

music

Bridging the Gap

Elder folk legend teams with folk-punk icon to bring generations together

by Dale Schiff

At first glance, Bitch and Ferron seem like an odd musical pairing: a 20-year age difference, disparate musical and personal backgrounds, and a visual dichotomy that speaks volumes about lesbian culture.

Ferron, the old-school butch, is a folk legend with her Castro cap tipped to the side, black boots, jeans and a folk guitar. Juxtaposed with her is Bitch, queer folk-punk icon, her head sprouting green and pink dreads, knees laced up in boots and an electric violin by her side. Put them on a stage together and their rapport is immediate and infectious. It is the definitive mutual admiration society, a happy collision of musical generations and union of two poets.

Younger lesbians may draw a blank at the mention of Ferron's name, maybe even roll their eyes at the thought of a lesbian folk musician in her 50s. Older lesbians have a similar response at the mention of Bitch's name. Maybe it's the name or just the unfamiliar. Regardless, there seems to be an undeniable musical generation gap happening.

It is a musical generation gap that Bitch is bridging by not only producing Ferron's 14th release, *Boulder*, on Bitch's fledgling record label, Short Story Records, but by touring with Ferron and performing Ferron's songs. That's only part of the show; Bitch is also introducing Ferron fans to the Exciting Conclusion, which she started with her girlfriend, Daniela Sea of *The L Word* fame. (Sea has bowed out of the band temporarily to continue acting.)

According to Bitch, the generation gap appears wider than it actually is: "I think we like truth. Sometimes that comes in a wild, rocking way (The Gossip, Erase Errata) and sometimes it comes through the words of an elder (Ferron). But no matter what medium, I think we are all searching for a sense of truth and reflection and seeing ourselves somehow in people's art."

The end result, *Boulder*, is a beautiful and intimate body of work highlighting Ferron's career with a host of familiar players. Ani DiFranco—a huge Ferron fan who introduced Bitch to Ferron's music—also contributes vocals and vibes to "Girl on a Road." JD Sampson (Le Tigre) adds beats and Samantha Morton (The Be Good Tanyas) adds mandolin to "In the Meantime." "Misty Mountain" is transformed from a folk ballad to a spoken word performance set over vocals from Ulali, a Native American a cappella group, conjuring images of Ferron's Cree and Ojibwa Indian heritage. One of the highlights of *Boulder* is the sweet "Never Your Own" with Bitch on fiddle, Julie Wolf on accordion and Amy Ray (Indigo Girls) on mandolin. It sounds as if the musicians were all at Ferron's house hanging their feet off of her porch.

"This record is something I've been thinking about for years," Bitch says. "I wanted to make an album of her songs that sounds like how she sounds when you sit next to her. I wanted it to be simple and soulful. Turns out 'simple' takes a long time to get—but I feel like it was so worth it. Ferron always said 'yes' to my idea but was really hard to pin down."

With failed attempts to get Ferron to travel to New York to record, Bitch instead drove her RV to Ferron's house in the remote woods of Michigan and proceeded to record these classic tunes with little more than vision and a laptop.

"When it came down to it, pretty much every step of the way I had to beg, manipulate, plead and force her to sing for me," Bitch says. "It was not easy, but I had this sense that people were waiting for this—that my peers needed these songs somehow."

Ferron's last experience with a record label, Warner Bros., was horribly painful and left her reeling—out of money and without rights to some of her songs. The making of *Boulder* could not

have been more different. It certainly was a labor of love: The album was painstakingly produced everywhere from bathrooms to hotel rooms, music venues and, well, Ferron's driveway.

When Ferron is asked about Bitch—whom she affectionately calls B—the consummate trust and respect is evident. "It was B's baby," she says. In fact, Ferron didn't even hear the finished product until its release in June.

Once Ferron starts talking about Bitch, it's hard to get her to stop. "Let's start with the performer, the name being a performance of its own...shows you're willing to take it on the chin for what you believe.... B is her art, and that's quite something in a time when nothing means anything. She's not a whiner, she's articulate, emotional, lining her politics up with her inner self, and what the hell else can we want from our artists?"

The two met when Bitch was part of the folk-punk duo Bitch and Animal. Bitch was known for a fiery violin, a wicked bass and an occasional sweet ballad on the ukulele. The duo was famous for theatrical onstage antics, an occasional tap dance number and memorable songs like "Pussy Manifesto" and "Best Cock on the Block," often tongue-in-cheek, sex-positive, pro-ganja, pro-pussy political performance art/music.

Ferron recalls: "And so, when I saw Bitch and Animal performing 'Pussy Manifesto' at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival and at many other places since, what I get to see is the audience witnessing their own relationship to misogyny, even down to the fine line of having a pussy but



Bitch (left) drove her RV to Ferron's house in the remote woods of Michigan to produce *Boulder*.

never talking about it...kind of like Bitch is *The Vagina Monologues* for the street, breaking barriers wherever she goes. The contradiction, of course, is that now there are lots of little Bitches running around, independent as minnows, but that is the right of youth. Bitch remains the prototype."

Bitch is an underrated, talented multi-instrumentalist who plays violin, bass, viola, ukulele and pretty much anything else you hand her. She obviously has an ear for producing, because for a first-time solo producing effort, she gets it just right.

At the end of the interview, Ferron adds: "Let's face it...life's a bitch, and every once in a while, if you can sit still as a boulder, you get to be in the same short story with someone you care about."

Well, Ferron, that's downright clever. **JO**

Doug Fir Lounge presents BITCH & THE EXCITING CONCLUSION and FERRON 9 p.m. July 16 at 830 E. Burnside St. The opening act is Myshkin's Ruby Warblers. Tickets are \$15 at the door or \$13 in advance from TicketsWest.

DALE SCHIFF is involved in many aspects of the Portland music scene and all things gay. Contact her at daleischiff@gmail.com.

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