

FEATURES

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Harp-playing made cool

Joanna Newsom models for Armani, enjoys a game of baseball, likes the odd cocktail or several and has harsh words for Madonna and Lady Gaga

BY JUDE ROGERS
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Not for the first time, Joanna Newsom looks a little out of place. We are on the set of the BBC TV music show *Later* with Jools Holland, and she is sitting behind her huge harp, a tiny figure, with Iggy Pop and Ozzy Osbourne to her left, and Courtney Love to her right. Then she starts to play, and sing. Iggy stares at her for a moment, before sitting back. A broad smile spreads across his face.

In the six years since Newsom released her debut album, *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, she has remained a constantly surprising presence. The reasons are legion. She makes ambitious folk-inspired records in an era when the album is meant to be dead. Her lyrics mix archaic language with modern vocabulary, sung in a distinctive, stark voice — which a critic for AllMusic.com described as “somewhere between Bjork and a handbrake.” She has made harp music influenced by Venezuelan and west African rhythms fashionable to indie fans. And stranger still, this mix sells out venues such as the 3,000-capacity Royal Festival Hall, London, in minutes.

We meet again the afternoon after her performance on *Later*, and she has only been up a few hours after “quite a few post-show cocktails.” Newsom is easygoing and down-to-earth, staying in a nondescript Hyde Park hotel. I order some tea, and she bites her lip: “I thought it might be time for a glass of wine. But no, you’re right, tea! I can’t get drunk on tape!”

It was Newsom’s second album, *Ys*, in 2006 that made her name. A suite of five songs over 55 minutes, she had assembled a strong creative team, including Beach Boys collaborator Van Dyke Parks, Steve Albini, and her then-boyfriend, singer-songwriter Bill Callahan, to record it. In January 2007, she performed the album with the LSO, and with symphony ensembles around the world — not bad for a 24-year-old.

Then there was a change of direction. In late 2007 she and Callahan separated; she toured with a group of friends she called The Ys Street Band. Then she played a negligent mother in the video for MGMT’s single *Kids*, modeled for Giorgio Armani, and was photographed at baseball games with US comedian Andy Samberg, now her boyfriend. More dramatically, last year she had an operation to remove nodules from her vocal chords, leaving her singing voice still distinctive, but much less high.

Some fans objected, which Newsom finds perplexing. “They’re so horrified! It’s a very weird thing.” She speaks in elegant, carefully constructed sentences. “That’s not to say that I haven’t changed over time, because I have. But I haven’t changed in the ways people think I have. If you’d asked me about fashion in 2004, for example, I’d have responded in nerdy detail. I think what’s changing is that people are slowly understanding that I’m not what they originally assumed I was.”

Born in Nevada City in 1982, a tiny gold rush town in northern California, Newsom tends to get characterized as an otherworldly type — a fairy, a pixie, a magical soul. And it’s fair to say that her musical tastes are unusual: her parents took her to study at folk music camp as a child, while her musical heroes include folk singer Roy Harper and minimalist composer Ruth Seeger. She admits she’s said some “dumb things that added fuel to the fire,” and wishes she had been more canny. “You know, if people ask a question that contains within it the assumption that I am a pixie, and then I have to respond — it validates the assumption.”

Far from being a pixie, she worries that she doesn’t read enough and watches “too much crappy TV.” She’s also a big fan of Jay-Z and Kanye West — though not Lady Gaga.

“I’m mystified by



the laziness of people looking at how she presents herself, and somehow assuming that implies there’s a high level of intelligence in the songwriting. Her approach to image is really interesting, but you listen to the music, and you just hear glow sticks. Smart outlets for musical journalism give her all this credit, like she’s the new Madonna ...” She breaks off and laughs. “Although I’m coming from a perspective of also thinking Madonna is not great at all. I’m like, fair enough: she is the new Madonna, but Madonna’s a dumb arse!”

Later, she e-mails to clarify what she describes as her “late-afternoon dopiness” on this subject: “I may have contradicted myself. My problem isn’t actually with Lady Gaga. But there’s not much in her music to distinguish it from other glossy, formulaic pop. She just happens to wear slightly weirder outfits than Britney Spears. But they’re not that weird — they’re mostly just skimpy. She’s fully marketing her body/sexuality; she’s just doing it while wearing, like, a ‘fierce’ telephone hair-hat. Her sexuality has no scuzziness, no frank raunchiness, in the way that, say, Peaches, or even Grace Jones, have — she’s Arty Spice! And, meanwhile, she seems to take herself so oddly seriously, the way she talks about her music in the third person, like she’s Brecht or something. She just makes me miss Cyndi Lauper.” And on the subject of Madonna: “I shouldn’t have called Madonna a dumb arse. Her music and she have just gotten so boring to me, this last decade. I think maybe she doesn’t hold her money very gracefully, the way some people can’t hold their drink. But one thing she is surely not is dumb.” She signs off warmly and sweetly, but it’s not exactly a retraction.

When Newsom talks about her new album, *Have One on Me*, it becomes even clearer what bothers her about these two women. *Have One on Me* is a triple album that runs to almost two hours, but is much more direct than her previous work, and more grounded in female experience. The title track is about a 19th-century courtesan called Lola Montez, a mistress to the King of

Bavaria, who was famous for allegedly inventing a dance in which she revealed she was wearing no underwear.

Montez lived for a time in Newsom’s hometown, and became a figure of local myth. “I’ve always been fascinated by her,” she says. “And in recent years, I found there was a parallel between what I do as a profession and what it meant to be a female artist at that time. I was noting the intersections between being a courtesan or a whore, and these professions that were socially looked down upon, the sort of professions that were basically creative.”

Newsom still lives in Grass Valley, near where she grew up, and misses the area intensely when she is on tour, or visiting her boyfriend in New York. “It’s a place where I immediately feel like myself, where I’m able to socialize without too much shyness.”

She says that the vividly drawn versions of her on her album covers point to parts of her personality. But she denies making any conscious effort to appear otherworldly, and says the announcement of her album’s existence only four weeks before its release was a practicality rather than a marketing strategy. “The music press is so saturated with Twitters and blurbs and MySpace — there’s so much that is just noise. It’s overwhelming and also, I think, ineffective.” She laughs. “So we just thought we wouldn’t play with that, and just announce it once.”

She admits Newsom the performer and Newsom the private person are closer now than they have been — particularly in songs like *Does Not Suffice*, which concludes the new album. It’s about a woman leaving her lover; she won’t say who it’s about, but hints heavily. “There were a few songs on the record that came to me quickly before I had a chance to stop them, and that was one. The mood of that song is the mood I was in.”

She places her tea cup back on her saucer, and wants to talk about things other than music — like the fire alarm that saw her on Bayswater Road in her pajamas at 6am, the curry she is looking forward to having tonight, and the fact that Simpsons creator Matt Groening turned her into a cartoon for the All Tomorrow’s Parties festival she played at the weekend, which he curated. “Holy shit! I’m a Simpson! I made it!” She giggles, and there is a trace of that famous squeak. “I don’t need a damn Grammy or anything. That’s the sort of magic all this madness is for.”



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