

Joanna Newsom

Have you ever seen that movie *The Village*? Yeah, that's how Joanna Newsom was discovered. She came out of a dark, impenetrable forest and was so clearly from another century, it was just spooky. Fortunately for all of us, this initial impression turned out to be a complete misunderstanding! Our Joanna is clearly from the 20th century, and today, just like the rest of us, she lives in the 21st.

Fact is, the newness of Joanna's sound makes us tremble violent-like when we think back – gulp – eight whole years to when it all began. Back then, Joanna was playing keyboards with an SF group and writing songs on the harp more or less as an exercise, taping them just to remember how she'd put them together. One thing led to another and geez, she ended up selling a million(-ish) records!

Hm, you haven't heard this story already? Eventually, her home-recordings began to seem worth enough to sell on CD-Rs at shows and so then they fell into some influential hands...and eventually even the hands of Drag City. We asked her to make a record, and she said yes. *The Milk-Eyed Mender* was recorded in late 2003 with Noah Georgeson at the board, highlighting the awesome dynamic range of her harp and the delightful qualities of her voice. The record was mostly harp and voice – except for the songs that were piano and voice. When it was released in March of 2004, *The Milk-Eyed Mender* got good reviews, but the sales didn't really start happening as listeners listened and then talked about it to other potential listeners. A relentless touring schedule helped as well; Joanna played dates in every month of 2004, making a jump over to Europe in the fall, as the excitement continued to spread.

Almost immediately (and especially in the UK), the question was, when's your new record coming out? Whatever! *The Milk-Eyed Mender* proved to have legs...strong, smooth legs, from ankle to thigh, and supple hamstrings to boot.

Mmm, cold shower, anyone?

As we were saying, *The Milk-Eyed Mender* continued to attract fresh attention as the months passed by. In February 2005, Joanna appeared on American late-night television, playing "Sprout and the Bean" on *Jimmy Kimmel LIVE*. That summer, when Joanna returned to Europe to play festivals over the summer of 2005, she appeared on UK television, playing "The Book of Right On" on *Later with Jools Holland*. Club bookings were moved into theatres on both sides of the pond, and in October, Joanna flew off to the Far East, to play shows in Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

2006: Joanna, when's the new album coming out? New songs were being played at gigs, but only a couple. Still, when a song's ten minutes long, how many does one need for a new album? There were more pressing matters at hand; like a couple shows in Iceland in the spring! After this, Joanna got down to the album. *Ys* was conceived as a song-cycle; who better to score the orchestration for it than Mister "Song Cycle" himself, Van Dyke Parks? Working with Joanna's notes about the emotional landscape of the songs (and the movements therein), Van Dyke produced marvelous arrangements in

his sparkling style for the songs, all of which were in the can by July. Then the set-up began in earnest, with an international slate of tour dates booked from November into the Spring of 2007. The packaging for the vinyl and CD were an intense challenge, involving a booklet, an o-card for the disc and...gilding! The pages of the lyric book were to be gilded! The record wouldn't be the same without it! This is an example of Joanna's unique and encompassing vision for her music. Unfortunately, it became an issue in November when the first pressing sold out all across the world. The ship number was greater anyone had even wildly imagined (though strangely, there was plenty of wild imagining going on at that time), and the clock started ticking as auxiliary gilders were tapped to try and get the job done and get more LPs and CDs back on the streets. The briskness of sales was even more surprising given that a prominent music website had unwittingly leaked the album in advance of the date. However, fans and interested culture-seekers were patient, downloading in relatively legal numbers until the hard-product returned to increased demand.

Joanna was on the road when *Ys* came out, playing her first live shows with a band, which was a great new way to see her after several years of super-intense solo shows. The band shows weren't less intense, but there was variety, which suited our personal ADD bullshit better. Did we mention we liked to be catered to? Anyway, 2007 passed in a blur of tour dates as *Ys* soared to new sales heights in the history of Joanna Newsom. The shows all went off as planned, even and most excitingly in the selected places where Joanna and her *Ys* Street Band were booked with orchestral backing! For Joanna, these concerts were a highlight of everything that had happened so far. A handful of shows were played in this configuration during the UK tour in January and again back in American in October and November. Another big gig was played in October over in London again – a headlining show at the Royal Albert Hall, with the awe-inspiring Roy Harper playing *Stormcock* from start to finish before Joanna's set.

Is it any wonder that only two gigs were played in 2008? I mean, where do you go from there?

The year of 2009 was largely spent executing the songs for the record that would become *Have One On Me*. As with *Ys*, a number of new songs had been brought forward earlier, during the concerts of '07 and '08 – these were recorded with other, newer songs that hadn't yet been performed. Joanna chose to work with *Ys* Street Band member Ryan Francescioni on the arrangements for the record, as he'd been really instrumental (get it?) when reworking Van Dyke's arrangements for *Ys* to suit smaller ensembles on the road. Joanna was deeply inspired by his writing, playing and thinking about the music.

Joanna rehearsed with and without Ryan and percussionist Neal Morgan before going in for basic tracks, after which overdubs were immediately scheduled. Everything was somehow going to happen, all eighteen songs and two hours worth of material coming in on the clock, when Joanna discovered to her horror that something was dragging her voice. There were nodes on her cords and she had to refrain from speaking at all for two whole months in order to address the problem. Anyone who knows Joanna knows that this is a problem – old girl loves to talk!

Anyway, the album got finished by the end of the summer and was mixed a little in Japan by Jim O'Rourke (who mixed *Ys*) and a little in America by Noah Georgeson (who recorded and mixed *The Milk-Eyed Mender* way back when). It got sequenced and adorned with lovely new-phase art in the history and career of Joanna Newsom, who's now touring again and will probably play more shows in 2010 than she has in several years. It's gonna be fun.