

The greatest difficulty with Crowe's singing is perhaps most obvious on the Jerome Kern/PG Wodehouse show-tune, *Bill*. While hers is a magnificent interpretation, bringing the song slap bang into the 21st Century, it also over-emphasises her extraordinary vibrato, a technique that is usually used subtly to bring additional depth to a performance. However, when Crowe switches that internal button, it is anything but subtle. Very rapid, deep and with a 'square-wave' quality, she turns it on and off like a tremolo effect pedal rather than fading it into sustained passages. On initial listens, this can be rather distracting – too often I was listening to the vibrato rather than the music – but subsequent auditions lessen the shock of the new. A flaw, true, but not a fatal one!

Overall, *Live At Wood Hall* is a worthy document of a pair of extraordinary performances. More than that though, it's an album that suggests that this young woman from an obscure mining town in Canada is only at the beginning of a long and successful career. **Trevor Raggatt**





Ari Alexander Ergis Magnússon
Screaming Masterpiece
 Palomar Pictures

★★★

Surely the most ambitious film title of the year, *Screaming Masterpiece* is a flag-waving celebration of the contemporary Icelandic music scene, and an attempt to answer its own self-gratifying, singular question – why have so many of Iceland’s modest population (roughly 600,000) achieved international recognition as musicians whilst maintaining a keen sense of national identity? What is it about this hostile environment that inspires such transgressive musical continents, these tectonic architectures finding homes in discerning collections worldwide?

Armed with extensive concert footage, archives, pop promos and interviews, director Ari Alexander Ergis Magnússon maintains a passive presence as he presents us with a quick-fire collection of artists, from native folk singers and instrumentalists like Slow Blow, via rappers Quarashi, to successful sonic pioneers like Múm and Sigur Rós. However, the film’s modest box office potential lies with the singer and actress Björk, who despite global success, has continued to source inspiration from her mother country, sampling in her own words, Iceland’s “emotional landscape”.

From the opening credits, awash with glacial hues, the film celebrates the marriage between traditional and modern music, with a folk song segueing into a cacophony of riotous punk. Whilst many of the smaller (and unpronounceable) bands have yet to be

heard outside the barren, blackened shores of their homeland, the film allows them equal space alongside the more exportable talents, and Magnússon seems keen to indulge the depths of obscurity, including pagan folk singers and xylophones made of flint.

For the uninitiated, any sense of chronology is belatedly provided halfway through the film, perhaps an attempt to reflect the free-flowing nature of its subject. Drawing upon 23 year-old footage from Fridrik Thór Fridriksson’s in *Rock In Reykjavik (Rokk í Reykjavik)*, which features a teenage Björk in punk collective Tappi Tíkarass, Magnússon traces how the end of Iceland’s relatively recent colonialism spurred a wave of creative nationalism, with Björk explaining, “When my generation came along we started to ask ourselves what it meant to be Icelandic and how to be proud of it instead of feeling guilty all the time.”

Set adrift both culturally and geographically from mainland Europe, there is reason enough behind the sense of communal isolation that invites a comparison with fertile musical centres like Manchester or Detroit. However, those musical cities thrived in spite of adversity, where it is evident here that the Icelandic government, heads of religion and affluent economy all actively foster artistic expression and adolescent ambition, including a teenage punk band Nilfisk, who feature here opening for US rockers Foo Fighters after a chance meeting.

While the layering of scenic snowdrifts and cavernous vistas may leave you feeling a little cold, the concert performances provide plenty of thrills and chills, and one of the film’s greatest assets is the live sound mix, literally booming from the Dolby speakers. From the ethereal wailing of Sigur Rós to Björk, whose powerful vocals seem projected by some innate force, all the artists share a raw energy and desire to embrace new technologies and sounds while remaining true to their folk heritage, which perhaps best defines the “Icelandic sound”.

In the end, despite an admirable sense of almost bohemian idealism, *Screaming Masterpiece* feels like something of an iceberg, its hidden depths never quite surfacing. Even at a brief 87 minutes, the continuous stream of artists, bands and collectives is an exhausting affair and the film ultimately falls short in fully addressing its proposition. One suspects that the more interesting points about cultural colonialism, environment, religion and heritage are lost amid the attention-deficit editing.

Even if the film does feel like Michael Winterbottom’s own flag-waving *9 Songs* sans the sex, for those who already have an interest in the bands on display here, this is a great chance to catch them sounding never better, and perhaps discover some new music to add to your iPod.

Stephen Collings



Kate & Anna McGarrigle
The McGarrigle Hour

Rykodisc
 ★★★★★

Originally released in the US and Canada in 1999, this companion to the studio album of the same name finally got a UK pressing this autumn. And whilst the title may parody those homely Osmond family TV specials, there is nothing twee about this gathering. Timeless in both the staging and songs, the anachronistic production feels more 1948 than 1998, but the McGarrigles and Wainwrights have always comfortably existed outside of popular music, living in a folkie vacuum where they are free to set their own courses. Family feuds are often the subject of their own songs and their closest contemporaries appear to be each other. With such a strong musical heritage, the “McWainwrights” are always liable to burst into song when the mood takes them, and one can almost imagine family gatherings where “pass the salt” is sung in harmonious verse.

With an ensemble of ex-spouses, offspring and friends, the McGarrigle sisters take us on an intimate journey through the great American songbook, taking in everything from Cole Porter to Irving Berlin, whilst seamlessly interweaving original composi-

tions for this musical family reunion. While their voices may not have the softest of timbres, the Canadian sisters’ pitch-perfect harmonies are still as strong as when they debuted in 1975 with their eponymous LP. The musical dynasty is in safe hands too, judging by the efforts here.

Martha Wainwright cuts a shy, endearing figure compared with the foot-stomping dynamic performer we see today, and her own composition, *Year Of The Dragon* (still a mainstay of her live set) visibly impresses the would-be converts in the McGarrigle-friendly audience. Her cover of Cole Porter’s *Allez-Vous-En* is sung with experience well beyond her young years, and she is complimented well by cousin Lily Lanken, whose fragile vocals are equally affecting on family favourite *Alice Blue Gown*.

Elsewhere, Rufus Wainwright is unusually restrained, despite upstaging his mother Kate McGarrigle during the introduction to *Talk To Me Of Mendocino* by calling her a “gypsy”. In *Heartburn* he shows he has inherited much of his father Loudon Wainwright III’s lyrical wit, but his voice is best suit-

ed to the standards and effortlessly croons the openings to group efforts *Goodnight Sweetheart* and *What’ll I Do*. Friends of the family, Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris, guest as they did on the studio album, while Kate’s former husband Loudon and assorted folkie friends add an authentic twang to the proceedings.

Despite the original’s release shortly before the popularity of the format exploded, a number of DVD extras are still included: a scattering of hyperlink interviews and a touching movie clip of Grandma McGarrigle’s own version of *Alice Blue Gown* around the family piano, along with four bonus songs from a 1981 McGarrigle concert in their hometown of Montréal.

In a year that has seen major releases from Loudon, Rufus and Martha, the McGarrigles have reconvened for *The McGarrigle Christmas Hour*, an album that once again showcases the family’s songwriting talents alongside some lesser-known festive standards, this time extending their family to include Rufus’ pals Beth Orton, actress Jane Adams and Teddy Thompson.

Stephen Collings

[*Note from the editor:* When Wears The Trousers heard that the queen of alternately bruised and bruising alt-rock was playing back-to-back acoustic retrospectives of her solo work and time with the Throwing Muses, we practically fell over our dribbling selves to wangle us an invite. Then, having managed that, we scrapped like Bette and Joan over who would get to go and bask in the bliss of nostalgia. Being of a somewhat democratic, fair-minded persuasion, I opted not to pull rank but instead to offer up straws to my compadres, of which I predictably drew the shortest. Sigh. So here's the lowdown from the lucky ones... nice guys finish last people, remember that!]

November 21, 2005

"You're probably thinking that I don't write any of my own songs... That's probably because I don't..."

This first night of Kristin Hersh's mini-residency at the Scala in aid of record label 4AD's 25th birthday celebrations (dubbed '1980 Forward') saw her revisiting the songs of the Throwing Muses, the band that made her name in the mid-Eighties as lead singer, songwriter and crunchy guitarist. For us of a certain age, many remember the Muses very fondly, occupying a similar space to Sonic Youth, early REM and fellow 4ADers, the Pixies, and yet parading an unmuddied style of their own. Armed with a string of excellently angular and unsettling songs piloted by the many mercurial gifts of Miss Hersh, they gathered a substantial underground following, while never really crossing over in such grand style as some of their peers.

The Muses were also a troubled group, and while being flat broke and quarrelling for most of their existence undoubtedly spurred them to musical and lyrical heights, it cost them dearly their peace of mind. Certainly, Hersh's mind is famously unpeaceful, her songwriting often serving to exorcise her vivid hallucinations, so it was not really clear just how happy she would be trotting out a whole night's worth of old, and in some cases presumably painful, memories. It's no surprise then that the Scala crowd are tentatively hopeful but entirely unsure of how the night would

Kristin Hersh 1980 Forward: The Scala, London November 21-22, 2005 ★★★★



progress. Mostly in their late twenties and early thirties, they definitely aren't looking to thrash about the way they first did to these songs, but then Hersh herself is a good bit older too.

After kicking off comfortably with *Hook In Her Head* and *Teller*, the crowd start to warm up with *Rabbit's Dying*. Hersh's voice begins to open up, revealing the maturity acquired after two decades of uninhibited perfor-

mance. From then on, she noticeably settles, introducing *Cottonmouth* as a drunkenly overheard and furiously scribbled down conversation between two equally drunk sisters in a bar with Hersh's own half-sister and bandmate Tanya Donnelly. After banging out another couple (*Hazing* and *Run Letter*), she wearily declares "*What a horrible trip down memory lane*". It's a relieving, ice-breaking thing to say and she

smiles, clearly enjoying herself despite (or even because of) the memories.

As things get increasingly comfortable, Hersh treats us a few more unhurried anecdotes. We learn that *Pearl* is about her virtually blind, psoriasis-suffering childhood friend, Marie, who won the Presidential Fitness Award (introduced by Ronald “*Ketchup is a vegetable*” Reagan) for doggedly hanging onto a horizontal bar the longest. She says something nice about 4AD: (“*Mmmmm, 4AD... yum*”) and complains after Drive that the songs drag on too much (“*None of them end! I keep waiting for them to end!*”). She also tells us how the band used to amuse themselves during the long overnight sessions recording 1990’s *Hunkpapa* album by betting on rat races in the alleyway under the studio. Apparently, Prince’s erstwhile head bimbo, Apollonia, had the requisite cash to record her ‘album’ one syllable at a time in the studio’s daylight hours. Then she spins/spits out fantastic versions of *Bea*, *Counting Backwards*, *Delicate Cutters* and, if I’m not mistaken, *Red*, which isn’t a Muses song at all but a track by Donnelly’s former band Belly.

She goes off stage to plenty of enthusiastic cheer and it’s not too long before she returns for a fantastic four-song encore, accompanied on strings by Martin and Joan McCarrick. Hersh then plays three tracks from the last Muses album *Limbo* (1996), saying that the band should’ve been called ‘The Martin Show’ by that point (“*...better name for a band too*”). Her renditions of *White Bikini Sands*, *Limbo* and *Serene* each sound even better than the last. As a nice touch, she admits that *White Bikini Sands*, a hidden track on the album, is probably her favourite Muses track, partly because her father wrote it and (with a laugh) as it got her kicked out of the band.

Finally, she winds things down with *Hate My Way*, the crowd adoringly eating up the 19-year old classic. But before she does, she tells us that the song was inspired by a day when she was walking through the student-saturated city of Providence, Rhode Island, being handed fistfuls of angsty, overzealous leaflets. One of which, about blame and responsibility, was so passionately disjointed as to be barely coherent and struck an emotional chord.

“*...I make you into a song..*”

November 22, 2005

Unless you’re Kristin Hersh herself, it’s unlikely that you’ll ever know whether choosing what to play from such a vast vault of riches would be a giant headache or simply a huge dose of self-affirmation. But first things first... Paula Frazer is a name I’ve seen banded around with complimentary abandon in the music press for some time now, but I’ve never knowingly encountered her music before tonight’s support slot. Clearly, this is a very wrong thing. Throwing simpler folk shapes than those of Hersh’s tangled thickets, Frazer’s acoustic guitar pillows her quite extraordinary mahogany voice, permitting it the space to reach out and caress the room. Her set could have been a bit longer at a measly half an hour, but it was a suitably 4AD start to the evening, and one more convert to her estimable charms.

With Frazer’s stingy on-stage allowance emphasised by the between set lull lasting longer than her performance, I join my fellow travellers for some general milling about. Eventually, Hersh appears stage left, her hair short and plastered to her head like a 1920s flapper or demure Helmut Newton girl, brandishing the obligatory acoustic and flanked by a cellist and a violinist; “*The McCarricks!*” are introduced with a smile and a glitter. She seems pretty happy.

She quickly launches into *Sno Cat*, which despite hardly being her jolliest song (apparently it’s about a row with her hubby), is certainly an appropriate start with its chilly cadences reminiscent of the season’s descent into winter. While the couples in the room hug tighter, the rest of us are left to find sanctuary in our pockets and memories. From that handsome, sombre start, Hersh takes us on a sublime ride through her solo career, jumping between her albums with glee. After a couple of years tourin’ ‘n’ shoutin’ with new band 50 Foot Wave, her voice – already never the most velveteen of instruments – is hoarser than ever, which works to great effect on more cathartic moments like *Your Dirty Answer* and brings new textures to her softer material. *Costa Rica* and *A Cuckoo*, especially, benefit from some new bruises.

Highlights? How about the aforementioned *Your Dirty Answer*, Kristin looking intense and haunted, eyes glittering like coals as she spits the words while strings caroused in the air around her? Or perhaps *Gazebo Tree*, which surely ranks as one of her most uncomplicatedly beautiful songs? She even forgets the words for a while, which I guess happens when you produce one or two new albums each year; “*Too many songs...*” she sighs, knowingly. She plays a wonderfully aquatic reading of *Listerine* and a lovely version of *Hope* before rambling through *The Letter*, despite unforgivingly branding it bad. A pretty straight version of *Me & My Charms* ensues, but then it’s one of those songs that doesn’t need much improvement.

The latter half of the set is taken entirely from *Hips & Makers* (1994), and ends – inevitably – with the heavenly *Your Ghost*. Of course, it receives a rapturous reception, and Hersh interprets it almost joyfully. It’s a poignant reminder of bad times now past, with even the spectre of Michael Stipe thoroughly McCarrickised. Then, for those who missed last night’s Musesfest, she closes out with the triptych of *Delicate Cutters*, *Mania* and *Hate My Way* – each one as great as they’ve always been. For my money at least, Hersh is one of the most important songwriters of the last two decades and this was a wonderful, wonderful evening.

Peter Morrow & Adam Smith



Emiliana Torrini
Passionskirche, Berlin
September 26, 2005
★★★★★



With her second album *Fisherman's Woman* one of the biggest slow-burning, word-of-mouth successes of the year, Emiliana Torrini has firmly established herself as a young, exotic heiress to Vashti Bunyan's throne of fragile, female folk. It's somehow fitting then that for her last big tour of the year, Torrini has upped the ante a little, this time playing venues that, while larger than those on her earlier trips, have an ambience more sensitive to her delicate songs. The Passionskirche in Berlin is such a venue; a large, red-bricked church with beautiful stained-glass windows, intricately detailed murals and carved wooden friezes lining the walls, and the best acoustics known to man.

It seems that Germany holds a special appeal for Torrini; it's here that *Fisherman's Woman* has enjoyed the most success and regular radio play. Like Rufus Wainwright and Antony & The Johnsons, she has been welcomed by the German mainstream, while so many other folk artists remain a niche interest. It's no mistake then that the long queue outside for first dibs on the pews was a mixture of old couples, young couples, indie kids, teenage girls, black-clad Berlin hipsters, groups of women, groups of men... but why labour a point? More interesting is

why this may be so, and one possibility is that the multilingual Icelandic-Italian is pretty nifty with the language. Certainly, her German between-song banter is just as charming, if not more, than her English preambles. Everyone appreciates a "danke" here and there, but a whole concert in German with light-hearted attempts to translate song titles into the language certainly endears her to the Berliners.

Despite a fairly rigorous tour schedule, Torrini still suffers from a degree of stage-fright, and one of the most satisfying elements of her live show is seeing her warm to the crowd, her speech becoming less staccato as the night stretches on, her stories longer and funnier. It's very much more "An Evening with..." than your standard gig; it's as if she lets you into her world, with the songs imbibing even more meaning as she confides in the audience as if all were close friends sharing a bottle of red wine. Then, as soon as she is finished confiding, she slips back into a consumed and introverted performance, eyes closed, hands twitching with nerves and emotion. It's in this contradiction that her charm can be said to lie – she is both entertainer and artist, and like the best of butterflies, she can flit between the two almost effortlessly.

Although the set was drawn almost exclusively from *Fisherman's Woman*, a few highlights from her 1999 international debut *Love In The Time Of Science* were thrown in for good measure, each getting an equally rapturous welcome. Closing on her heartbreaking rendition of Jacques Brel's *If You Go Away (Ne Me Quitte Pas)*, an elusive early B-side, Torrini proves her point. She doesn't need to finish on a single. She could finish on anything and still be guaranteed a thunderous standing ovation. A truly holy experience.

Robbie de Santos

Alex Parks
Bush Hall, London
October 20, 2005
★★



Curiosity, it has to be said, is a bit of a risky business. Aside from disposing of our feline friends, it can lead (albeit less fatally) to some sorry situations, and yet life would be much the poorer without it. It's with this caveat in mind that I offered to review this show, the third and

final performance on a teeny tiny tour to air the new album from a genuine oddity. Alex Parks, the black sheep of the 2003/04 Fame Academy alumni, is back after a near two-year hiatus with *Honesty*, an album of originals and co-writes with the likes of Alisha's Attic's Karen Poole, Shakespeare's Sister Marcella Detroit and veteran British folkie, Judie Tzuke. Though I confess to holding a rather cynical view of the worth of TV search-for-a-star clones, there's something sweetly irregular about Parks that has me wanting to be impressed, even proven wrong.

Sadly my suspicions are confirmed. Despite having started a singing career at the age of 14 (she's 21 now) and fronting up for millions of viewers week after week at the Academy, Parks is hugely lacking in confidence. As the night goes on she fidgets, mumbles and looks terrifically embarrassed – and what a stretch it is too. Perhaps over-eager to distance herself from the bland cover versions comprising much of her rush-released debut, *Introduction*, Parks' set is devoid of any sympathy for her audience. Song after song from *Honesty* is bashfully unfurled, which might have been all well and good if anyone had actually heard the thing (bar the first single *Looking For Water*), but in the context of the night was hardly the wisest of moves. As well as hampering the evening's flow, the constant fluctuation from Dawson's Creek background ballads to Evanescence and Lavigne-like teen angst rock chants seemed to simply weary and confuse those in attendance.

Finally, after an apology from Parks for playing too much new material, the last song of a long slog was thrown like a bone to the crowd hungry for recognition. Suddenly awoken to how good she can be, they swayed and open-mouthedly emoted to her engaging debut single, *Maybe That's What It Takes*, waving aloft their glowing mobile phones in place of the more traditional lighter. Sadly, it was too little too late, and with nary so much as an encore, she slipped off into the darkness. There's no doubting that Parks can sing. There's an exceptional quality and depth to her voice, but while that was enough to see her graduate with honours from the Fame Academy, sharper instincts are needed if she's to avoid this ruthless industry's chop. Such a fate would be a wicked irony indeed for someone who started out in a band named One Trick Pony.

Sophie Richards

Regina Spektor

AR2, Bristol University SU

November 19, 2005

★★★★½



The AR2 at Bristol University is a minuscule venue and one that is frankly inhospitable to whomsoever graces its dingy little stage. Just to even get there, Regina Spektor must climb through a crowd of adoring fans who've been eagerly waiting for two hours, and in the atmosphere of heady devotion and anticipation one fears a little for her safety; the French boy I've been talking to has just informed me that if he gets to meet her afterwards he will cry and, if by any chance she hugs him, he will die. Thankfully, Spektor's burly tour manager and assorted security men clear her a path, and when she finally mounts the stage, she beams at the crowd and looks very happy to be here. Swiftly launching into *Ain't No Cover*, a lovely a cappella ditty, her voice swoops in a manner so soulful that it recalls the great jazz singers like Nina Simone and Billie Holliday as she taps the microphone gently with her finger to form a beat. The song is about death – not an uncommon topic for Spektor – and yet she sings and inhabits the lyrics in a way that celebrates every aspect of living.

As on her records she is irrepressibly playful, and what shines through the entire performance is an undeniable wit. Even when playing songs that are new to many audience members – Spektor has two albums, *11:11* (2001) and *Songs* (2002), yet to be released in the UK, plus a truckload of others so far unrecorded – she elicits genuine laughter from the enthusiastic crowd. Nowhere is this more true than on *Baby Jesus*, which, in a pre-emptive strike, Regina warns the

crowd not to be offended by. Ostensibly about her fear of fanatical right-wing Christians, the chorus of “*All the non-believers, they get to eat dirt/And the believers get to spit on their graves*” simply reaffirms that Spektor is a brave, sardonic and original lyricist.

The evening's excitement doesn't stop there either. For *Poor Little Rich Boy*, Regina plays keyboard one-handed while simultaneously bashing a chair with a drumstick so vigorously that chips can be seen flying into the audience. When she launches into *Us*, also from 2004's *Soviet Kitsch*, the reverence with which the crowd sing along and faithfully recite each word gets Regina's infectiously wide grin of approval. Later on, when a lady briefly faints at the front, Spektor stops playing in order to help her up and, after easing her into a seat on the stage, hands her a bottle of water and allows her to sit there for the rest of the show.

Clearly, this is an artist who truly cares for her fans. Indeed, following a rapturously received encore of *Samson*, one of Spektor's most affecting and simple songs that spins the yarn of a tender love, she announces that she'll attempt to meet any fans who want to say hi at the merchandise stand. She tells us that she fears this plan is overly ambitious, and the fans do indeed flock to meet their idol, but Regina remains until every last one has queued, blushed and gushed their thanks (myself included). For not only is she one of today's most unique, creative and playful artists, but also one of the most humble and generous. **Danny Weddup**

Annie is an odd 'un. On one hand, she's been proclaimed by many to be the saviour of modern pop, with this year's kitsch electro debut, *Anniemal*, receiving widespread broadsheet acclaim. On the other hand, she has yet to appear on Top Of The Pops, she writes her own material, runs her own club night in Bergen, Norway, and, when playing live, finds herself on stages more accustomed to unwashed indie sorts, rather than the aircraft hanger-like arenas of her pop princess peers. Add to that the fact that her Richard X-produced single, *Chewing Gum*, is a favourite in the cool London indie clubs like Trash and White Heat, and it's clear she's no Rachel Stevens.

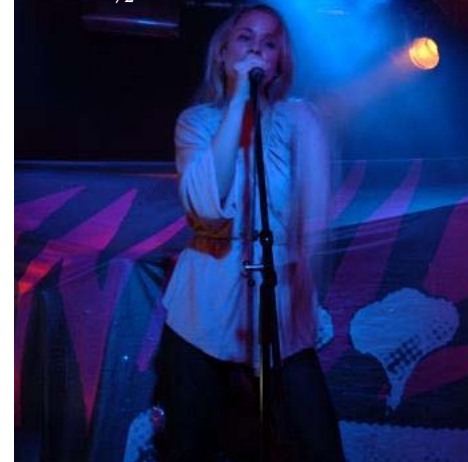
With her album hitting the German shops in September, almost six months after its release in the UK (where it has yet to make an impact), Annie made a trip to the country as part of the 'Monsters of Spex' tour with Danish punk-funk newcomers, WhoMadeWho, for the influential leftfield music magazine, Spex. Despite having released her first single, *The Greatest Hit*, in 1999, it wasn't until this year that Annie has begun to play live. At first, so uncomfortable was she with being on stage that she would sing from the DJ booth. However, by the time the tour touched down in Berlin, she was dancing and singing like a bona fide popstar on the Magnet Club's tiny stage. But there was no suspended-in-air entrance – she arrived from under a banner strewn over the headline act's drum kit – and there were no dancers. Only her longtime collaborator Timo, playing with keys and samples, and an aging rock guitarist joined her.

Annie

Magnet Club, Berlin

October 26, 2005

★★★★½



None of the trappings were needed in the end; Annie utterly inhabited the space. Charismatic and involving, she often made eye contact with the dancing front row fans and smiling, pointing her fingers as though she was playing a stadium and giggling at her own mistakes.

With a heavy cold straining her vocals and explosions of coughing between every song, the show was not especially polished, especially in light of the additional sound problems. But despite her obvious frustration, Annie duly proved her indie credentials by soldiering on in the face of hitches that would probably cause Madonna to throw the most embarrassing of tantrums. It's a brave move, but more importantly, it left the crowd of curious music fans and determined Zeitgeist spotters with a warm fuzzy impression.

With new song *The Wedding* (taken from her recently released *DJ Kicks* compilation) getting rapturous whoops and applause, it seems that Annie's already formidable acclaim and support will only grow. The game of pop stardom is one of chance without that cynical major label backing, but Annie is good for a gamble. Global adulation and the iconic stature of her idol Debbie Harry is waiting in the wings, but for now it seems this pop idealist is happy to take the Earth one indie kid at a time, Vorsprung durch Musik.

Robbie de Santos



Nerina Pallot
Bush Hall, London
November 28, 2005

★★★★★



After several years spent licking the wounds from the rigors of abuse at the hands of one the "majors", 2005 was finally good to Nerina Pallot. This time taking the independent route, her second album, *Fires*, garnered both critical acclaim and serious national airplay. Several high-profile support slots followed and Pallot wound up opening for the likes of Jamie Cullum, Sheryl Crow and Suzanne Vega, with the occasional headliner on the London club scene. This led to the desire to hold an end of year celebration, something special for the artist and her obsessively loyal and rapidly growing fanbase. Certainly, from the moment she took to the stage to the strains of a string quartet, it was clear that the sell-out crowd were indeed in for a memorable treat.

The opening number – a string rearrangement of her debut single *Patience* from ill-fated first album *Dear Frustrated Superstar* (2001) – set the tone for the evening, transforming the jaunty pop number into something bearing menace and tension, with the strings used to maximum effect demonstrating Pallot's skill as an arranger as well as a composer. Although this was the most overtly orchestral treatment of the evening, the songs that followed did not fall into the trap of using the strings simply as keyboard-pad replacements. Rather, the orchestrations by both Ned Bingham and Pallot herself added a depth to the music that transcended simple melody and chord structure.

With the setlist taking in the breadth of both her albums, Pallot remarked on what a pleasure it was to perform the earlier songs since the "pots of big record company money" that was lavished on it had allowed many of those tracks to have lush string backing. This was her first opportunity to give them such an airing in a live context, and it was clear that she was enjoying the experience, characteristically throwing herself into the performance – whether on acoustic guitar or a baby

grand piano. Pallot, wearing a classy black ensemble suited to the ambience and the venue's ornate interior, seemed initially overawed by the rapturous reception she received. She professed being at an uncharacteristic loss for words, although soon loosened up and delivered her now trademark between-song blethering.

Pallot's consummate skill as a performer drew her rapt audience through the emotional and musical ebb and flow of the songs, whether the short solo set in the middle of the evening or the ensemble pieces; the awed silence which accompanied the music contrasting with the enthusiastic applause. A moving performance of *Damascus* particularly impressed, with the strings adding extra poignancy to the music and lyrics. Punctuated by a switch from legato to pizzicato strings, the song's middle eight formed a veritable danse macabre of regrets for lost love. The set was drawn to a wistful conclusion with the beautiful *My Last Tango*. The recorded version, which closes out *...Superstar*, features a sumptuous string backing and tonight was done full justice, the closing notes met with a standing ovation.

With such a response an encore was assured, and when Pallot returned alone to the stage, she pulled off a tender rendition of the Joy Division classic, *Love Will Tear Us Apart*. Unbelievably, her treatment drew hitherto unheard depths of poignancy out of what is already a paean to the pain of loss. Two new songs – *Everything's Illuminated* (almost certainly a reference to the Jonathan Safran Foer novel and new Elijah Wood film) and *I'm Gonna Be A Man* – brought the evening to a stunning conclusion, boding well for her next disc. Finally satiated, the audience spilled out into the bitterly cold West London streets suffused with the inner glow of knowing that they had participated in a very special evening indeed. **Trevor Raggatt**