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## Laura Cantrell (June.05 issue)

Contributed by Jeff Clark

### Sweetness and Light

#### Laura Cantrell Makes Tradition Her Own

Laura Cantrell's voice radiates the sort of poised, enchanting sweetness that can render grown men's knees the sturdiness of Jell-O. Well, maybe not those grown men I saw on the corner this afternoon with neck tattoos and Decide T-shirts, but you know what I'm saying. That voice is the first thing you notice on her recordings - not that it draws attention to itself in any tacky sort of way. It's just that after being conditioned to accept that over-wailing bimbo divas, angry white guys shouting and screaming, thug rappers grunting, indie rockers whining and mumbling and geezer folkers wheezing constitute the best vocal talent America has to offer, when you hear a voice that's almost wholesome in its traditional beauty, it kind of knocks you back a few steps. You're paralyzed by the purity.

I think the first time anyone told me I should listen to New York-based Laura Cantrell's uncomplicated country-folk music, it was John Peel. He wrote a postcard thanking us for the piece S&S did on him in 2000, and he made a point to recommend Cantrell's debut album, *Not the Tremblin' Kind*.

Cantrell, a fellow DJ (she's hosted a program called "Radio Thrift Shop," featuring a mix of current and vintage country, bluegrass, folk, jazz and blues recordings, for twelve years on New Jersey's noncommercial freeform station WFMU-FM), Cantrell went on to record five Peel Sessions for the BBC and became close friends with John and his wife. When they visited New York City in 2002, he asked Cantrell to guide him on a tour of all the good local record shops.

In 2002 Diesel Only, the small independent label operated by Cantrell's husband, Jeremy Tepper (he now programs the "Outlaw Country" station on Sirius' satellite radio service), released her second album, *When the Roses Bloom Again*, to high praise from critics and peers. After Elvis Costello personally picked her to open a string of dates on his US tour that fall, Cantrell finally quit her corporate day job (VP of equity research at Bank of America) and plunged into music full-time.

Matador, the independent rock label known more for hippping the hipsters to Yo La Tengo and Guided By Voices, releases Cantrell's third album, *Humming By the Flowered Vine*, on June 21st.

As with her previous recordings, *Vine* is a seamless mix of obscure old excavations ("Wishful Thinking" by Bakersfield honky-tonk legend Wynn Stewart, the traditional mountain murder ballad "Poor Ellen Smith"), selections by little known modern songwriters (Emily Spray's "14th Street," Jenifer Jackson's "What You Said") and Cantrell originals ("California Rose," a tribute to Rose Maddox, and "Old Downtown," a rumination on her old hometown of Nashville, are standouts). Lucinda Williams might be the only name anyone will recognize in the songwriting credits, but "Letters" is a cover of an unreleased Williams song from the late 1970s. Musically, it's a pretty, tasteful amalgam of folksy styles, solid if restrained and a bit too adult-polite, in that "NPR country" sort of way. But if it's lacking in ruffles, it makes up for it in the wistful, reassuring mood it creates around you.

We took a call from the refreshingly down-to-earth 37-year-old Cantrell on a recent Monday afternoon. Here are a few segments of our conversation...

**Stomp and Stammer:** You've obviously become a rabid music fan, especially for traditional country, bluegrass and folk. How was that interest sparked and when?

**Laura Cantrell:** "Well, that really started at home. My folks both were kind of casual music fans, but my dad had real old-fashioned

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tastes. His favorite singers in the world were like Eddy Arnold, and he loved Lester Flatt, and we'd have Hoagy Carmichael records going in our house, stuff like that. So I got exposed to maybe a little more old music than some of my contemporaries. And being in Nashville, also, you were around those people. Growing up in the '70s, you very well might run into Minnie Pearl in Kroger, we saw Hank Snow one time I think at the dry cleaner. So it was easy to just kind of, without even thinking you knew about them, kind of absorb that information about them. You knew who Grandpa Jones was, all those old-timers from the Opry, 'cause they were local celebrities in Nashville. Then right before I left for college I got a summer job working for the Country Music Hall of Fame, and...the Country Music Foundation offices are literally below the old Hall of Fame, where there were sort of these scholarly characters taking very serious study of country music, and that greatly appealed to me. No teenager growing up in Nashville really escapes the feeling that country music is the most pithy, embarrassing thing about where they're from, and so I got a little bit of a window of perspective, I guess, that there's actually a really cool history that went with the music. It was a great perspective to get on the eve of my own departure from Nashville."

I'm sure doing your WMFU show - and also working at the Columbia University station prior to that - has been a great way to get steeped in the music as well.

"Oh sure. I started 'Radio Thrift Shop' with the idea that that's where I bought records -- you know, as a student or whatever, you can't always afford to walk in and buy the brand new thing. So I had this 'two dollar' rule where I'd buy records for really cheap, and you know, most of the time they weren't too hammered to play on the radio. But in the last several years, of course, there's been so much being reissued that you can get serviced at the station now, so it's amazing how much old time music is available. I was lookin' at this new Charlie Poole box set that's coming out, or a lot of old blues, and pop and swing stuff, that's it's great to have a steady stream of these reissues, and being really well done."

Were you doing the radio show before you started performing your music in clubs?

"I started college radio before I did anything musically. The first people actually I performed with were people who were friends from the radio station who just like, for fun, started a little band, when I was at Columbia. I didn't play guitar actually, so I had to teach myself to do that, and it was a long, sorta hard struggle to not just be completely dreadful. It was probably a few years after I graduated from college before I started performing again in public. I did some guest singing with They Might Be Giants [on their 1992 album Apollo 18; an EP Cantrell recorded for TMBG's "Hello CD of the Month Club" in 1996 has just been reissued] and John Flansburgh and I had a band together that never actually played a gig. And I had a duo with Mac McCaughan prior to his forming Superchunk. But you know, it was that kind of thing, where in your neighborhood you'd have music playing to do with friends. It was mostly for fun, but it was also to learn, and learn songs, and just to get better at it. I did that for a long time."

So how did you settle into the style of music you're playing now?

"Well, it's funny because at first I thought it would be a good idea to have everything be old fashioned, sort of like a Kitty Wells style. She was one of my favorite artists, and I also learned a lot of Louvin Brothers songs. I was kinda stuck in that '50s style. And I realized it became kind of a limitation that didn't make any sense. Especially since there were other eras to explore. And also if you wanted to write your own music, I found it a little hard to write something in the style of Kitty Wells when I was first starting to try and write. It

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made more sense to me to write something that maybe referenced that time or style in some way but that wasn't such an obvious thing, like I have to sound like 'Honky Tonk Angels' or something."

Right, then it becomes acting.

"Yeah, it started to feel kinda forced. And I was looking around, and admiring a lot of local musicians and writers here in New York, like Amy Allison and Amy Rigby, I'm big fans of both of them, and saw that they seemed to be able to balance it somehow. They had different influences in their music that didn't detract from or overshadow their own originality, and so I felt like that might be a good thing to shoot for."

Many of the people you've played with are more from what you would call the independent rock and singer-songwriter scenes - Tony Maimone, John Flansburgh, Dave Schramm, Caexico. Do you think these people 'get' what you're doing better than traditional country players would? Especially now that you're on Matador, it seems very likely that you'll be accepted more by fans of Cat Power and Yo La Tengo than you will be by fans of, say, Gretchen Wilson and Kenny Chesney.

"Well, we'll see, I guess. I think we've been really lucky all along to connect with great music fans. I'm not sure if that's because of my music itself or because of my own sensibilities and I consider myself one of those people. But for instance, I'm sure there are some folks in the Yo La Tengo audience who are kids who just think Yo La's cool 'cause they're on college radio and it's not that deep, and then there are other fans of Yo La who are real music fans, whether they are new ones or whether they are longtime fans, and I hope we get to connect with those people. And I feel like when we got our other opportunities, like opening for Elvis -- I mean, I throw that around all the time, because it was a big deal for me - but I'm sure some of his fans were like, 'OK, enough with the girl country singer, it's boring!' But then there were some really great, real interested music fans whose interest goes beyond genre or the records they loved in college or whatever, who we did connect with. And I feel like if we can keep amassing those people out there, then we'll be well set."