

MUSIC

Queer as music

Just in time for Pride Month, two heavy hitters hit Portland

Tracy Chapman, June 8, Keller Auditorium

Don't underestimate Tracy Chapman. As much a social activist as she is a singer/songwriter, the five albums she's released since her groundbreaking 1988 debut haven't amounted to much—if you're a bean counter. But if you count the hairs rising on the back of your neck, Chapman has produced her share of emotional "hits" (e.g., "All That You Have Is Your Soul," "Crossroads").

The exception? "Give Me One Reason" from 1995's *New Beginning*. The song was a stylistic anomaly for Chapman; that the bluesy bar tune took the album gold and reintroduced the understated folk rock goddess to her audience was a bit of a fluke. But Chapman's ride has been topsy-turvy from the start.

Remember the album cover of her first record? The light brown background, the tightly cropped dreadlocks, eyes cast downward. "Fast Car" got a lot of attention (and airplay). For a mostly white audience eight years deep in the bleak Reagan-Bush era, Chapman represented the Great Underdog.

A young, soft-spoken black woman discovered in the coffeehouses of Boston, she drew us in with her vulnerability, her quiet wisdom. And we whispered, *do you think she's queer?* With her music, she's been bold enough to take a creative road some would consider commercial suicide. But when it comes to her private life, Tracy Chapman stays silent.

Released amid the needle-poking grunge craze, the second album, *Crossroads*, went greatly underappreciated as sales limped in comparison to her stunning debut. By 1992, the critical and commercial apathy toward her third album, *Matters of the Heart*, made the songwriter seem irrelevant. Folk was dead (again). The big buzz quieted. And that probably suited Chapman just fine.

She might have disappointed record executives and alienated critics, but the singer did not lose sight of that *other* measure of success: personal integrity. She kept on, writing songs about the interior of relationships, the inequalities of political and economic systems, the subtleties of being human.

Maybe the only issue she's never addressed head-on is the one we'll always wonder about.

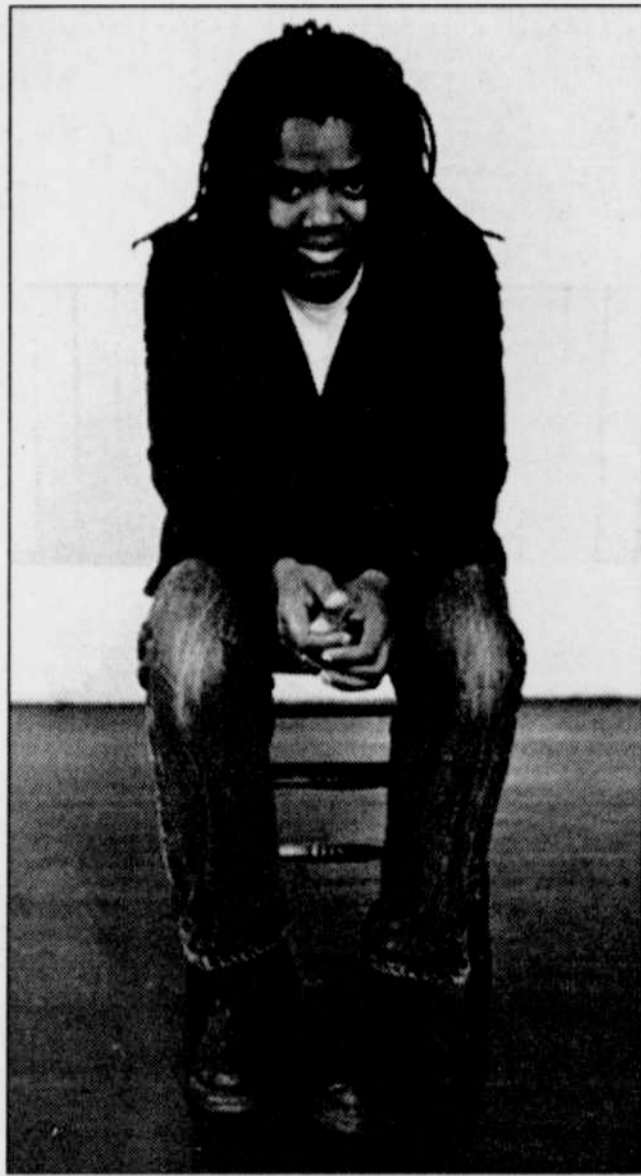
Word on the street is Chapman's a knock-out live. Tickets for her June 8 show at Keller Auditorium are \$31.50-\$45 from TicketsWest. And be sure to arrive early to hear the opening act, eastmountainsouth, a soothing, melodic Americana duo touring on their debut record.

—Cori Taratoot

Buzzcocks, June 11, Berbati's Pan

When you're talking about Buzzcocks, it's reflexive to mention The Sex Pistols and The Clash in the same breath. All were well regarded and relatively popular groups from the first (c. 1976) English wave of punk—that stripped-down, sped-up pop that set a new standard of fast, loud, catchy, succinct and smart.

In hindsight, though, it's fitting that Buzzcocks'



legacy, while lower-profile, also feels more dignified and less nostalgic. Those other prominent punkers might have seemed more defiant, and they were inarguably liberating and seminal in their own ways, but Buzzcocks...they were another sweeter, richer, maybe more important story.

They subverted their way, song by song, to the heart of post-sexual-revolution romance, love and sex—topics virtually anathema to their peers—from a casually but actively bisexual POV. (Lead singer/guitarist Pete Shelley and singer/bassist Steve Diggle were lovers for a while in the band's early days.)

Their work was of its moment yet singularly timeless; even today, no teen-ager or closet romantic from anywhere on the gender/orientation spectrum can hear those breakneck guitar melodies or Shelley's voice frustratedly squeaking lines like "If passion is a fashion, then emotion is a curse" without feeling a pang of identification. Their gender-neutral, fatalistic, funny, tender sensibilities were the missing link between the sex rebels of the early '70s (David Bowie, Iggy Pop, New York Dolls) and The Smiths, who borrowed their fluid sexual tone and tense realist/romantic dichotomy almost directly from Shelley and Co.

After a fallow '80s, Shelley and Diggle reformed the group with a new rhythm section, mounting a successful revival during the past decade. Though Shelley's voice has lost a little of the androgynous, petulant charm of yore, and the production values of their '90s releases lack the magic of the earlier ones, the new material still demonstrates an unmatched, unique brand of worldly-wise, heartache-prone acuity.

Buzzcocks play Berbati's on June 11 to promote the just-released *Buzzcocks* (the first eponymous title in their catalog), and new songs like "Jerk" and "Stars" won't seem at all out of place alongside the classics. (I'm crossing my fingers for "Ever Fallen in Love?" and "Promises.") Tickets are a cheap \$13.50 from TicketsWest.

Anyone who's pined and triumphed in the less repressed but still volatile minefield of modern love—and that probably includes all of us at one time or another—should be there to experience the perfect soundtrack for it.

—Christopher McQuain



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