



Vienna Teng “**Warm Strangers**” Rounder/Zoe Records

This album first saw the light of day on Seattle based Virt Records in early 2004, and was recorded in Nashville and produced by David Henry at his True Tone studio. “**Warm Strangers**” is the sophomore album by this folk/pop, Bay Area born, bred and based singer/songwriter/pianist.

Vienna’s opener “Feather Moon” features a series of lyrically impressionistic portraits – “*Waters black, Wood in snow, Dead of night*” and more, while led by her piano, in terms of overall sound, for me, this semi-spoken song – the lyric closes with “*I love you endlessly, Not knowing why*” – possessed a doom-laden feel. A string quartet features alongside the aforementioned Teng piano on the percussive love song “Harbor,” “*Sail your sea, Meet your storm, All I want is to be your harbor.*” The up-tempo and also highly percussive “Hope On Fire,” which follows, was penned by recording engineer Jim Batcho, David Henry and Teng.

The word “harbor” meaning “*a safe haven*” reappears in the opening verse of “Shine.” The “Mission Street” lyric must have been born in the night-time – “*I’m sleepless in this dark*” – and opens with an expression of willingness to discover more “*Mission Street is a striking dark-eyed stranger, Who speaks a language I don’t know but long to learn.*” In mythological terms Medea was a woman who was loved and then scorned [by Jason], so I guess that “My Medea” relates in some way, but sadly Teng words amount to an obtusely impenetrable Gordian Knot. “Shasta [Carrie’s Song]” relates the story of a pregnant woman who intends having an abortion, until she meets “*a Christian woman*” at the clinic door. A weary wanderer of the highway is the main focus in “Homecoming [Walter’s Song],” while “Anna Rose,” which follows, is a child’s lullaby. Heaven forbid that the latter trio are meant to be connected in some way!

Curiously – well maybe not - the lyric to Teng’s *a cappella* “Passage,” which opens with the line “*I died in a car crash two days ago*” is missing from the liner booklet. And just as well, I feel. In subsequent lines and verses, the spirit of the dead person ghoulishly describes her flame consumed passing, and goes on to observe people and places associated with her former life on Earth, at “*three months*” and then “*four years*” after her passing – the underlying theme being “*oh how easily they forget!*” In terms of subject matter I can handle controversial, but I question the need for, or purpose of, this thoroughly distasteful creation. Based on the lyrical content, this particular spirit certainly does not rest in peace. Within any one song Teng appears partial to excessive repetition – of the melody, or of a lyric - and the closing cut “The Atheist Christmas Carol” is an example.

Having listened to this recording a number times while trying to find some words to say concerning the contents, I came to the conclusion that there wasn’t a single track that held my attention and left me with the urge to listen to it again and again. Lyrically there’s a deal of aimless and obtuse lyrical rambling – spell it out girl, was it heads or was it tails? Did she have the abortion? “**Warm Strangers**” began and forty-eight odd minutes later it ended, and what occurred in-between washed over me and left me feeling utterly indifferent, apart from feeling physical revulsion during “Passage.” Oh yes, and there’s a hidden track, a lullaby performed in Mandarin that Teng’s mother sang to her when she was young. Where did the innocence go???????????

Folkwax Score 5 out of 10

Arthur Wood.
Kerrville Kronikles 08/05.