

MUSIC

One more beat

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

Sleater-Kinney's latest tweaks your conditioned response to pop



From left, Sleater-Kinney's Janet Weiss, Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker will promote *One Beat* Sept. 27 at the Crystal Ballroom



Sleater-Kinney, the now completely Portland-based rock phenomenon declared "the best band in America" by *Time* magazine, has become almost burdened by such grand acclaim. Their rock band status and accompanying ballyhoo have grown exponentially during their seven-year career into an unmistakable roar that buzz-weary detractors have used as an excuse to dismiss them.

Nearly everyone in RockCriticLand, including respected "rock scholar" Greil Marcus, are taken to at least some degree with the heroic pop-punk-rock trio of Carrie Brownstein (guitar, vox), Corin Tucker (guitar, vox) and Janet Weiss (drums, background vox).

The band also has a huge queer following; they're painstakingly progressive in politics sexual and otherwise, they released their first two records on Portland dyke-run label Chainsaw, and Brownstein and Tucker were once romantically attached. There is also, of course, the unarguably sexy charisma these women project from the stage, which, in the tradition of all great performers, seems to cross gender/orientation lines effortlessly.

One need only throw on any of Sleater-Kinney's truly original and exceptional albums to forget the loud hype and asinine backlash and to hear only the tremendous creative appeal—the freshness, passion, tension and personality that are the hallmarks of great pop-rock music.

One Beat, S-K's new album, is a particularly adventurous, forward-looking collection. While retaining the bold hi-fi production values of 2000's *All Hands on the Bad One*—with Tucker and Brownstein's beautifully recorded voices high in the mix and a judiciously applied array of charming, impressive vocal and keyboard effects—the group's sixth CD is more abstract overall, less straightforward.

The secret ingredient leavening S-K's immediately apparent power-chord-brandishing rock 'n' roll swagger is what sounds to be a deep admiration of European art school post-punkers of the early '80s—bands like the Slits, the Raincoats, LiLiPUT and Gang of Four who made polyrhythmic, angular, expansive punk-derived pop and refused to dissociate the personal and the political. They deliberately subverted angry-boy's-club convention in pursuit of more eccentric musical pleasures, and they've been there from the beginning in Brownstein and Tucker's unconventionally bassless double guitar arsenal and often subtly skewed song structure. But *One Beat* wears those influences on its sleeve.

That doesn't mean there's any paucity of propulsion or melody. Each song is a delicately apportioned collection of overlapping hooks,

stopping and starting in odd places only to come rushing back full force. It's the verse-chorus-verse pop formula we all know and love, but times 10 and out of order, tricking the senses and tweaking our conditioned responses to pop grammar.

This approach turns each track into a grab bag of sonic treats that run from tart to salty to sweet, often all inside the same three minutes. The strident, martial persistence of the title tune's roiling rhythm track buoys contrasting guitar and vocal melodies; Brownstein sings, "Take me to the source of chaos, let me be the butterfly," simultaneously invoking the chaos theory of physics and lyrically foreshadowing the rest of the album's playful meld of rough and delicate tones and textures, most striking on "The Remainder," "Light Rail Coyote" and "O2." ("Coyote," a well-considered hometown tribute, will make any native Portlander laugh with recognition and beam with pride.)

"Faraway" is Tucker's impassioned journal of initial reactions to the horror of Sept. 11: "And the president hides/While working men rush in/And give their lives." "Combat Rock" wryly addresses the disconcerting political and cultural aftermath, with Brownstein—proficiently modulating her voice into an elastic, delightfully artificial signifier—querying, "Where is the questioning, where is the protest song," and sardonically observing of "patriotic" consumerism run amok: "Red-white-blue hot pants doin' it for Uncle Sam."

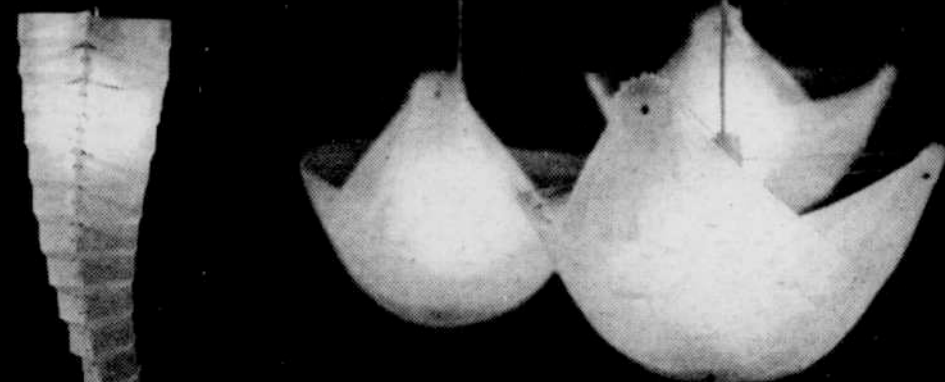
Then there are the songs that just go to prove S-K can conquer any pop or rock style they choose. There's the strutting grooviness of "Step Aside," a perfect Motown-style anthem of peace, love and empowerment, complete with horns, that reveals Tucker's voice to be that of a born soul singer. And there's Brownstein's overpoweringly tuneful, pressure-heated love-gone-wrong "Funeral Song," along with the crystallized new wave of "Prisstina" and the postmodern blues of "Sympathy."

One Beat confirms Sleater-Kinney's hard-earned status as the kept promise incarnate of utopian American underground-rock idealism. They've done it their way without exception, they've made it on their own terms with an inimitable combination of skills and smarts, and they continue to transform themselves into an increasingly prominent cultural force that can, at will, recast virtually all pop/rock music in its own image.

That's a lot to do, and Portland is just damn lucky they've decided to do it here. **jm**

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