



## Anais Mitchell **"Hymns For The Exiled"** Waterbug Records

Anais Mitchell was one of the half dozen winners of the 2003 Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Songwriting competition. She appeared in the latter half of the competition heats on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> May, and although I caught her performance, I can't recall any lasting impression. The previous day, during the first day's heats when the judges, Aengus Finnan, David Roth and Tracy Grammer, were searching for winners, sat in a hotel restaurant in Kerrville, I clearly recall Susan Werner remarking on being impressed by Mitchell's songs heard at a late night ranch campfire the previous night. As for the winner's show, on a June Sunday following those heats, during which time Anais performed five songs, four [+] of which appear on **"Hymns,"** my main recollection is that she amused the audience with the fourth song preface, *"Can I get a little more vocals in the monitor now. Sorry to be high maintenance."* Segue forward a year and having caught a few festival site performances by Mitchell, a Cactus Café set [shared with fellow 2003 winner, Jonathan Byrd], in our midst we now have Mitchell's sophomore album **"Hymns For The Exiled."**

Released by Andrew Calhoun's estimable Waterbug label, let's begin with a word about the album liner. The second verse in the penultimate cut "Two Kids," is sung in Arabic, and was penned by Syrian poet, Noor al-Din Ba'aj. It's the only collaboration on this collection, and while I will say more about the song later, thankfully, a translation of Ba-aj's verse appears in the liner. In addition, a small number appears beside nine of the eleven listed track titles. Employing a smaller font – *sadly, a much smaller font!* – a multitude of *footnotes* inform those songs, with anything from one to four reference points provided for the listener's edification.

Having listened to **"Hymns For The Exiled"** repeatedly, I shelter no doubts that Mitchell is already an accomplished, sharp [as in *barbed*] and clever lyricist, while in terms of melody [and guitar playing expertise] she still has significant ground to cover. By track seven my attention consistently faltered, since the pace of her melodies barely alters. Rather, it appears that you are listening to a collection of poems that happen to have guitar [and other minimal] accompaniment. In terms of that nominal instrumental support, album producer Michael Chorney plays guitar and bass, plus there's Caleb Elder's violin and viola, and backing vocals from Sara Stranovsky.

On the opening cut "Before The Eyes Of Storytelling Girls," Mitchell marries images of her joyful home life as a child and marries them to reflections of mankind's apathy, *"I could tell you stories like the government tell lies, Oh but no one listens anymore, In the rooms the women come and go talkin' on the mobile phones, And the television talks about the war,"* political comment *"Every day the muezzin [#] calls, Sun come us and Baghdad falls"* and Arabian fantasy *"She was just a poor man's daughter, Going down into the sultan's bed, He was desert, she was water."* Apart from the Orwellian connection, it's no surprise that "1984" contains mention of U.S.A. Patriot Act, the bugging of private property - *"They can hear us making breakfast, They can hear us making love"* and Big Brother, while, in the closing verse, the narrator casually mentions she's a Government mole – *"Sure is going to be lonely, after I turn you in."* While name checking the late Gram Parsons and his music in a *footnote*, the lyric to "Cosmic American" is couched throughout in terms of *"I am"* with scant reference to the genre he *invented*. Anyone possessing common sense should conclude well before the closing page of Ben Fong Torres' bio **"Hickory Wind: The Life and Times of Gram Parsons"** that Parsons was a *flawed hero*. Ploughing the vein of those that are gone, "Orion" [+] is a personal tribute to the late Ben Gilker, a New York born, Austin based drummer, who died in 2003.

Principally "The Belly And The Beast" retells the life story of the prophet Mohammed, but opens with a reference to Oz, *"I in my longing fly out in the night, Unveiled and irreverently dressed, I'm lip-stuck and liquored-up picking a fight, I'm the wicked wicked witch of the west"* and closes with the dead-on, *"The morning delivers the news to my door, Of my president's war in the east, But he doesn't tell me and I don't know who's, In the belly and who is the beast."* Where *fantasy* and *truth* begin and end is hard to decipher these days, as this lyric attests. "Mockingbird," lyrically is a dark little number that references the *"I got the devil on my shoulder – hollering - beating his red wing,"* although I guess it's mere coincidence that the mockingbird is the state bird of Texas. "I Wear Your Dress" [+] fondly recalls a frock [and a more innocent age] *"The one you made with the gold brocade and the empire waistline, You fitted to your figure when it looked just like my own, That was Jersey in the fifties, and the women stayed at home"* that one of her grandmother's gave her, while the late July 2002 mining disaster and subsequent successful rescue of *"nine good men"* from the Quecreek Mine in Pennsylvania is recalled in "Quecreek Flood" [+]. As the story unfolds Mitchell berates the *cost cutting* mine owner *"And safe above ground, the boss paced around, Surveying the scene of the flood, After chasing away the UMWA, So inspections were cheap - still he didn't lose sleep, He just stood in the sun - "What could we have done?," He said, "This was an act of God"."* In an album already flush with references to George W. there's *"And the president came from his party campaign, To shake every hero's right hand, After slashing the funds for the miners' black lungs, And the regulations - "God bless our nation," he said, "United we stand"."*

The liner footnotes for "A Hymn For The Exiled" [+] reference the creation of *"every beast of the field and every bird of the air,"* as well as Adam being banish from Eden. "Two Kids" employs clever counterpoint, by comparing the life of a child in America with one in Iraq. In America a father and his *insecure and confused* child, act like a family under siege [*"There's plenty of Campbell's and beers in the basement"*], while in Iraq, conditions are akin to *"living in hell"* [or as the lyric states *"prison"*], while the relationship painted is that between a mother and a *questioning* child. In terms of her vocal on the closing cut, "One Good Thing," Anais sounds as if she was sat at some distance for the microphone. As for the lyric, beginning to end it delivers further socio/political commentary on an America that's in decline.

#### **Notes.**

[#] – In Islam, a *muezzin* is the official who proclaims the call to prayer.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood

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