

The Big Buzz



Ivy Mairi

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At first glance, Toronto's Ivy Mairi might epitomize many up and coming singer/songwriters. Her latest album *No Talker* (on Latent) leans towards love songs, generally framed in the confessional vein you come to expect from younger tunesmiths.

But once you actually listen you quickly realize that this is no entry level folkie. Her songcraft and pacing show real ingenuity and fewer ties to the formulaic. With help from producer Michael (Cowboy Junkies) Timmins, her working trio and other friends, the tracks stake out an impressive dynamic range, from quiet acoustic settings to back-country shuffles to more electric, rocking grooves.

And then there's that voice, raw and fragile in an almost girlish whisper one moment, boldly resplendent with import and passion the next, but entrancing either way.

Ironically, Mairi was recovering from a case of injured vocal cords when *No Talker* was recorded in 2011. It's only since then that she had her first informal singing lessons.

"Michael likes no-frills recording and he was excited that we wanted to record most of it live in the studio, even though most of my vocals wound up being overdubbed."

The backing of Matthew Bailey (guitar, mandolin) and Lucas Gadke (acoustic and electric bass, banjo) is central to the mix with occasional drums from Michael Brushey and guests like pedal steel player Michael Eckert.

They find real nuance in the disc's darker title ballad but the opening tune *Kenyatta* is especially moving with a long build to a joyous, anthemic chant buoyed up with drums and the cello and backing vocal of her friend/mentor Anne Bourne. That song took its unlikely inspiration after she lost her shruti box (like a harmonium) and then had it returned by a guy named Kenyatta, whose name becomes an ecstatic mantra by the end.

She fits words to music, uses wordplay and repetition, and juggles points of view.

"My writing process is as unrigorous now as it was at 15, very intuitive. Melodies have always been my anchor and I don't always know why I use the words I do. I worry about whether they reflect me but there's nothing wrong with poetic licence or using your imagination to kind of distance yourself from something too personal."

Growing up in the relative isolation of Toronto's Ward Island, Mairi took early piano lessons and guitar from 14. At home there were songbooks of traditional British folk ("the murder ballads creeped me out") and Appalachian tunes to thumb through,

records of vocal music from Bulgaria and Georgia and albums by The Watsons, Silly Sisters and Doc Watson. She started singing with her mother and sister in a vocal trio that made its formal debut as Kith & Kin about five years ago.

Mairi was 17 when Bourne introduced her to Timmins, which led to him producing her debut *Well You* (2007). A year at McGill University followed before she was drawn back to music. Joining the Toronto gospel-rock unit Bruce Peninsula and touring with them to Western Canada and into the U.S. was a valuable apprenticeship. Forming her trio with Humber College grads Bailey and Gadke and stage-testing new material left her better prepared when she met up with Timmins again for *No Talker*.

Now 25, Ivy Mairi is a serious new talent to watch.

— By Roger Levesque

Milkwood Dreamers

Early in their relationship, Mel and Marti Smith of Milkwood Dreamers hid surprises for each other in separate closets of the loft apartment they shared.

The two were only barely along as a couple after meeting at a backyard jam session hosted by fellow musician Dave McCann, but Marti acted on impulse,



Mel and Marti Smith