

RECORD REVIEW

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Ken Mauri - Daily Hampshire Gazette (Feb 24, 2009)

Still reeling from serious heartbreak, sick of the dreary and cold New England winter around her and feeling the need to get out and do something different, Northampton singer-songwriter-pianist Carrie Ferguson got on a plane to sunny Los Angeles. Destination: her brother and sound engineer Eric, raring to record sis, who had a bunch of breakup songs ready to go.

That was three years ago, and the album that Ferguson began during that dark winter went through some transformative phases to become her new, brightly decorated, hopeful and sometimes gleeful debut solo CD entitled "Riding On the Back of the Wind." Ferguson celebrates the release of the disc with a show at the Iron Horse Sunday at 7 p.m.

The record starts with a catchy country-pop song (almost a quick-footed Cajun two-step) called "Let You Go" that deftly shows both sides of the album at once. It's a cheery song about being stuck, a giddy-up tune about how hard it is to move on.

"And I think we had some fun/I know we ate a lot of food/I thought you were the one but I guess I had me fooled," sings Ferguson, a description that certainly hits close to home with anyone who's been in a happy-for-a-while relationship (so happy and freewheeling that you gain weight from all the romantic meals and snacks)...and then been dumped. Yet whatever melancholy is in the lyrics, the music is grabbing it by the arm for a spin on the dance floor. Hope is taking the lead.

"I like it that some of the 'sad' ones maybe have a little bit of cheerfulness to them and the 'upbeat' ones maybe have a little bit of pain," said Ferguson in an interview earlier this week.

"Radio Waves" is another example of the record's interesting blend of emotions, a song that's weary yet finger-snappingly funky, with one of the album's hookiest choruses.

Ferguson's plan with her brother Eric was to go out to Los Angeles for one week and work around the clock to finish the album. They began by recording in his bedroom studio in a makeshift sound booth that consisted of U-Haul moving blankets and a borrowed keyboard.

But thanks to a generous loan from their parents, they were also able to spend two days in two very different professional recording studios.

"The first was in a ware-house, had no windows, had a very colorful and comfortable dingy punk vibe, an awesome sound booth, and a couple of recording rooms crammed with equipment," Ferguson said.

"The second was in a somewhat famous jazz pianist's back yard next to a carp pond and rock garden. It had huge sliding glass doors between the rooms, grey leather sofas and an amazing grand piano."

Ferguson says she felt out of her element in L.A.

"It seemed to me out there that everybody was always texting and checking their cell phones, even in the studio there would be four guys clicking away in between takes."

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Eric spent about eight days frantically editing the recordings, sometimes while eating breakfast, but the siblings ran out of time and Ferguson returned home to unhurriedly continue making the record with her friend and engineer Scot Coar.

"In contrast, Scot's studio, Sow's Ear, is in a little neighborhood on the edge of Easthampton," Ferguson said. "It borders a huge meadow and there are bears and coyotes and fireflies and peepers. Scot has a cell phone but he doesn't check it."

In the two years it took to rework and finish the album, Ferguson moved past the heartbreak phase and as her outlook changed, so did the concept of the record, which was once named after her tough but wistful song "Small White Rock" (now the album's closing track).

The resulting "Riding On the Back of the Wind" has more than its share of memorable songs - the moody rocker "Mars" (partially inspired by Ray Bradbury's "Martian Chronicles"), the haunting "Mermaid" and the rollicking "Girls Like Me" are just three diverse examples - and prickly,honest lyrics stick out all over the place. "I was so much in love with you/but you were not in love with you," Ferguson sings over a sad seesaw piano part on the song "Paris."

At her Iron Horse concert, Ferguson and her band will play the entire 11-song record from beginning to end. She'll be joined by Jim Henry on guitar, dobro and mandolin, Paul Kochanski on bass, J.J. O'Connell on drums and Amy Olsner on backup vocals. Also in the group will be two of Ferguson's bandmates from her old group Plump, Chris Scanlon and fiddler Emily Brienes.

Ferguson, who's been writing and performing for 20 years, knew it was time to finally make her own full-length album.

"I've always wondered, 'Will people - other than my friends and folks in the Valley - like my music? What will it do? What can it become?' And for various reasons I'd never quite managed to fully ask the question...so, now I am," Ferguson said. "I', just so psyched about finally getting the music out there," she added. "I feel like this recording is really me. There's humor and melodrama and worry and queerness and fun and sadness and pondering, bigness and littleness."

**Jose Ayerve (from Spouse and Nuclear Waste Management Club) will open the show.
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