

music

Out of Control

Gossip mongers rejoice at band's new record

by Cori Taratoot

Beth Ditto's fiery soul-punk band The Gossip is on the job: a new record, *Standing in the Way of Control*; impending U.S. tour dates; and an invite from Portland faves Sleater-Kinney to play its curated set at the U.K. festival All Tomorrow's Parties in May. The future looks bright, but the recent past has been a bitch for Ms. Ditto.

For starters, The Gossip survived its first personnel change, as ex-Chromatics drummer Hannah Blilie replaced Kathy Mendonca. Ditto says losing Mendonca hurt "like a serious breakup."

Then Ditto found herself forced under the knife—emergency gall bladder surgery—and, like most working musicians, had to come up with all of the cash to pay the bills. While bands from the Pacific Northwest (The Decemberists, Pretty Girls Make Graves, Blood Brothers and Tracy & the Plastics, to name a few) rallied for multiple benefits, Ditto got healthy and got back to work.

Beth Ditto is a Southerner, and Southerners are exceedingly polite. It's not until I mention the All Tomorrow's Parties nod from Sleater-Kinney that her vitality and personality start to explode through the phone.

"I told Carrie [Brownstein], 'I just want you to know that if you weren't going to pick us I was going to be so mad,'" Ditto says, in mocking exasperation. "When she finally invited us, I was like thank God."

To extract full enjoyment from the following interview, imagine a thick, seductive Southern drawl. Imagine you're in good company. Remember how it felt to really laugh again after a rough time. That's what spending time with the hot, hilarious, giant-hearted Beth Ditto is like.

Cori Taratoot: First of all, how are you feeling?

Beth Ditto: I'm good. I feel a lot better.

CT: How did it feel to have Portland celebrating you?

BD: It wasn't just Portland—it was people in Olympia, Seattle...it was so cool. I had never felt so loved before. I never realized how many friends I had in the music scene and punk world. And I

mean, how many benefit shows have there been for this thing or that?

CT: Right. The show at the Doug Fir seemed so special. It wasn't just another benefit. The Decemberists headlined....

BD: It was very sweet. Let's not forget that Alicia [Rose] from Doug Fir totally donated that place; there were no expenses.

CT: Was it hard to accept that kind of generosity?

BD: Oh, yeah. I didn't send King Cobra or The Need thank-you notes. I didn't even say thank you when I saw them later. I was so nervous about it. It was like this one time my grandma gave me \$5 and I didn't say thank you because I couldn't think of what to say, because thank you wasn't enough. It was really hard. I didn't even want to go to the show, because I felt bad taking it.

CT: This record seems pretty dark. Do you agree?

BD: A lot of people have asked me why I wrote a dark record...I'm happy when I hear people say that. 2004 and 2005 were so dark for me. Kathy was gone.... We'd been friends since childhood. And lots of crazy things had happened to me and [guitarist] Nathan [Howdeschell]. So with the record, it's well-documented. And yes, it's darker, but it's hopeful. I think that's something missing from punk, and that's one of the things about Le Tigre—they put hope out there. I made a record that I needed to hear, a document from a part of my life that was dark...but I knew that I would make it out alive.

CT: What happened with Kathy?

BD: She couldn't go on this tour that we were asked to go on because she was in midwifery school. So we were looking to find someone temporary to drum. Hannah, she was down to do it. She took time off from her job at [Seattle sex shop] Toys in Babeland to come on tour with us. In the middle of that tour I thought: "Wow, this is really great! She loves to drum!" It hadn't always been that way before. Hannah added a ray of hope. I didn't think Gossip would go on before Hannah.



Beth Ditto (left) didn't think The Gossip could go on without original drummer Kathy Mendonca (right).

CT: You hear a big difference immediately. Tell us about Hannah. Who is she?

BD: Hannah Blilie—no relation to Jody [Bleyle of Team Dresch and Hazel]. She's one of the best drummers around...and she's a very driving creative force. A lot of the songs were written with just me and her, me laying down vocals on top of her drums. I would work with her as the bass line, and then Nathan would write the guitar part around her. It adds a lot. I didn't want anyone who played drums like Kathy. If you're going to replace drummers, you don't want the next record to sound like the old ones did.

CT: You seem pretty pumped about Sleater-Kinney inviting you to play their curated set at All Tomorrow's Parties.

BD: I feel really flattered. If it weren't for Sleater-Kinney, we wouldn't have half the audience we have. I was fresh off the turnip truck [when we met them]. I was 19. I had no idea how big they were. I barely knew their records. I didn't know they were world icons. They asked us to be on their world tour.

CT: You mentioned Le Tigre earlier. I checked out your new single, "Standing in the Way of Control," and noticed the Le Tigre remix on the B-side and the artwork by Sonic Youth. How did all of that come about?

BD: Kim Gordon did some of the artwork on the 12-inch. She's my favorite member of Sonic Youth; I think she is amazing. Nathan and Hannah worship Sonic Youth; they are the end-all, be-all of punk existing today for Nathan.... We've become good friends with Le Tigre, and [on tour] we talked about how great it would be to collaborate. How does a band stripped down like The Gossip and a band based solely on technology like Le Tigre collaborate? How can you do that? Get Kathleen [Hanna] to sing? Nathan is a huge DJ freak; he's obsessed with dance music, so a remix made a lot of sense.... It's a nod to the DJ scene; that's where his heart is.

CT: Do you feel a sense of recommitment to Gossip now? Is this your day job?

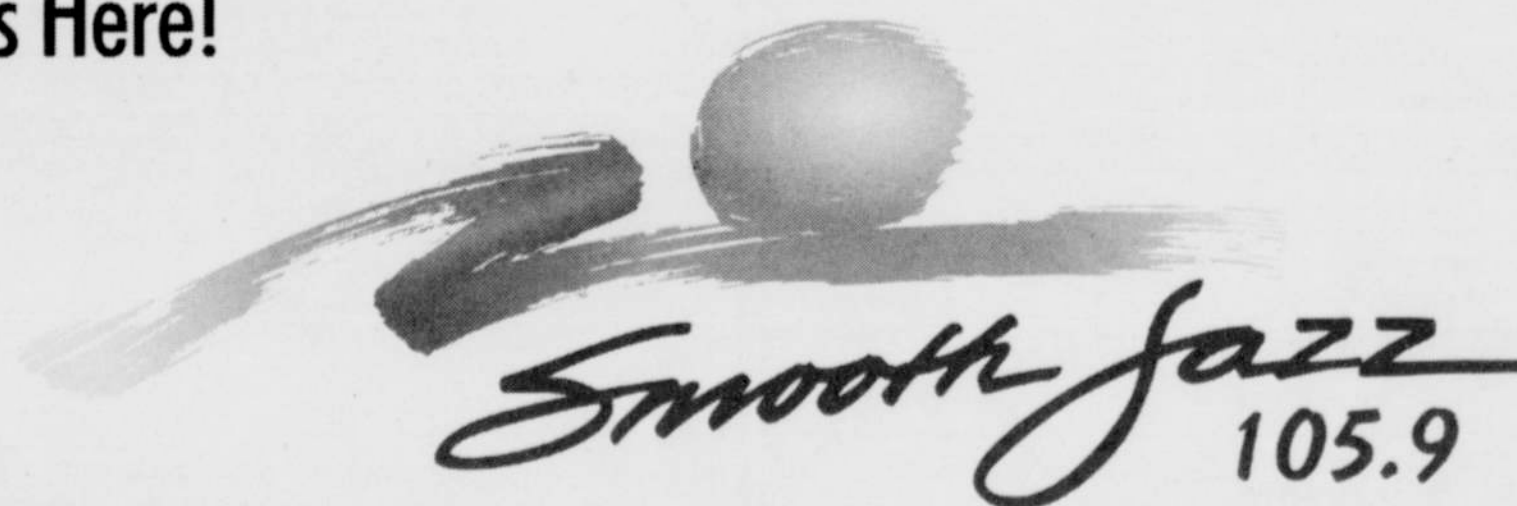
BD: Definitely. It's our passion. Everyone in the band was born to do what they are doing.

Besides, I was never the kind of person who wanted to go to college. Eww. It was either going to be this or beauty school. **io**

THE GOSSIP throws an album release party with Swan Island and Lovers 9 p.m. Jan. 25 at Wonder Ballroom, 128 N.E. Russell St. Tickets are \$12 at the door or \$10 in advance from Ticketmaster..

Free-lance writer CORI TARATOOT co-founded PDX Pop Now!, a nonprofit dedicated to Portland's thriving music community.

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