



Marianne Faithfull • Rhythm & Blue Angel

Broken English may have provided the breakthrough that meant Faithfull was finally taken seriously, but that was eight years ago, and they've been long, tough years for her. The comparative mediocrity of *Dangerous Acquaintances* and *A Child's Adventure* was the least of it. In an August *Melody Maker* interview that was like eavesdropping on a confessional, Faithfull opened up and revealed with horrifying candour her trials of the 80s.

Art Blues

Under the circumstances, it makes the artistic success of her new album *Strange Weather* seem miraculous. It's an album of torch songs, "art blues" that evokes in the 80s the Berlin cabaret of Lotte Lenya, Brecht and Weill, and the smoke-filled Manhattan clubs of Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington. The production is exquisite, with a small selection of musicians such as Dr John, Robert Quine and Lou Reed's J T Lewis and Fernando Saunders, led by Hal Willner, who produced 1985's Kurt Weill tribute *Lost in the Stars*.

But despite Willner's sympathetic production to

Marianne Faithfull's in a love-hate relationship. With the press. She loves talking to them, about everything, and they love writing about her, about everything. But when you hear the weary voice at the other end of the phone, you feel like another in a long line of exploiters.

Faithfull's song on that album, 'Ballad of a Soldier's Wife,' she began recording an album with a completely inappropriate producer, which sent Faithfull's life into a tailspin.

The producer had wanted to put everything through a Synclavier ("Oh, I *hated* it," says Faithfull) — exactly what happened to Dusty Springfield on her last album five years ago, which damaged her self-confidence until the recent comeback with the Pet Shop Boys.

"Oh, Dusty — she's a brilliant brilliant person, and a wonderful voice, and that kind of talent doesn't go away," says Faithfull. "Dusty will always have that. It's just difficult — I wonder if it's something that always happens to women singers. They get involved in a very controlling situation with some producer who has a very dominating idea of what you should be, and it's

interesting because it's at moments like that that I can see that nothing has changed.

"I hated being in that position and I was very happy when I somehow got out of that, and there I was with one of my best friends — Hal — working with some of my other best friends on *Strange Weather*. Really amazing."

Ebb Tide

Tom Waits initiated the *Strange Weather* project when Faithfull was at her lowest ebb, in hospital receiving treatment for heroin and alcohol dependency; she has now touched neither for 18 months. Waits talked Island boss Chris Blackwell into letting Faithfull make a blues record with Willner. Originally the album was going to have a New Orleans theme and be called *Storyville*, with Waits being closely involved. As it turned

out, *Strange Weather* was made in New York, with Waits only contributing the title track.

The songs range from the blues standards, and an acapella spiritual, to those made famous by Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington. Waits and Mac Rebennack (Dr John) contributed new songs, plus there's a beautiful version of a rare Bob Dylan song 'I'll Keep It With Mine.'

"There was lots of stuff we couldn't put on," says Faithfull. "Mac and I also did an incredible version of 'Gloomy Sunday,' which didn't go on the album. To have 'Yesterdays' and 'Gloomy Sunday' would have been too sad, but it's a wonderful track. It was heartbreaking to pick what went on and what didn't."

The album was recorded quickly, with little rehearsal, which pushed the musicians and Faithfull to great depths of

expression. It seems ironic that it is Marianne Faithfull, rather than her 60s peers, who is the greater creative force in the 80s.

"Yeah," she says, matter-of-factly. "You know I couldn't have done what I'm doing now when I was 17 or in my 20s, it's taken me 23 years to be able to have the authority to really do what I want, and be listened to. And also of course to get the people around me who are really sensitive. It's one thing for people to say they're going to listen, but it's quite a different thing for them to *hear*."

The spirit of the Kurt Weill album hangs over *Strange Weather*; Faithfull says she has an "ethnic connection" to his music. "My mother worked in Berlin and is sort of German. She's Austrian actually. She knew Weill, but not that well. She met him. She knew Bert Brecht and those people when she was a young dancer in Berlin before the war. That music was on at home when I was young, so I kinda feel comfortable doing it. But more important than the Kurt Weill music, though it was wonderful, was how Hal and I realised we made a very good team."

Freedom

Faithfull says she loved singing other people's songs. "It gave me a sort of freedom, a lack of self-consciousness that I don't always get when I do all my own stuff, and it's actually taught me how to approach my own stuff. I don't have to be so self-centred about it, I don't have to get so wrapped up in it."

The album seems to have a tone of regret, and loss of innocence. Does it frustrate you when people interpret the music as how you're feeling?

"No no no no no," says Faithfull. "I'm a performer and accept completely that other people will put their own stuff on what I do. I can't control what other people make of my work, and I would never want to. When you do something, it's free for people to interpret how they want."

"It doesn't matter to me. I know what I was doing, and it's possible to assess what I was doing by listening to records, but if other people want to put their own shit into it, then they can do that. It's nothing to do with me."

That sort of discussion seems to be to perpetuate the Faithfull legend, and disturb the reality.

"Don't worry about it, I can cope," she laughs. "It's no problem to me."

Well, choosing 'Yesterdays' intrigued me — I read a quote of

yours "I don't believe in yesterdays," yet the song seems to look back to the good old days.

"Well, it's a song, I dunno, it's a heartbreaking call about yesterday. And of course at 40 I wouldn't be human if I didn't look back on the past with [wistfully] some longing and some regret. But I think it's all very caught up in the *now*, too. I wouldn't be able to sing 'Yesterdays' if I wasn't speaking from a secure and happy place now."

Dangerous Acquaintances

What were your feelings when you re-recorded 'As Tears Go By' [the ballad written for Faithfull by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, her debut hit as a 17-year-old in 1964]? A sense of "self-acceptance," as some have written?

"No, it wasn't anything like as dramatic as that. It was just *time*. I felt it was time, I wanted to redefine it, and I particularly wanted to hear it as I heard it in my head, and I had the control to do that. It was a wonderful experience, very healing. We slowly put it together and *re-invented* it."

It's always been a beautiful song — it seems extraordinary that it was the first song that Mick and Keith ever wrote.

"Yeah, that is *amazing*," laughs Faithfull. "It's a very mature song, a wonderful song. I'm very proud to have access to that song, and I'm very very grateful to Mick and Keith for giving it to me all those years ago."

What are your plans for the next album — are you writing again?

Yes, I'm writing a song right now and I've got a lot of material for the next record, which will be mostly my own stuff, but we'll do two or three covers. I've got quite a few ideas but I don't really want to talk about them. We won't be doing the next record till about March."

Making *Strange Weather* seems to have revitalised you.

"Yes, I do feel completely renewed and it does feel like I am existing again, new. There is something about renewal about my life right now, and a lot of it is to do with living without chemicals, of course."

Marianne Faithfull's honesty has been her downfall many times since she first hit the spotlight as a wispy voiced 17-year-old ex-convent schoolgirl. It was essential to the power of *Broken English*, and eight years on, that honesty is the core to the depth of *Strange Weather*.

Chris Bourke

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