

FEATURES

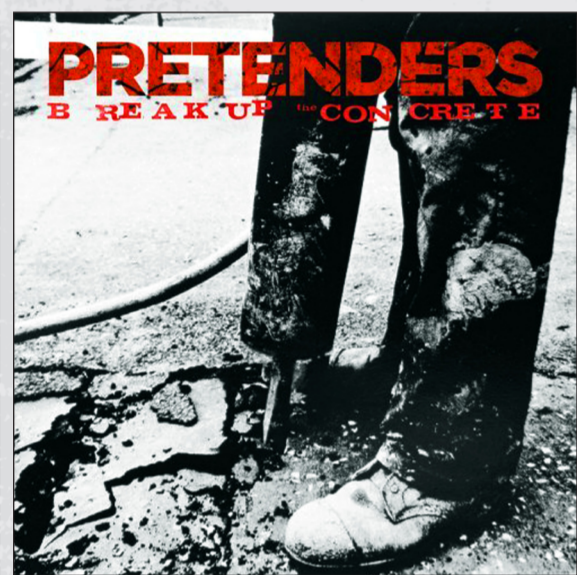
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PAGE 13

Her city's not gone, and neither is she

The Pretender's new album 'Concrete' makes clear that Chrissie Hynde's recent thoughts have largely been shaped by a traditional factor: spending more time in her hometown, Akron, Ohio.

BY ALAN LIGHT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, MANSFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS



Above: The Pretenders' new album, *Break Up the Concrete*.
Top right: The Pretenders, class of 2008: from left, Martin Chambers, Chrissie Hynde, Nick Wilkinson, Eric Heywood and James Walbourne.
PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Backstage at the 23rd annual Farm Aid concert, the sound of Kenny Chesney's voice filled the air. Chrissie Hynde cursed at her cellphone, pulled off her boots and curled up on a couch, following a sundown set by the latest configuration of her band, the Pretenders. In typically ornery fashion, the majority of songs they performed came from an album that was weeks away from reaching stores: *Break Up the Concrete*, the first Pretenders album in six years (which will be released tomorrow on Shangri-La Music; that night, the band will perform at the Highline Ballroom in Manhattan). "Ambition is not my middle name," Hynde said. "But I don't care — I'm up to my eyeballs most of the time goofing off. I'm kind of a hippie, so the idea was not to have goals or anything. Just moving around and observing and living life; that's necessary before you can make a record anyway."

Sipping a nonalcoholic beer and smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, Hynde, 57, remains as rail thin as she was almost three decades ago, when the Pretenders' self-titled debut album perfectly melded punk energy with British Invasion style and hooks. She now allows some gray streaks to show through her trademark black bangs, but with her makeup smeared from the heat of the late-afternoon stage, she still looked every bit the rock legend.

Discussing *Concrete*, though, it becomes clear that Hynde's recent thoughts have largely been shaped by a traditional factor: spending more time in her hometown, Akron, Ohio. Like the rest of the Rust Belt, Akron (also the birthplace of eccentrics like the filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, the country outlaw David Allen Coe and the

garage rockers the Black Keys) has been hit hard for decades; unemployment hovers well above the national average, and only one rubber manufacturer remains in the former Rubber Capital of the World.

Hynde might seem an unlikely cheerleader. She moved to London, her primary residence, in the early 1970s and only recently took an apartment in Akron. But she has written about her hometown in songs like *My City Was Gone*, and it offers an opportunity to champion causes like mass transit and urban renewal.

"My parents are really old now, and I want to be around more," she said. "I'm trying to discover my own relationship to Akron — there's a resonance you get when you go back to the place you were born."

Most notably, last year she opened a vegan restaurant in Akron called the VegiTerranean. Hynde is an animal rights activist and has been arrested several times in protests (once for slashing leather products in a Gap store in Manhattan). At Farm Aid, she wore a T-shirt reading "Tax Meat" and called for a day when "all McDonald's and slaughterhouses are burned to the ground" — presumably not a sentiment shared by the cattle farmers present.

"There wasn't one vegetarian restaurant in Akron, so I said, 'I'll do it,' and it's just been a phenomenon," she said. She described its "international flavor, right down to the tea bag in the pot"; at its opening, she personally served veggie burgers to police officers.

"Everybody told me, 'Don't do it, it will not work,'" she said of the restaurant. "But I had to do it anyway, because I had to have somewhere I could eat. And more than the music, it's what I'm about. To me, the music is a vehicle so I can have a voice."

"I don't think the world really needs another Pretenders record. But frankly, I was getting embarrassed because we hadn't made a record in so long. And we were doing a lot of touring, and I just can't stomach doing those old songs anymore. It's just torture."

As she began to work on new songs, she found her direction changing. "Spending more time in Akron, I was getting more of an American feel in my sensibility," she said. In addition, the Pretenders toured last year with ZZ Top, and Hynde participated in a tribute concert to Jerry Lee Lewis. When she went to Joshua Tree National Park in California and found where the ashes of the alternative-country pioneer Gram Parsons had been scattered, "I sort of had my epiphany there and I thought, Wow, I think I know how this thing is going to go now."

Cut live in the studio in less than two weeks, *Concrete* is loose and scrappy, shot through with rockabilly and country. It offers yet another version of the Pretenders, whose lineup Hynde has continually juggled since the deaths of the founding guitarist, James Honeyman-Scott, and the bassist Pete Farndon in the early 1980s. The drummer Martin Chambers, the other most consistent member, is touring with the band, but the session ace Jim Keltner plays drums on the album.

"Chrissie is as subtle as napalm," Chambers said in a phone interview. "She's absolutely uncompromising. She knows when there's something wrong that needs to be fixed, and she does it."

The album's title track is a high-speed meditation on urban sprawl and cultural homogenization, but at Farm Aid, Hynde expressed optimism. She cited wider acceptance of vegetarianism and increased attention to downtown areas as evidence of changing attitudes.

"I have a very good sense of these things," she said. "Like when I was moving around in the 1970s, trying to get a band together. I went to Cleveland, I went to Paris, but around 1976, I could just sense something was going to happen in London. Sure enough, in 1977 the whole punk thing broke loose. And I have that same feeling right now about America."

"Believe me, I don't feature any false optimism. I'm very realistic about things. But I can sense that there is this change coming, and a lot of it is because people will have no choice."

Though the Pretenders have never matched the peaks of their 1979 debut (which included the hit *Brass in Pocket*) and 1984's glorious *Learning to Crawl* (*Back on the Chain Gang*), the band managed to become a kind of institution. Hynde's bravado and ragged style influenced subsequent female rockers from Shirley Manson and Liz Phair to Lucinda Williams; today, her spirit is visible in the likes of Karen O from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

"Why hasn't a movie been made about her?" said the pop-rocker Katy Perry. "She is the pioneer for female rockers with her personal style, a female Mick Jagger, but more punk."

Every few years, the spotlight swings back to her: her appearance on *Friends*, for example, or Carrie Underwood's cover of *I'll Stand by You*. Despite its punk origins (Hynde played in early versions of the Clash and the Damned), the band is now a staple on classic rock radio and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2005.

Hynde, though, adamantly refuses to think in terms of the band's legacy. "I hate all that," she said, calling the Hall of Fame "another American cheesy moment." She added: "A Hall of Fame is for sports. It was a big deal to my parents, but I don't see it as any kind of honor."

The common perception is that, at some point, the Pretenders turned into a solo project, backed by whatever musicians Hynde pulls together. She said, however, that the Pretenders will always remain a genuine band. "I've changed the band over the years, but I've never been sued, I've always remained friends with the guys," she said. "They can see that I can't play very good, but I've got a certain vision — and that my loyalty always has to be to the music first."

"I never would have been interesting if it would have been me alone," Hynde concluded. "If it was Chrissie Hynde and her guitar, we wouldn't even be having this conversation. You wouldn't even know who I was."

[THE WEEKENDER]

Cloud Gate scales new peak with live music

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER



Horse Dance Theatre: interesting but uneven. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHEN CHANG-CHIH

Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's (雲門舞集) performance of *Moon Water* at the National Theater last Monday night with Russian cellist Mischa Maisky can be summed up in just one word: sublime.

It was a fascinating show, even for those who had seen *Moon Water* many times before, because Maisky's playing took the whole production to a higher level. I know that the dancers were apprehensive because they had never performed the piece to live music before and had only had a brief run-through on Sunday evening with him. But it wasn't a case of Maisky accompanying the dancers; he and the dancers became one. He obviously enjoyed playing for and watching the dancers, just as they clearly delighted in having him on stage.

Moon Water calls for incredible fluidity on the part of the dancers and the dancers appeared to be water themselves, bending, curving and twisting their bodies so easily it was hard to believe they were human. One can only hope that the company's two performances last week with Maisky will not be the last.

On Saturday afternoon, the five-man Horse Dance Theater (馬舞劇場) delivered a never-less-than-interesting but uneven performance of *Bones* before a packed house in the Experimental Theater.

The five men who make up Horse have very different personalities as well as dancing and choreographic styles. This means there is no single style, no single voice, which can be a plus in terms of creativity; the downside is that democracy is a difficult ideal to achieve in a company.

As in previous Horse productions, the solos and duets were wonderful, especially Chou Shu-yi's (周書毅) solo to the what sounded like crackling sounds of ice breaking up on a river. Chou is a beautiful dancer who always leaves you wanting to see more of him. The harpsichord music for Cheng Tsung-lung's (鄭宗龍) solo provided the perfect counterpoint to his very cerebral, architectural-style of dance. You can almost measure the exact degree of each hand movement, each angle of a leg or arm. Cheng's earlier duet with Yang Yu-min (楊育鳴) was another highlight.

As an all-male troupe, Horse has a unique dynamic, but there has always been an element of slapstick, which in *Bones* ranges from trading slaps and a "bone-naming game" to a well executed "puppet master" showdown between Yang, on Cheng's shoulders, and Chen Wu-kang (陳武康) perched atop Su Wei-chia (蘇威嘉).

With a blazingly all-white set, great lighting and a subtle though incredibly varied sound score from Frenchman Yannick Dauby, the focus in *Bones* was solely on the dancers. This was a plus in that neither the dancers nor the audience was distracted by props. But it also made it clear that *Bones* is a production that is still evolving. Small companies like Horse, however, can't afford long runs of any one show. It's a pity because *Bones* has great potential and a few more performances would give Horse the time to refine the production.

PLANETPOP



Carlos Santana is on tour and has an album coming out, but in an interview with *Rolling Stone* posted online on Friday the rocker said he sees himself one day heading up a church in Hawaii. Santana also told the magazine about the pain of recently going through a divorce from his wife of 34 years, Deborah.

Brazilian race car driver **Helio Castroneves** and his sister and lawyer were indicted on Thursday on charges of conspiring to defraud the US of taxes on US\$5.55 million of income, prosecutors said. The two-time Indianapolis 500 winner and his sister, Katiucia Castroneves, were also charged with six counts of income tax evasion for the years 1999 through 2004.

Singer **Natalie Cole** is resting in bed at her Los Angeles home after being hospitalized in New York last month because of a setback in her battle with Hepatitis C, her spokeswoman said on Thursday. The Grammy-award winning singer, 58, canceled her tour dates next month and all other appearances after spending about a week in the hospital last month.

Clint Eastwood spends more time behind the camera these days directing films. But anyone who believed him a few

years ago when he said he had given up on acting, can think again. Eastwood has changed his mind. The Academy Award-winning director, who was promoting his latest film *Changeling* at the New York Film Festival on Thursday, began acting more than 50 years ago and gained fame playing tough-minded cowboys and cops.

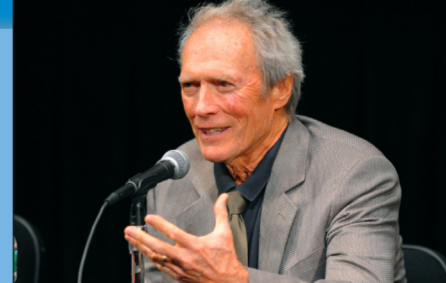
More than 60 artists, including Radiohead, **Robbie Williams** and the Kaiser Chiefs announced Saturday they had banded together to seek more rights over their music and break free of record labels.

The Featured Artists' Coalition (FAC) aims to "give artists the voice they need to argue for greater control over their music," amid new opportunities provided by Internet, the group said in a statement.

"It is time for artists to have a strong collective voice to stand up for their interests," said Brian Message, co-manager of Radiohead and **Kate Nash**.

"The digital landscape is changing fast and new deals are being struck all the time, but all too often without reference to the people who actually make the music."

Message said the FAC would "help all artists, young and old, well-known or not, drive overdue change through the industry in their interests and those of fans."



Thus far, 61 artists have signed up to the coalition, which was officially launched yesterday in the northwest English city of Manchester.

It is fighting for changes to laws that govern business in the music industry so that artists always ultimately own the rights to their music, rather than record labels.

The FAC is also calling for, among other things, artists to receive "fair compensation whenever their business partners receive an economic return from the exploitation of the artists' work."

Several groups have recently used the Internet to promote their music directly to fans, often bypassing record labels entirely, including Radiohead, which launched their latest album *In Rainbows* in October 2007 on the Web.

Last week, Oasis posted its new album *Dig Out Your Soul* on Internet social networking site MySpace in advance of its commercial release, allowing fans to

listen to the whole compilation, but they could not buy it.

Janet Jackson has postponed three more shows because of an undisclosed illness.

Her publicist said in an e-mail late Saturday that Jackson was postponing a Saturday show in Greensboro, North Carolina, one yesterday in Atlanta and a third tomorrow in Fort Lauderdale.

A statement from Jackson said she arrived in Greensboro, North Carolina, hoping to perform there Saturday, but a local doctor advised that she not perform after it became "evident" she was not fully recovered.

Representatives for the 42-year-old singer say she became "suddenly ill" and was hospitalized Monday night in Montreal shortly after she arrived for a show. She also canceled concerts in Boston and Philadelphia on Wednesday and Thursday.

Jackson's publicist did not elaborate Saturday, only saying she was "recovering." The note said Jackson will return home, at her doctor's direction, for further treatment.

In the note Jackson said the promoter is working to reschedule dates.

Jackson is on her first North American tour in seven years.

Right: Can Clint Eastwood be taken at his word?
Left: Janet Jackson is feeling under the weather.
PHOTO: AP

— AGENCIES