

MUSIC

Babe in *The Woods*

Sleater-Kinney's Carrie Brownstein takes it to the limit

BY CORI TARATOOT

Sleater-Kinney's seventh record, *The Woods*, is loud. Consider yourself warned. In the most recent issue of music mag *Magnet*, Pearl Jam frontman Eddie Vedder blames the Portland trio for blowing out the speakers of his home stereo. Even diehard fans on Sleater-Kinney blogs are reporting an involuntarily reflex to stuff cotton in their ears.

And this is a Pacific Northwest band who (in the mid-1990s, no less) made grunge irrelevant and left Kurt Cobain looking weak and lame. Hell, Sleater-Kinney made a career screaming their demons out and—maybe just as importantly—creating a place for the audience to scream theirs out, too.

So you'd expect Sleater-Kinney's fans to be prepared for this level of sonic disruption. But how could you be? The volume is corporeal and shocking. And, according to guitarist/vocalist Carrie Brownstein, that's exactly how the band wants it.

"The distortion is intense," she says, calling from her Portland digs. "Live, it is going to be unsettling. We didn't want to do anything safe."

The Woods marks a turning point for S-K. It's not only the defining record label upgrade (Sub Pop puts the band into first-class, heavy-duty promotional overdrive, as it bids Olympia's Kill Rock Stars DIY aesthetic farewell after eight years), it's also the aforementioned production aesthetics of the record.

So why the dramatic push into the sonic stratosphere?

Produced by Dave Fridmann, known to some as the "fifth Flaming Lip" and to others as the bass player for Mercury Rev, *The Woods* is a 48-minute assault on the status quo. But if status quo renders up images of George W. Bush

and the other obvious right-wing targets, don't get too comfortable in your seat. Yes, Sleater-Kinney is a "political" band. Their roots are and always will be in riot-grrl radical feminism. Yes, they have written—and will likely continue to write—protest songs pointing a finger at the Establishment.

But perhaps more disturbing is this—the complacency and stasis Sleater-Kinney is out to disassemble? This time the finger is pointing at us.

"Dave is a sadist," Brownstein says. "He would say to us, 'People won't notice if we don't push this to the max.' This is our seventh album—we want to take those chances. We want to be in the moment."

It's a swirl of circumstance and timing that brings Sleater-Kinney to this moment. They are both comfortable with their archetypal roles—career rock musicians, torchbearers, heroines—and at a new level of technical proficiency with their instruments and gear. Add to that another Bush in the White House, 9/11, the first Sleater-Kinney baby—from Brownstein's perspective, returning to the immediacy of loudness and improvisation is not an option, it's a necessity.

"At shows we were giving ourselves

the room to make things up and keep things somewhat unstructured and free. We needed that given everything that's going on in the world. We didn't feel the same pressure in the studio to present a structured song with form intact. Some of those guitar moments are definitely unscripted. For me, it does symbolize the time we are living in and our need to push things as far as we can."

When asked if she still views Sleater-Kinney as a vehicle for self-expression, Brownstein is quick to reply: "Oh god, yes. I think this record shows that, even more than [1996's] *Call the Doctor*. Sleater-Kinney saved our lives, and we recognize that. And it still does." **J**

SLEATER-KINNEY is throwing a record release autograph party 6 p.m. May 24 at Music Millennium, 801 N.W. 23rd Ave. The band performs with Mary Timony of Helium 9 p.m. June 1 and 2 at Crystal Ballroom, 1332 W. Burnside St. Tickets are \$15 from the box office or Ticketmaster.

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From left, Carrie Brownstein, Janet Weiss and Corin Tucker pump up the volume on *The Woods*, which hits stores May 24.

Sleater-Kinney: A Primer

BY SARAH BURGUNDY AND CORI TARATOOT

You know who you are. During the past 10 or so years, various indie-rocker types have raved to you about a red-hot riot-grrl rock band in the Pacific Northwest who sounded pissed and sexy and looked it, too. You saw the lesbians queued up for shows wearing "Show Me Your Riffs" and "Sleater-Kinney Is for Lovers" T-shirts. You never bothered to listen to an S-K record, or maybe you listened to a song or two and shrugged them off.

And now look at you. On the eve of their latest release, you're finally thinking about hopping this train, but sigh: You're so far behind. So many albums to listen to, Web sites to review, back issues of *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* to peruse—how will you ever catch up?

Welcome, *Just Out* readers, to Sleater-Kinney 101.

The name

Sleater-Kinney (pronounced SLAY-ter). Mocked by the locals for naming themselves after an Interstate 5 exit, band founders Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker picked a road in

Olympia, Wash., for their *nom de plume*. Both attended Evergreen State College in the early 1990s.

The people

Carrie Brownstein, guitar and vocals. She's the heartthrob who's usually on the audience-left side of the stage, with short dark hair, red lips and a serious look on her face. Keep an eye on her during the show—she usually shows off a few well-executed rock 'n' roll moves, circa *Who's Next*. That's usually her when the song features a lower, more matter-of-fact voice or overlay. She's a big reader and the band's youngest member, this year turning the big 3-0.

Corin Tucker, guitar and vocals. You're usually hearing her voice singing lead: It's distinctive, higher-pitched, powerful and sometimes shaky. She usually stands audience-right. She has wavy, shoulder-length, copper hair and big eyes and is the most femme of the three. In between 2000's *All Hands on the Bad One* and 2002's *One Beat*, Corin and husband Lance Bangs had a baby boy.

Janet Weiss, drumming bad-ass and vocals. She splits her time between Sleater-Kinney and Quasi, a dynamic experimental rock project with ex-husband Sam Coomes. She joined S-K in 1996, replacing drummer Lora McFarlane. (The band has had a grand total of five drummers in its lifetime.) Janet lives in Portland—look for the dark, Cleopatra-style hair-cut walking the streets of Southeast. Prior to her full-time music gigs, she worked for the man at *Willamette Week* and Wieden + Kennedy.

Which S-K girl are you? Find out here: www.shemadethis.com/skquiz.

The rumors

- Carrie and Corin once dated briefly. (True.)
- Carrie once ate food off of Nicole Kidman's stomach. (Maybe not true, but fun to think about.)
- Corin named her son after The Marshall Tucker Band. (True: Marshall Tucker Bangs.)

The songs

"Dig Me Out" from 1997's *Dig Me Out*: So much to love. There's Carrie's power riffs, Janet's big boom drumming, Corin's vocals, which seem at first unable to keep up, but then build in intensity for the rest of the song. Oh,

and for fun, they throw in a handful of hooks that hint at three more great kick-ass songs.

"The End of You" from 1999's *The Hot Rock*: A quintessential S-K song. Carrie's terse, angular riffs start us off, Corin's vocals launch, there's a pause, then Carrie joins in. The bridge leads to Janet's rapid-fire buildup on the drums. Heaven.

"You're No Rock 'n' Roll Fun" from 2000's *All Hands on the Bad One*: Any song that references Christmas socks, whiskey drinks, chocolate bars and girl bands gets my vote. Plus, Carrie and Corin's biting humor makes ya waŕna!

"Combat Rock" from 2002's *One Beat*: A Clash reference and a fair lyrical inquiry—"Since when is skepticism un-American?" Our heroes, one of the first bands to speak up post-9/11. Here here.

"Rollercoaster" from 2005's *The Woods*: Oh, the distortion. Oh, the guitar hooks. We haven't been this excited about an S-K song since their 1995 self-titled debut on Chainsaw Records.

Congratulations! You've made it this far, so now you can pass yourself off as a longtime S-K fan and buy the T-shirt and the rest of it. Check out the official site, www.sleater-kinney.com, and the fan site, www.sleater-kinney.org. **J**

