

Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [April 3, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Ys

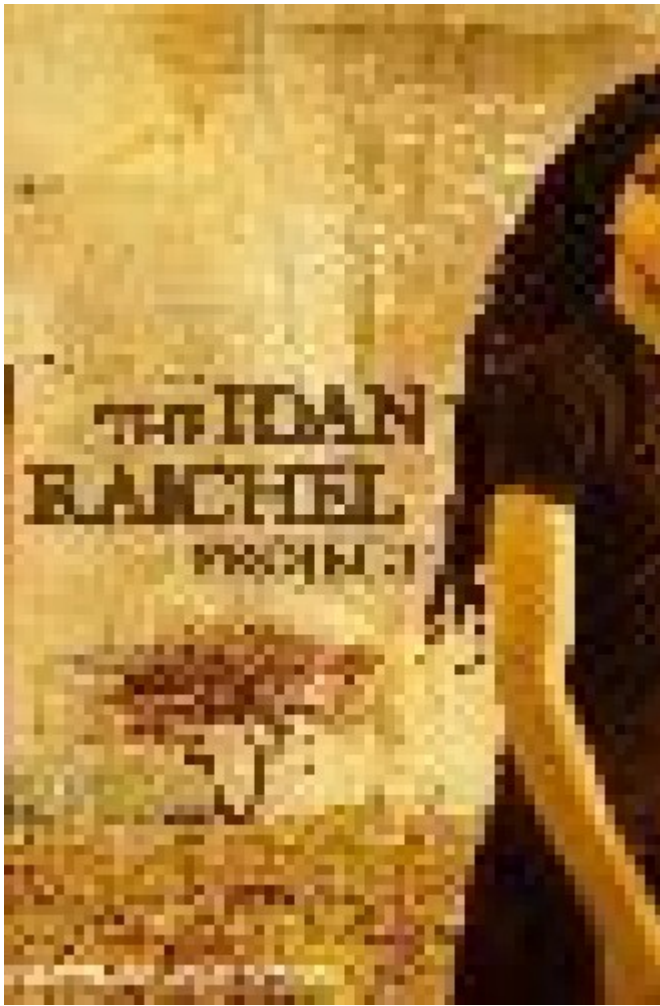
Joanna Newsom
Drag City



Dream Again

Phil Keaggy

Strobie



The Idan Raichel Project

Idan Raichel

Helicon/Cumbancha



The Crane Wife

the Decemberists
Capitol



The Dawning of the Day

Ronan Tynan
Decca/Universal



These Four Walls

Shawn Colvin
Nonesuch

Those who discovered Joanna Newsom's full-length debut *The Milk-Eyed Mender* (Drag City, 2004) fell without exception into two camps: either they ran screaming from her Betty-Boop-on-helium voice and tales of bridges, balloons and beans or found themselves enchanted and amazed. Here was a young woman playing the harp—the harp!—making pop music so original and magical that it sounded as if it emerged from the cracks in C. S. Lewis's fabled wardrobe.

This reviewer fell into the latter camp. So it was with great anticipation that I awaited *Ys* (Drag City, 2006), an album already hailed in some corners as the best independent release of the past 12 months. I'm not prepared to go that far, but let's give Newsom, who is all of 24, credit for taking big steps forward in artistry, vocal

prowess and imaginative scope. The promise of her early CD expands into a vast world—five songs sprawled over a length of 55 minutes. Her ambition is obvious; Chicago’s Steve Albini (Nirvana, Robert Plant) recorded Newsom’s harp and voice, and *Ys* was mastered at London’s famed Abbey Road studios. Yet it’s hard to detect an ounce of fat anywhere—though other excesses can be found.

One thing noticeably lost on *Ys*, compared to its predecessor, is a sense of intimacy. This is a much more choreographed, orchestrated effort. Conductor Van Dyke Parks takes Newsom into cinematic realms. As the opening of “Emily” unfolds, one can hear Newsom’s voice—grainier and more restrained than on *Mender*—dancing artfully with harp arpeggios and breathless string runs. The listener rolls down the hill with Newsom in a giddy, slow-motion Edith Piaf tumble.

Just as in his early, overwrought work with the Beach Boys, Parks revels in pasting ornate flourishes atop Newsom’s basic tracks. That’s too bad, because on *Mender* the songs made you feel as though Newsom was playing for you alone in an antique conservatory space. Here she sounds as if she’s projected onto the big screen. That’s not necessarily bad, but what’s gained in grandeur is lost in coziness.

It’s next to impossible to convey the fantastical, labyrinthine worlds of Newsom’s lyrics, which involve black airplanes flying in night skies; monkeys and bears heeding the cries of an eager stable boy; ears filled with buzzing bees; pronouncements seemingly culled from lost 18th-century novellas (“Cold, cold cupboard, lord, nothing to chew on!”). Animals aren’t just walking or ambling, they’re “spelunking”; love is not merely declared or deceased, it becomes “a toothless hound-dog choking on a feather.”

Ys will reward the time and investment of the adventurous listener. Newsom’s work is as bramble-filled as her verbal musings, but it has enough surprises to demand layers and layers of loyal listening. Happy spelunking.

Some other notable CDs:

In the hands of a lesser artist, casting oneself as musical cousin of Paul McCartney would be a dangerous business. But besides being a masterful guitarist, Keaggy has a heartfelt grip on what makes for soulful, soft rock. “Kathy’s Song” is a tender tribute to Keaggy’s older sister, while “Why” shuffles dynamics to produce an old-school protest against poverty, ignorance and war. The too-literal “Redemption” comes off as preachy (“Do I want to be right or redeemed? / Will I be brilliant at the

cost of being obscene?”), but the instrumental “Traveling Light” shimmers with jazz-flamenco light—proving that most artists speak spiritual volumes by saying nothing at all.

Hailing from Kfar Saba, Israel, Raichel takes the best licks of Western world music stars—including Sting and Peter Gabriel—and throws them into a melting pot redolent with religious imagery, African grooves and Arabic stylings so thick you can smell the incense. “Bo’ee” (Come with Me) begins with the simplest stick-and-kick drum machine pattern before blooming into a daydream haze worthy of Senegalese vocalist Youssou N’Dour. Especially striking are “Be’Yom Shabbat” (On Sabbath)—in which swirling voices envelop a 4/4 beat like prayers echoing through a gilded temple door—and “Hinach Yafah” (Thou Art Beautiful), a smart, circular piano figure based on the Song of Songs.

The overblown, arena-sized pomposity of progressive rock is brought back to its proper size by this Portland, Oregon, quintet, which takes its inspiration from the children’s book of the same title. One would be hard-pressed to find a more literate, brainy rock lyricist than vocalist Colin Meloy—a frumpy antirock star fond of trotting out words such as “Sycorax” and “dirigible.” But it’s no College Bowl stunt he’s after here, as his 12-minute soundscape “The Island: Come and See—The Landlord’s Daughter” rocks with boot-shaking stomp like an early John Lennon outtake. “O Valencia!” gallops with a sleek stride recalling British new-wavers Modern English. Highly listenable, entirely unique—and highly recommended.

Tame production by Brown Bannister—who’s often guilty of overbridling artists—hinders an otherwise inspirational effort by this Irish tenor who makes the most of even the most tired singalong warhorse, like “Morning Has Broken.” Gifted with an utter lack of guile and a voice that can pierce the heart, Tynan delivers an orchestrated album equally befitting Sunday morning meditation or prayers of inspiration. Tynan is a physician, a world-record-holding Paralympics athlete and a motivational speaker. He didn’t take up formal voice study until he was 33.

Just because you haven’t heard news from Shawn Colvin lately doesn’t mean she isn’t making great music—and with the same producer, John Leventhal, who has helped her bring home Grammys aplenty. The 50-something Colvin sounds impossibly girlish on “Fill Me Up,” an acoustic-tinged tale of a displaced tramp making her way toward mysterious redemption (“Fill me up, fill me up / ‘Cause you’re all that I’ve got / And I’ve traveled a long, long way”). “The Bird” soars with its Byrds-meets-Tom Petty jangle, while the ashen “I’m Gone” delivers a plaintive

plea for mercy and deliverance (“Mercy God, Jesus Christ / I’m gone, I’m gone, I’m gone”).