

black hearted love

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In a stone inn in rural Dorset, **PJ Harvey** and long-time collaborator **John Parish** talk the rapture, beauty and disgust of new album *A Woman A Man Walked By*. *Plan B* peruses a menu, will pass on the chicken livers, if it's all the same to you

East Coker is a place where the name looms larger than the village itself. These days an appealing outskirts of Yeovil (whose road signs, with baffling optimism, proclaim the town to have 'The heart of the country, the mind of a city') it was written into poetic history by TS Eliot, who traced his English ancestors back to here, and whose ashes lie in the village churchyard.

After Eliot visited in the Thirties, he composed 'East Coker', part of his metaphysical opus *Four Quartets*. The poem paints the village as a place where time's passing is a cycle of decay and rebirth – "In my beginning is my end" – where past ghosts still dance lightly across the fields on summer midnights. As the poem turns to the horror and inevitability of death, from the third, and bleakest, section comes these lines:

John Parish prepare to once more sit on the sofa and talk. As Parish studies his bowl of parsnip soup, Harvey changes from her photo-session dress into jeans and a jacket. The poet may have dubbed April the cruellest month, but February is generally the chilliest, and even the Helyar's log fire isn't enough to fend off goose pimples on bare arms.

Change accomplished, she settles down next to Parish, who projects the dignified affability of a man who can enter middle age without too much soul-searching about how his time has been spent. Harvey is a famously reserved interviewee, but having Parish there takes the heat off a little. If the questioning lingers on her too long, that intense, hazel-eyed stare need not frost over in polite evasiveness, but

her previous guise of austere black or grunge-ironic leopardskin for a vamp-drag of piled hairpieces and bone-clinging dresses. At Glastonbury 1995 her dazzling pink catsuit and Joan Crawford eyelashes could be seen from several fields' distance.

Then came *Dance Hall At Louse Point*, written while touring *To Bring You My Love* and recorded soon after, as the eyelashes were peeled off and the panstick scoured away. A deliciously world-weary cover of Lieber and Stoller's 'Is That All There Is?' aside, Parish wrote and recorded all the music: Harvey found, fitted and sang the words. Thirteen years on, they've revisited that arrangement for *A Woman A Man Walked By*. So why now?

"Well, we'd always assumed we'd make another record together," says Parish, "with me writing the music and Polly writing the lyrics. It came about now

'It's something that we guard against, the possibility of weakening the work by compromising each other's ideas'

– Parish

"Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing – I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope".

Generations later, they're echoed, yet denied, by PJ Harvey's *White Chalk*: "When under ether/The mind comes alive/But conscious of nothing/But the will to survive".

Sitting solidly on a corner in the village, The Helyar Arms has been much renovated since those inter-war years when untroubled lanes and picturesque rural toil provided a fertile backdrop for Eliot's literary meditation. Nevertheless, it's still one of those ageless stone inns where light passes through the windowpanes and halts, suspended at the exact late-afternoon point when it would be best to put aside poetic scribblings and break out the toasting fork and slippers. A red setter weaves around the barstools, tastes the air and grins, scenting tantalising leftovers from the weekly pie night.

What would Eliot have made of the duo now emerging from the nostalgically named Apple Loft? Having installed themselves in the pub for a fortnight, doing press for their new album, *A Woman A Man Walked By*, Polly Harvey and

can be safely deflected towards her cup of tea as he answers.

A Woman A Man Walked By is billed as Harvey and Parish reunited, but in reality the Yeovil-born musician has been a longstanding presence in Harvey's career. Having been tipped off by a friend who overheard her singing, he met her after she tried to book his group, Automatic Dlamini, to play at her 18th birthday party. The gig fell through, but Harvey went on to join the band, playing sax, guitar and singing backing vocals until 1991.

Automatic Dlamini came to an end around the time of PJ Harvey's first album, *Dry*, with Parish focusing once more on his previous sideline of producing bands. They worked together again on 1995's *To Bring You My Love*, his playing and production work helping reshape Harvey's sound from the spinal fluids-and-rust-lubricated guitar grind of the Steve Albini-recorded *Rid Of Me* to a gothic melodrama, flawlessly staged between blood-crimson velvet curtains.

The performances around *To Bring You My Love* saw Harvey lay down her guitar and step deliberately under that uniquely harsh spotlight reserved for female singers – but on her terms, mocking the expectation of glamour by swapping

simply because Polly came across an old tape with the song 'Black Hearted Love', when she was sorting out all her tapes at the end of the *White Chalk* recording." Although Parish brought in PJ regular Eric Drew Feldman, Autolux drummer Carla Azar and guitarist Giovanni Ferrario to flesh out some tracks, Harvey denies having felt tempted to add her own music to his compositions. Yet there's no hint of two strong-willed artists jostling for the creative top bunk: in fact, the album seems so much the work of one unified sensibility that it could easily have been billed as a new PJ Harvey record without anyone noticing. With such a sharp division of labour, surely they must have had some musical disagreements?

"There wasn't really one on this record. It's something that we guard against, the possibility of weakening the work by compromising each other's ideas, so if there's anything we have disagreements about, that we're not 100 per cent confident about, we won't work on that piece. We don't try and persuade each other of the other person's point of view," Parish replies.

"We have had disagreements on other projects, though," Harvey points out. "Sometimes we naturally – or perhaps unnaturally – seem to hear



rhythm in the opposite way to each other. I remember one week-long disagreement going on when we recorded 'The Devil' off *White Chalk*. We were really in a big sulk with each other for a long time."

Who won in the end?

"He did," she grins. "Dammit."

Both of you seem keen to push yourselves and others forward. Can you each recognise when the other is working within their comfort zone, and jolt them out of it?

"Yes, but I don't think we had to do that much with this record," Parish says. "We're both quite rigorous self-editors, so we tried to move beyond that before we even got together for this record."

on collaboration, and voice

If PJ Harvey's 2004 album *Uh Huh Her* brought for the first time the suggestion of over-familiarity, Harvey herself must have sensed this: for 2007's *White Chalk* she responded by embracing the challenge of expression through both a new instrument (piano) and a new, eerily high vocal register. But plenty has happened for John Parish, too, in the years since *Dance Hall At Louse Point*. He produced a wealth of other albums – including Eels' *Souljacker*; which he co-wrote – working with Goldfrapp, Sparklehorse and Giant Sand; scored film soundtracks and released two other solo albums, *How Animals Move* and *Once Upon A Little Time*.

Despite often being attributed the status of a side-project for Harvey, *Dance Hall At Louse Point* is still a fearsome piece of work: alternately subdued and hysterical, and held together by a chest-

years/Jesus, come closer/I think my time is near". But even the supposedly naked hurt of *Dry* clothed frustration, lust and jealousy in tales of Samson and Delilah and sheela-na-gigs.

Now Harvey's lyrics are more subtly defined and less obvious in their reference points, sketching out more ambiguous realms where outlines are lighter and the emotions spill over and mix more freely. If listeners to 'When Under Ether' tried to pin the song down to a specific scenario, the most commonly seized upon being a woman's experience of abortion, they risked losing grasp of the song's gauzy, between-worlds evocation of psychological and spiritual awakening. And so when 'Sixteen, Fifteen, Fourteen' concludes with Harvey feverishly whispering "*There is no rapture in the garden*" over and over, leaving unanswered the question of what happens when the countdown reaches zero.

'Leaving California' changes the tone once again, with a piano waltz that sees Harvey return to the brittle, regret-filled soprano of *White Chalk*. Considering how each successive album has seen her find a new kind of voice to suit the music, does she feel completely in control of it?

"No, I don't. I don't at all. I really hope that it doesn't come across as just doing vocal acrobatics. I hope it doesn't sound like that to people because it's certainly not intended to be," she says, sounding hurt at the thought. "I don't feel in control of my voice, because I feel it's really instinctive. I need to sing in certain ways according to the atmosphere of the song and the narrative, to make it credible. So I never, ever feel as though I'm purposely showing off all the things I can do."

"I never hear it like that," reassures Parish.

'I don't feel in control of my voice, because I feel it's really instinctive. I need to sing in certain ways according to the atmosphere of the song' – Harvey

clenching mix of yearning and claustrophobia. It's not hard to divine some of this tension from Harvey's apparent awkwardness at having for the first time to express some of her most desolate songs through vocals alone. Conversely, *A Woman A Man... feels instantly more at ease with itself*. And Harvey and Parish both seem more content with this second team-up (or at least as satisfied as these two can be: "Had we had limitless time, I wouldn't have minded more time with all the musicians there, to see if anything else could have happened with any of the other songs", Parish muses).

The arid blues wasteland of *Dance Hall At Louse Point* has been softened and greened, seeded with a range of styles that seem to reach back to different points of Harvey's career. Even though it's one album Parish wasn't involved in, opening song 'Black Hearted Love' immediately echoes the disconcertingly straightforward rock of *Stories From The City, Stories From The Sea*, albeit with a gleeful masochism that's more *Rid Of Me* than life-affirming romance: "*When you/Call out my name in rapture/... volunteer my soul for murder*".

'Sixteen, Fifteen, Fourteen' scurries off in another direction entirely, with bursts of Appalachian-inspired strumming that become a menacing weave around musical statues as Harvey recounts a game of hide and seek, every breathlessly counted second laden with expectant ritual. Harvey's lyrics have always been heavy with layers of allusive imagery: *To Bring You My Love* theatrically acknowledged its debt to both the blues and Biblical fire and brimstone with its opening flourish, "*I was born in the desert/I been down for*

But Harvey continues, "Sometimes I worry about it. With my own records, too, people use words like, 'Now she's doing the wailing banshee, the yelping girl', or something like that." She adds, "It seems a shame to me to limit the colours of my palette, just to avoid those applications and terms. Because I do feel that the voice is an instrument, like all of the colours that an artist might use."

So how do you find the right voice for a song? Does it emerge first time, or are you pulling faces in front of the mic in order to locate it?

"I don't even think about it. The sound that comes out of my mouth when I open it is the sound that each song has. There's not even any feeling it around. On this album, the only songs I had to experiment with were 'Pig Will Not' and 'A Woman A Man Walked By'. It took me a while to find a way to sing those songs that didn't sound silly over the top of such rambunctious, crazy music. I couldn't sing quietly over songs like that."

It's interesting that she mentions those two. One of the most startling things about Harvey's songs over the years have been their smearing of the line between aggression and humiliation, despair and comedy. The extreme emotions that Harvey professes to seek are often either puffed up to self-defeating levels of ridiculousness or, at the other end of the scale, garbed in the blackest of humour. The latter comes on *Dry*'s acoustic dirge, 'Plants And Rags', a picture of abjection whose opening couplet announces the narrator's wish to "*ease myself into/A body bag*". The former is often overlooked on *Rid Of Me*, from the title track's hoarsely screamed "*Lick my legs/I'm on fire*" coda to the swaggering supersexual giantess and the





pj probing

Other side alleys and intriguing dusty corners from Polly Jean's idiosyncratic career

4-Track Demos (Island, 1993)

Early, equally abrasive guitar-and-vocals versions of songs from *Rid Of Me* coupled with unreleased gems such as 'Reeling'. Also boasts two wryly subversive images from Harvey's longstanding photographic foil, Maria Mochnac: the cover's DIY pin-up in woolly underwear and the reverse shot of a naked Harvey glumly packaged in cellophane.

Is This Desire? (Island, 1998)

Instead of continuing down the more radio-friendly folksy avenues of *To Bring You My Love*, Harvey takes the understated menace of 'Working For The Man' as cue for an album of prowling bass, oppressive electronic atmospheres and feverish, desperate visions. Recommended for anyone who still has her pinned as a blues-rock Luddite.

The Peel Sessions 1991-2004 (Island, 2006)

The urgent throb of Harvey's early trio may not really need the no-frills BBC session approach, but this career-spanning, if sadly not comprehensive, compilation also includes the *Rid Of Me*-era rarity 'My Naked Cousin', a lascivious swagger through Willie Dixon's 'Wang Dang Doodle' and Harvey and Parish's cover of Rainer Ptacek's 'Losing Ground'.



anxious would-be macho man of '50ft Queenie' and 'Man-Size'.

Here, there's 'A Woman A Man Walked By', in which Harvey leers about a man with "chicken liver heart/made of chicken liver parts/lily-livered little parts". Torn between fascination and disgust, she growls, "That woman man/I want his fucking ass". 'Pig Will Not', meanwhile, sounds as though Harvey's head has been replaced by a pressure cooker as she builds up to the kind of foot-stomping tantrum that causes parents of toddlers everywhere to sigh wearily and walk in the opposite direction.

If it took you a while to get that kind of aggression right, were you holding yourself back? "I didn't know how to... I tried singing gently, I tried whole-note singing, and they ended up needing to be almost a half-spoken tirade in order to work with the music, but it took me a while. Whereas with a song like 'April', that particular voice, or with 'Sixteen, Fifteen, Fourteen', I just opened my mouth and that way of singing would be there."

Just as you expect Harvey's venom on the title track to reach some kind of peak, it pulls the rug out by melting away into 'The Crow Knows Where All The Little Children Go', an instrumental whose jabs of piano and locomotive percussion keep running with the momentum but let the aggression dissipate. What made them decide to splice the two songs together like that?

"That was Polly, actually..." says Parish.

"It was my idea. My idea!" Harvey exclaims in mock-triumphal style. "I think when we were finishing off the album, the last two weeks, I felt as though it needed to go somewhere. I wasn't happy with it fading and it didn't seem right to stop. I felt

on costume, and characterisation

Harvey's voice once more explores unexpected corners in the slow-oozing ballad 'April', where she adopts a quavering croak, whose pleas of "I don't know what silence means/It could mean anything/April, won't you answer me?" seem to reveal in their weakness. When singing a song like that, how much does she visualise the world of its character?

"I think very much about the words I'm inhabiting. When I sit down to do a vocal, I probably read through the words that I've written first of all," she says.

"Sometimes it takes a very physical posture that I need to adopt. For 'April' I had to sing with my hands cupped over my nose the whole time [demonstrates] in a slightly crooked position. And I don't know why. I didn't think about it for days beforehand; it was just there. I never try and analyse why because I like that that just happens and that it surprises me. So I suppose I just try and be responsive to the moment, wherever that takes me."

One of your initial quotes when the album was announced suggested that the song was sung from the view of a 100 year-old woman. "I wasn't trying to be age-specific there, not in any way. Again, it was all to do with the words, the person who's singing to April the whole time, and asking these questions, imploring for an answer. It felt like the voice that that needed to be."

I'm thinking for a moment of two different YouTube clips I watched of 'Taut' (from *Dance Hall At Louse Point*). One, from around the time of the album's release, has Harvey frozen and wide-eyed behind the mic stand, whimpering and

that originally inspired them, but the songs still manifest an honesty from Harvey that outweighs a magazine-rack full of confessions.

In this aspect, *White Chalk* was a beautifully conceived creation: Harvey's encounter with the unfamiliar black and white keys made physical through her ebony-and-ivory styling as a primly brooding governess, sat rigid for the plate photographer but finding new freedoms within the songs' spindliness and spaces. For *A Woman A Man Walked By*, it's as though each piece of music already recorded by Parish is a costume for Harvey to try on and see how it speaks to her. In each there's restriction but also a new story to be found, and just because it's someone else's story doesn't mean she can't have a feel around to surprise us with what lurks in the pockets.

on independence, and things to come

The teacup emptied and the soup consumed, it's time to wrap up, to break free of the Helyar Arms' temporal amber and rejoin life outside. The world has changed in so many ways since *Dance Hall At Louse Point*. But one thing is the same. Polly, how on earth are you still managing to get away with doing whatever you want on Island Records?

"I feel very fortunate that I've been with the same record label for years and years, since *Rid Of Me*. At this stage I have a really good relationship with them and they seem very happy to put out what I give them, when I give it to them," Harvey laughs. "I think it's because of that longevity that I'm in a position to do that. And also because

Harvey builds up from the songs, trusting instinct to let them decide the shape of PJ Harvey, performer

like it had only just begun. John had this piece of music, 'The Crow Knows', which I loved, but I hadn't felt able to write words over it. I think it works really well. And that was that beautiful moment where we said, 'Will it work? I don't know' and had this really rough approximation, just quickly threw it in, and it knitted together perfectly. It was like it was always supposed to be there."

You might expect the song to lead into something a bit more apocalyptic. It's almost, well, pretty.

"Pretty, yes?" replies Parish with a hint of a quizzical smile at the cloth-eared interviewer. "I never would have described it as that, but I'm glad you hear that."

Well, it's surprisingly understated.

"I feel like it's really low lighting in a New Orleans bar, with sawdust shavings and people shimmying," says Harvey.

"It's a dance track, definitely."

"Yeah, but very, very dark and dirty."

"But I do love the way the two pieces mesh and you get that moment where you're not sure what the music's doing."

Harvey feigns panic: "What's going on?"

"You're kind of slip-shifting from one thing to another."

"I'm looking forward to hearing that live."

Parish hesitates. "Yeah. Yeah." They both laugh.

"I can see the dread run through you!"

"I think it's going to be a difficult one to play," Parish says, "just because the instrumentation is very peculiar on that track. So we're going to have to find a way of making it work." He brightens. "Which is going to be great, actually."

squealing with the same constrained wretchedness as the record. The second, captured during the *Uh Huh Her* tour, reimagines the song as a yell of outrage, the song's anger no longer bottled up as Harvey revels in it, rolling and head-shaking across the stage.

You're the performer I've seen who seems to experience the most physical connection to her songs. Do you know how these ones will come out live?

"Again, it's always instinctive and I won't really know until I'm on the stage singing them. It is all to do with how it feels right in that moment. It depends on the audience, the room, what I'm hearing from the band and how I'm feeling in myself, if I'm feeling confident or not."

"It's really hard to find words to talk about something you never even talk about in your own brain. I just avail myself to the moment in an honest fashion; I don't try and put on anything other than the way I feel right then, and just try to deliver the song in the best possible way."

Time and again, Harvey takes pains to emphasise how much she works through instinct and feeling, immediacy rather than guile. Yet how to reconcile this with her apparent love of artistry: the costumes for each album, the make-up, the production and instrument choices, the melodramatic storytelling? It seems that, in reversal of the hunger for authenticity that leads people to dissect music, gesture and appearance for signs of the 'real' person underneath, Harvey builds up from the songs, trusting instinct to let them decide the shape of PJ Harvey, performer. We may not know the carefully guarded inner thoughts and emotions

they have a certain respect for me and what I do, and they're always interested to hear what I'm up to."

You seem lucky to be in that situation. "I've had a good relationship with Island. But you can never guarantee anything. Now, financially, things are getting so tough that I don't just know that they're always going to be there. And they might not."

"And certainly, individuals change and you might get a different set of people," Parish adds.

What would you do if you didn't have a label?

"I think somebody in Polly's position is quite capable of putting out their own material. Polly's an established artist and there are a lot of people who are going to be interested in what she does. But Polly doesn't want to do that herself, she doesn't want to be sitting there doing the mechanics behind it, so there has to be some kind of organisation like a record company. I don't see Polly burning her own CDs and sending them out to people."

Me neither. Even without the Victorian garb of the last album, there's something about Polly Harvey and John Parish that's... not old-fashioned, but pleasingly detached from 2009, as though their creative lives are carried around inside their own versions of Eliot's East Coker. Few other artists could release a sequel to an album like *Dance Hall At Louse Point* 13 years on and not make it seem like bookends to their careers or an attempt to retrace past glories. *A Woman A Man Walked By* marks neither a beginning nor an end for Harvey and Parish, but the kind of middle that looks both back with experience and forward by trusting each other's instincts.