

Weathering the storms

If there's ever an example of following the dream paying off it would be Philadelphia-born, Norfolk-based singer-songwriter Catherine Feeny. After the obligatory years of paying her dues in tiny clubs things are starting to take off. Her second album Hurricane Glass is starting to get her seriously noticed. Her song Mr Blue has been featured on the OC and a major motion-picture soundtrack. She's picking up increasingly impressive support slots from Dr John to Tim Finn via Martha Wainright and starting to sell out her own headline shows... things seem to be happening. It was before a gig at the Concorde 2 in Brighton while on tour supporting the Indigo Girls on their last UK tour that Trevor Raggatt managed to track her down for a few words.

The rendezvous with Catherine Feeny outside the seafront venue was looking a little dubious until she and musical cohort Sebastian Rogers pulled up only a few minutes late – victims of the costal cultural Mecca's mercurial traffic system and the bottleneck known as the A23. Having checked that it was still going to be some time before she was needed for soundcheck and with numerous apologies for her (only just) lateness it was decided that what was needed was a cup of tea while we chatted. A quick stroll along the colonnades soon found an establishment with the prerequisite Kiss Me Quick ambience and braving the February weather we settled down. The first question was perhaps a little obvious but still something which had been intriguing me... Just how on earth does a girl from Philly end up living in the wilds of Norfolk?

The response is accompanied with a wry smile, 'Yeah, that's a long story. I was living in L.A. playing music and there was a place called Hotel Cafe in Hollywood which a whole lot of singer-songwriters frequent. I met my producer Sebastian there, who was a singer-songwriter as well at the time. He was a big fan of my stuff and he convinced me to come over to England. So I did and that kinda just kept growing, I got a publishing deal and there was just so much more happening for me in England so I just stayed over.' Fair enough, following

where fate and opportunity leads is as good a driver as any other. But maybe that just leads to more questions about what makes an artist an artist and where the passion for music that drives the artistic spirit comes from...

'My parents, my dad, especially, loved music and so we always had a bunch of records to listen to growing up: Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles and whatever. And always listened to the top 40 on the radio. And I think I just became a bit of an obsessive music collector as I got older and then when I think I was about 12 or 13 I started playing guitar and writing my own songs. From when I was really young, I thought, "I want to be a singer when I grow up." I used to sing at family parties and stuff... just like whenever I was able to get the spotlight I wanted to be in it. But I think when I got a bit older and went to university I thought, okay, it's time to settle down and think about what I really want to do. So I got out of university and got a regular job as an editorial assistant at a magazine and I was just really unhappy, thinking is this all there is? So at that point I realised I needed to do what really was my passion and got back to music. By that time I had sort of drifted away from it and wasn't playing as much. But I really got back to it then.'

I comment that the hard work and dedication seems to be paying off with her song Mr Blue featuring on soundtrack of the recent Gwyneth



Photos: Ian Spain

Paltrow film *Running with Scissors...* A particular spark flashes in her eyes as she recalls the happenstance or destiny which gave her that break 'Oh, that was so really lucky. We'd finished a few of the tracks that I was recording with Sebastian. And I was a big fan of Nick Harcourt and a station called KCRW in L.A. It's a Santa Monica colleges radio station but it's has a really wide listenership and they're kinda taste makers for a lot of America. So when we finished some tracks I mailed them in because they accept unsolicited albums from unsigned bands and they started playing *Mr Blue* straight away. And the director of *Running with Scissors* happened hear it driving into work one day and got in touch with his music supervisor saying "We have to find out what this is, and get it for the film soundtrack". So he e-mailed me, "We need this pronto, get in touch with me." Of course it wasn't nearly the rush that, he said it was but it was still really exciting.

"The film came out in October, and my hits on MySpace and downloads on iTunes went way up. And the same with the OC when that was on. I went to see the film recently and really enjoyed it. It's quite quirky and probably not everybody's cup of tea. But hearing your music with the film, I think that's just every songwriter's dream. So that was just so cool!"

The song, rapidly becoming something of a signature number, has a Brion-esque feel to the arrangement but is very much a Catherine Feeny song. Despite treading on similar sonic ground it doesn't sound like someone trying to rip off an Aimee Mann song. Mention of this theory again brings a definite response from the singer, 'Well I guess a lot of that is the jangly piano. That piano... we recorded out on a farm in Norfolk in the bottom of this old windmill. At the time the studio didn't have a piano, but the farmhouse did. So we went down to the farm house to record the piano and when we got it back to the studio we realised it was about a key and a half out of tune. So we had to tune it and ended up being in, like B-flat when the song's actually written in C. So it was a very strange process, but that worked out the best because the horns of course, B-flat is a great tuning for horns - which we hadn't thought about before. But I wouldn't say that, apart from the piano song, Aimee Mann's a big influence. She's an amazing artist and I feel she's just a million miles away from where I am as a writer... she's such a thing unto herself. She's just remarkable...'

As if to underline that an acquaintance with one song doesn't

define what this artist is about the rest of *Hurricane Glass* contains a diverse range of sounds and textures. 'I think it's a mixture of deliberate and happenstance. Sebastian and I were both kinda big fans of music that came out in the early 90s and maybe late 80s, like people like Cindi Lauper, were every song had a different instrumentation on it yet you maintain a sort of cohesive feel to the whole album. And I always felt that was the way my music would need to be because I tend to vary quite greatly in moods and so on. And although Sebastian and I disagreed on some things at first we definitely agreed on that; that we carry that on out throughout the album. And it was kinda a process as we went along thinking, "Oh, what shall we put on this?" He really determined the sound for *Mr Blue* almost wholly himself because he loves stuff like brass bands and that sort of Ringo Starr drum sound... that's all his brainchild. A lot of the stuff we thought about and worked on together.'

Listening through to the album suggests that a wide range of influences have come together in the music. Even a casual listen brings to mind, at different times, artists as diverse as the Stones or Ry Cooder to Steve Earle or Sheryl Crow via the folkier Joni Mitchell end of things... 'You know, I have a lot of influences. I guess a lot of things come together for me with lots of other stuff. Plus of course Sebastian put his own set of influences into everything in terms of production. I mean, he loves strings, and I came to the project sort of thinking, "Oh, I don't know about strings...," but I think the way that we use them really amazes me.

'Actually, we managed to make the album, really quite inexpensively when you compare that to the richness of the sound. You know, Sebastian called in every favour that he possibly could and everyone got paid kinda after-the-fact. So I think that helped fuel the positive feel of the album, because everybody that was involved with it had goodwill towards it and was giving something



Photo: Alexandra Bone
www.alexandrabone.co.uk

without necessarily knowing that they were going to get something back. That's a really powerful thing when you're working on something creative.'

I decide to probe a little deeper into the genesis of one song, *Unsteady Ground*, which clearly seems to have been inspired by the Gulf War. This brings a not of agreement and a touch of genuine sadness to the singer's voice, 'Yeah, I was really frustrated at the time and is talking to a lot of people trying to figure out how was it that the press and the administration were pulling the wool over everyone's eyes. Because it seemed so blatantly obvious that if we just wanted to attack Iraq... hmmm... well maybe they have weapons of mass destruction. It was just, like, such a depressing thing to be watching. The chorus came to the first probably why was driving, I did a lot of driving when I was living in Los Angeles, and then I went through several iterations of the verses because it's really difficult to write political songs without being all preachy, and just kind of clichéd. And of course I wanted to avoid that at all costs.'

One of the most affecting aspects of *Unsteady Ground* is the way that Feeny, as narrator, seems to yearn to detach herself from her own nationality in the lyrics of the song. A soul reaction to the time which it described... 'Oh definitely! And that song for me is, as much as I'm frustrated with the



Photo: Ian Spain

administration I was really frustrated with the American people that we let it happen. And that's a lot what the song is about as well so there is certainly a sense of I just don't want to be part of this.' This puts me in mind of the dilemma so many of my own liberal American friends face, wanting to object to the war but not wanting to be disloyal to the US or the troops serving over there... 'I think there's been a sort of turn around now, where people are allowed to say, "You know, I think the war wasn't a good idea." But there was definitely a time when people even in Congress would be called traitors if they said, "You know, maybe we shouldn't be in Iraq." And that was a very dark and sort of scary time to be in America. You know, I think the Dixie Chicks, thing kinda showed that... yeah great, America, the home of the free... aren't we supposed to be allowed to talk about these are the things? I think everyone went into crisis mode and denial. It's very unfortunate.'

The writing on many of Feeny's songs seem to reach into the internal landscape of the psyche and betray an autobiographical honesty. I wonder how it feels exposing all that to a room with a thousand people in it. 'Well, it's weird. I didn't used to feel it was weird so much, but I think it's particularly when you start to play for a larger audience and you go out and start to think, "Hey, I don't know

any of you but I'm singing you my life story!" So that is kind of weird, almost like meeting someone at a party and just pouring every thing out to them... "Well, you know, I just broke up with my boyfriend, and life is terrible, and blah blah blah..." So I imagine that your relationship with the audience must develop over the years and you must feel differently about it at different times - depending on your state of mind. But definitely sometimes it just feels so strange that all these people looking at you and listening to what is coming from your mouth, wondering what it all means.'

It must be a strange disconnect, from playing little clubs through to the big theatres on a support slot. 'I really love both. The other night supporting the Indigo Girls was my first night ever playing Shepherd's Bush Empire and it was amazing - I had a great time, because, number one it was my birthday which was very exciting. And number two I'd been to see John Prine, at that venue and Mindy Smith too and thought that it was just the best venue ever, so cool. So playing there was, just like a dream come true. It was fantastic! Plus the audience was really warm and supportive. But then again, the intimacy of playing in a really small place where you can chat with person in the front row is really fun too..'

One can't help think that with the increasing buzz surrounding this beguiling and enchanting artist the

move from small clubs to larger stages will be inexorable. So, is this all part of the Feeny master plan? That provokes a smile and a gentle laugh, 'Well I don't have a master plan. Hmm... I don't want to jinx anything, because it's all kind of still in the works, but I think *Hurricane Glass* is going to be re-released by a major label sometime in the spring. So it'll get a bigger marketing push and hopefully some more exposure. Plus I been working on the next album. And that's probably about two thirds of the way done, actually. But it'll be a good while before that actually comes out.

'I think the most important thing for a songwriter and musician is just keep writing and so I intend to do that as much as possible.' That's not a bad philosophy for a singer-songwriter. And with that, my question list has been sucked dry at just about the same time as our warming cups.

The distractions afforded by the interview over, the pleasant ambience of sitting on the seafront gives way to salty breezes and a cold that starts to chill the digits; even in an unseasonably temperate February. However, on the evidence of the songs and Feeny's ability to win the hearts of the Concorde crowd (who, lets face it, bought their tickets to see the headline act) with a little luck and the promotion afforded by a major label re-release this *Hurricane Glass* should soon be kicking up a storm.