

entertainment

Marianne Faithful converts from nun to rocker

Singer pulls out all stops in powerful new release

It's difficult to believe that there will be a better recording released by a female artist this year than Marianne Faithful's *Blazing Away*. In fact, it's just possible that this is *the* recording of the year. Period. Who else will be able to summarize the last 25 years of his or her life in 70 coherent minutes of music and emotion?

So who is Marianne Faithful? There is no better answer than that contained on the recording, but one can try to fill in the details that are left hidden by the broad outlines of her life found there. She came out of a convent. She fell in with a fellow named Mick Jagger and his pals long enough to become his girlfriend, ex-girlfriend and a junkie, although not in that particular order. One day she put lyrics to a tune that "Mick baby" had composed, and the world heard "Sister Morphine." She later sued him to get her name included on the song's credits, and to receive her share of the royalties.

Her voice is ragged, all smokey, edged and spent. Like some latter-day Marlene Dietrich, she stands at the microphone and exhales smoke into the stage lights. She looks into the crowd, and as the music swells she coils her voice around the words and begins to sing: "Here I lie in my hospital bed/ Tell me, Sister Morphine, when I'm coming 'round again."

At that moment the listener is transported back in time to that hospital, to that bed, looking at the stark walls, feeling no pain and yet every pain that Marianne Faithful once knew. At her best, the walls that always exist between audience and artist are collapsed, and she speaks to each person one-on-one. It is an achievement that depends on emotional truth, and after a lifetime of struggle she has stripped away the small deceptions that can clutter the space in between.

Like Janis Joplin, Faithful's imperfect voice becomes a vehicle for perfect expression, simultaneously conveying grief, hope, despair, rage and love. She invites her audience to join her in

contemplating these raw emotions.

Blazing Away is an impressionistic tour guide, a songbook of her life for the past quarter of a century. As she puts it in the liner notes: "Here is my life on tape. This happened slowly, over many years and through many life experiences. And looking back, it all seemed natural and simple, not my life, just the way the songs express it."

Recorded live at St. Anne's Cathedral in Brooklyn, Faithful retraces her career from those early days with the Stones to the present. In addition to "Sister Morphine" (previously available only on a 12 inch single) she has included "As Tears Go By," her first recording to gain notoriety, as well as two previously unreleased songs, "When I Find My Life" and the title cut. These songs serve as thematic bookends to a recording that chronicles the bumps in the road she has found.

For those not familiar with Faithful's oeuvre, she does not go quietly into that good night. Rather, she—you guessed it—rages against the confines of her life, most notably on the quintessential you-done-me-wrong song, "Why'd Ya Do It?" There, Faithful pulls out all the verbal stops (which nowadays would prompt a Jesse Helms shark attack and feeding frenzy) as she describes her un-Faithful lover. Spitting out her anger as graphically as one can imagine, she transforms the piece into one long primal scream. (After which she tells the audience: "My—I feel better now.")

Her band for this stellar performance sails through her emotionally charged material like an atomic carving knife set on self-destruct. As a result, the songs never bog down into that wrist-slashing mentality that would make them simply maudlin. And what a band! Garth Hudson (formerly of The Band), Dr. John (aka Mac Rebennack) and guitarist Marc Ribot make guest appearances, while her core musicians include her long-time songwriter Barry Reynolds. But you don't need to know their names to hear them tear the guts out of songs that deserve it, and to simply percolate on the songs that require more subtle musical shadings.

Those who lost track of Faithful after her

A classical act

Musica Femina's pieces are delicately handled with care

The flute-guitar duo of Musica Femina will give a free performance at Portland State University on Nov. 2. Musica Femina's emphasis is on classical music composed by women. Their most recent disc, *Returning the Muse to Music*, explains why they do not take the legitimacy of such music for granted: "If we do not always consciously choose our focus in performance, we risk losing the ground we have gained. To ensure that our sisters will never again be eclipsed from history, Musica Femina chooses women."

Those who have seen Musica Femina perform (as has Dr. Tantalus on at least two occasions) will recall them as technically superb performers whose clean sound is both calm and contemplative. *Returning the Muse to Music* captures this spirit well not only through its performance, but with the quality of the recording.

Musica Femina began in 1981, and is comprised of Janna MacAuslan on guitar and Kristan Aspen on flute. In their career they have performed across the country at such diverse locations as Duke University, Oberlin College, Princeton University and the University of Houston, as well as here in the Pacific Northwest.

Both musicians have contributed pieces to their latest recording that have been heard in Portland on prior occasions: "Bay Bridge Suite," by MacAuslan, and "New Beginnings," by Aspen. However, the disc also contains more clas-

seminal 1979 release, *Broken English*, will be glad to know that five songs from that album are presented here in fine form. In addition, *Blazing Away* contains some nuggets from her string of 1980 releases: *Dangerous Acquaintances*, *A Child's Adventures* and *Strange Weather*. Only the rather dreary French art song, "Les Prisons du Roy" fails to make an impact.

Those in need of background music for their weekly vacuuming should steer a course away from this record, because it demands concentration from its listeners. Its grab-you-by-the-throat intensity is refreshing for Faithful's refusal to offer up cheap solutions. She does not invite her audience to do as she has done, but rather, to



sically-oriented material from some less-than-well-known sources, unless the names of Caccini, Leonarda and de la Guerre are familiar to you.

The unearthing of such seemingly obscure material represents the efforts of Musica Femina to explore and present women composers who otherwise receive relatively little recognition. But more contemporary composers are included as well, such as Theresa Clark, Gwyneth Walker and Therese Bell.

The efforts of Musica Femina would be laudable, but not memorable, if the performance of these pieces was substandard. However, Dr. Tantalus is happy to report that each recording appears to have been delicately handled with care. These musicians present their chosen material in the best manner possible. The rest, as they say, is up to the listener.

simply hear what she has done. All I can do is perform, she seems to say, and here it is.

On the equally compelling videotape of this performance (which is highly recommended for those owning VCRs), the show finishes with a standing ovation and Faithful, seemingly unaware that she has left this impression on her audience, holds up her arms and shakes her head and says in wonderment, "Thank you. You never really fucking know, do you? You never really fucking know!"

For those also battling with life's uncertainties, and for the rest of us who, while seemingly calm, never really fucking know, this recording is a must.

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