

Sarah Silverman loves ... cursing

When she was three, her father taught her to swear to make his friends laugh. Ever since, Sarah Silverman has been addicted to shock value comedy. But is saying the worst thing possible always funny?

BY OLIVER BURKEMAN
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



Sarah Silverman with Brian Posehn in a scene from her Comedy Central show, *The Sarah Silverman Program*.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

The character that Sarah Silverman plays on stage and television — also called Sarah Silverman — is girlish, sincere and eager to please, but also narcissistic, bigoted and, in Silverman's words, "kind of an asshole." There's no topic on which she doesn't believe she has something to contribute: race, the Holocaust, rape, gay rights and global poverty all fall victim to her mistaken belief that she is an exemplary concerned citizen. Take the AIDS crisis: "If we can put a man on the moon," Silverman deadpans, as if embarking on a well-worn platitude, "we can put a man with AIDS on the moon. And someday, we can put everyone with AIDS on the moon." She speaks earnestly, inviting you to empathize with the difficulties of being a good liberal in this day and age: "I want to get an abortion, but my boyfriend and I are having trouble conceiving."

It is several years now since the US release of *Jesus Is Magic*, the concert film that made Silverman's name, but its jokes have lost none of their power to startle, forcing an audience to compute what she just said, whether she's allowed to say it — and whether they're allowed to laugh. "Everybody blames the Jews for killing Christ, and then the Jews try to pass it off on the Romans," she says, shrugging her broad shoulders to imply that everyone's entitled to their opinion. Then, suddenly serious: "I'm one of the few people that believes it was the blacks."

The real Sarah Silverman, who is 37, lives in a big, bright apartment off Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles with her dog, a Chihuahua-pug mix named Duck — "A stoned decision I'm stuck with." She recently split from her boyfriend of five years, the TV host Jimmy Kimmel (although not, so far as we know, for the reasons you might infer from the song she performed on his show a few months back, *I'm Fucking Matt Damon*, which went on to win

an Emmy). Journalists, especially male ones, often feel obliged to describe her beauty as "unconventional," which as Silverman notes is usually just self-flattery on the journalist's part: "They think they're the only ones. It's like, 'You know what? I think she's attractive!' Like I'm a freaky choice or something."

Her rising stardom has graced her with a personal assistant, a 23-year-old named James, whom she enjoys pretending to treat as a butler, snapping her fingers imperiously, though she still seems to be acclimating to the kind of lifestyle that involves a personal assistant. "Last week, I was trying so hard to find things for him to do," she says when he steps outside, "I had to send him out to buy batteries and tennis balls."

Some interesting cross-cultural chemistry seems guaranteed later this month, when Silverman arrives for her first solo performances in the UK: a country that prides itself on its appreciation of irony, playing host to the comedian who tests its outer limits more than any currently working. Silverman doesn't plan on changing her act, which frequently mixes politically edgy stand-up with songs full of toilet humor. "I'm sheltered, so I don't know what to expect," she says, "but it's weird when British comics come over here and their whole act is about 'I'm different from you, I'm from another country!' I'm just, like, whatever. Just tell jokes. I find you not as adorable as you think you are."

When we meet, Silverman is absorbed in a different project: a short video (now available online) that aims to garner votes for Barack Obama in Florida by persuading her young, Jewish, Democrat-supporting fans to lobby their elderly Floridian Jewish relatives, an especially difficult demographic for Obama. The video rehashes a vintage Silverman skit in which she explains why, far from being at odds with each other, young black American men and elderly Jews should embrace their commonalities. "They may seem totally different, but on paper they're the same," she says, sitting on a sofa in her apartment between a Young Black Man and an Elderly Jewish Woman. "I mean, think about it. Tracksuits — let's start there ... Car of choice, the Cadillac. They're both crazy about their grandkids ... They both say 'yo' all the time, though Jews go right to left, 'yo.' What else? Oh: all of their friends are dying." It's a typically brain-twisting Silverman exercise, playing with the specters of racism and anti-Semitism, in a video funded by the Jewish Council for Education and Research in support of an African-American candidate.

Silverman's humor has been well characterized, in the online magazine Slate, as "meta-bigotry" — the same approach adopted by the creators of *South Park* and by Sacha Baron Cohen on a good day. As a stand-up and in her TV show, the *Sarah Silverman Program*, she parodies the ways that we — bigots and self-styled liberal non-bigots alike — discuss taboo topics, or avoid discussing them, or tie ourselves in logical knots in order to hold what we think are the correct opinions about them. This is edgy in the truest sense of the term, but Silverman's blank-faced persona, of course, doesn't think she's being edgy except at those moments when she really isn't. "Nazis are a-holes, and I'll be the first to admit it, because I'm edgy," she says in *Jesus Is Magic*. "But they're cute when they're

little — I will give them that."

The biggest risk involved in being a meta-bigot is that people will think you're secretly a real bigot, wrapping your hatred in a protective blanket of irony. Some people do think this about Silverman. But the criticism that seems to have stung the most came from the *New York Times* writer A.O. Scott, who called her act "the latest evidence that mocking political correctness has become a form of political correctness in its own right. She depends on the assumption that only someone secure in his or her own lack of racism would dare to make, or to laugh at, a racist joke, the telling of which thus becomes a way of making fun simultaneously of racism and of racial hypersensitivity ... Naughty as she may seem, she's playing safe." ("That was something that always festered in the back of my mind that I never talked about," Silverman has said.)

But a good Silverman routine should still make her typical audience — white, liberal — feel uncomfortable, not least because of the way her glib homilies seem to echo those to which we're prone, even though their content is the precise opposite. A typical one-liner begins as if it's a pro-diversity cliche, then swerves sharply in another direction: "I learned that whether you're gay, bisexual — it doesn't matter," she says brightly, cocking her head. "Because at the end of the day ... they're both gross."

Silverman was born and raised in New Hampshire, the youngest of four sisters, in a family that by virtue of being Jewish and liberal was almost unique. "It was a very conservative area," she recalls. "Very white-blonde, very preppy, hoity-toity. Ever since I was little, people would ask, 'Are you from New York?' and I'd say, 'I'm from here!' I felt like a stranger in a strange land." She was "hairy and dark," and used humor at school to deflect insults about her "monkey legs." But she attributes her earliest performative leanings to her father, Donald, who owned a clothes shop called Crazy Sophie's Factory Outlet, for which he recorded his own local radio ads. ("Spend your time at the mall — spend your money at Crazy Sophie's!") When she was three, he taught her to say "bitchbastarddamnshit." "He thought it was hilarious," she says. "I would say them for my friends, and all these adults would go crazy laughing. And they were laughing at pure shock value — a tiny child saying filthy words. It became very addictive for me. I chased that excellent feeling, even from that age."

Before she was born, her parents had had a son, who died in an accident while in the care of her grandmother; they told Sarah about him when she turned 5. "Every Sunday my grandmother would pick us up in the car and we'd go to a diner for lunch," Silverman remembers. "The Sunday just after I'd learned about Jeffrey, we got in the car, and she goes, 'Everybody put your seatbelt on!' And I go, 'Yeah ... because we don't want to wind up like Jeffrey!'

"I thought that would kill," she recalls, shaking her head. "I remember bursting with excitement to say it. And she just started sobbing. God, my poor Nana. But up until then I had learned that saying the worst possible thing was funny, you know?"

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I CD REVIEWS I

Aphasia is a four-piece outfit born out of Nipples, a Taipei indie-rock band originally inspired by Sonic Youth. As Taiwan's indie scene matured, so did the band's sound, which gravitated towards the instrumental genre commonly called "post-rock." In keeping with the new namesake, Aphasia's members don't sing — they fully embrace the language of emotional soundscapes, which they create with standard rock instrumentation: electric guitars, bass, drums, and the occasional synthesizer.

Having made its debut with the sound track to Cheng Wen-tang's (鄭文堂) film *Summer's Tail* (夏天的尾巴), Aphasia found inspiration in creating quiet, introspective moods, which led to *The Crocodile Society of Aphasia*, released last month on White Rabbit Records, an indie label started by the band's bassist Yeh Wan-ching (葉宛青), better known as KK. Though the music isn't a drastic leap from Nipples, Aphasia's songs are more focused and refined.

Each song plays like a self-contained story, though all manage to stick to a main theme. The liner notes offer the

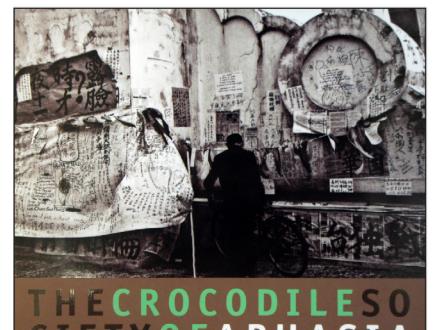
band's only verbal message, a slogan printed in Chinese that reads: "Not having [speaking] a language doesn't mean you don't have an opinion" (沒有語言, 不代表沒有意見).

The overall sound is ambient and detached, and relies heavily on electric guitars to direct the melancholy undertones that often grow into loud, mid-tempo rock laced with controlled screeching and howling. *Behind the River* begins with a gloomy melody line that builds into layers of guitar strumming and cymbal crashes. The reverb tones of *Deep Spring* and *Rainy Season* create a dreamy mood that hints at the compositions of jazz guitarist Bill Frisell; rocking tracks like *Metal Tank* and *The Freedom Highway* are drenched with overdrive distortion. Overall, the songs hold up well after repeated listening, but sometimes predictability creeps in, and makes later tracks like *Graduate Travel* seem labored and melodramatic.

Post-rock's avant-garde pretensions may turn off some listeners, but Aphasia's music shows thought-out craftsmanship and a sense of direction. The grooves draw you in slowly, while textured guitar sounds develop meaningfully and usually lead to satisfying hooks or resolutions.

— DAVID CHEN

Backquarter (四分衛) is all over the map stylistically, and this is part of the band's charm. The group's new album *World* is unabashed rock 'n' roll fun that will please die-hard fans for its upbeat carnival of rock sounds, while unfamiliar listeners will have to keep up with the whims of these veteran rockers, who at one point flirted with mainstream label success but realized they were happier making music the way they wanted.



The Crocodile Society of Aphasia
(失語的鱷魚社會)
Aphasia (阿飛西雅, aphasiaband.com)
White Rabbit Records
(www.wrr.com.tw)



World (世界)
Backquarter
(四分衛, www.backquarter.com)
AsiaMuse (www.asiamuse.net)

The album kicks off with *Sandwich Love*, a feel-good rocker with peppy horn arrangements and chorus hooks that hint at Japanese pop. There is also a Japanese rock feel to *Panda Club*, a hard-rock song full of bravado guitar riffs and rousing refrains. *Amber* has a funkier groove, with vocals drenched in a spacey reverb that nods to the 1980s and a quirky piano solo that comes out of nowhere.

The band uses a horn section to good effect on *I Want a Huge Table*, which lends a classic R 'n' B touch to a modern rock groove. *Audrey Hepburn*, the band's ode to the iconic actress, sports a catchy electronica-sounding bass line but overreaches a bit. The mood of longing throughout the tune doesn't quite fit with lead singer Spark Chen's (陳加山) lustful delivery of the final refrain: "Lady, lady, take me to your moon river."

Backquarter received grant money from a Government Information Office (新聞局) program that helps Taiwan's independent musicians, and they have put it to good use with this release. The album also sports an excellent

packaging design with pop-up drawings and a novel way of presenting its liner notes and credits.

— DAVID CHEN

Never Ending Story (夢的延長線) is a two-disc set of music drawn from the Wind Music catalog to serve as, in the words of the subtitle, "a musical background to 10 years of creativity by Jimmy Liao" (幾米創作10年音樂風景). I had been prepared to dismiss the collection of 26 tracks as nothing more than high-grade elevator music, but there are in fact several reasonably interesting numbers, though the arrangement is utterly haphazard, jumping around from classical to Celtic revival and flamenco to lounge for no other reason than to pack the box set with plenty of mildly exotic snippets of music. The fact that a dialing code is given to download tunes as ringtones just about sums up the aspirations of this album, which is a repackaging and somewhat cynical marketing under the Jimmy Liao label of Wind Music's back catalog.

That aside, samplers such as these are perfectly useful as an introduction to music with which one is not normally



Never Ending Story
Various Artists
Wind Music

familiar. For world music fans, an introduction to Norwegian folk group Chateau Neuf Spelemannslag or the new age/jazz fusion of Jean-Marie Lagache might prove welcome, and works by various local composers, especially Fan Tsung-pei (范宗沛), who is best-known for writing film scores, are also quite interesting.

One element that seems to link the music is the presence of Western-inspired musical forms that have been so smoothed and polished that they glide by with virtually no impact. An example is the flamenco-themed *The Red Infatuation* by Fan. As with virtually every track, there are no rough edges, and the biting rhythms and visceral excitement of this musical form have been utterly excised, replaced by pleasantly melodic piano and sentimental accordion. Production values on this album are excellent, and if you are looking for a pleasant and varied musical mix to serve as background music, this would be a good choice.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Wu Le Bu Tsuo (無樂不作) certainly provides value for money with its 30 tracks. But it's more about quantity than quality. A careful look and you realize there are just five new songs. Nevertheless, this retrospective collection for the young artist who has shot to the major leagues through his leading role in the hugely popular local film *Cape No. 7* (海角七號) is guaranteed reasonably good sales on the strength of its title track, which also is a key musical number in the movie. This reasonably competent rock anthem brings the movie to a rollicking high, but musically, it is unexceptional and almost completely derivative, setting the tone for the rest of the album, in which virtually every cliché of the pop-rock medium that can be used



Wu Le Bu Tsuo
Fan (范逸臣)
Forward Music

to lift mundane lyrics and a mediocre voice is found.

Fan is firmly set in the Mando-pop mainstream of adolescent love ballads that play out every variation of the "I love you, you love me" theme. Unfortunately, even given these limitations, the lyrics are not sufficiently interesting, nor is Fan's voice particularly arresting, so despite over two hours of playing time, there is very little that is memorable. It is the low points that make something of an impact. Song's like *Do You Love Me* (你愛我嗎) should trigger the gag reflex in all right-thinking music fans. Its blend of cloying, syrupy lyrics, self-pitying posturing and bland acoustic guitar mood-making are memorable simply because they are so annoying. Other love ballads on the album don't quite plumb the same depths, and the production quality ensures that nothing grates the nerves, but the lack of invention means that despite all the hype of *Cape No. 7*, Fan has so far failed to hit the number one spot in the charts, coming in at No. 11 and mostly inhabiting the lower half of the top 10 for the last two-and-a-half months.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW