

Review: *Acid Tongue* [Jenny Lewis]

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There was a time in my life where Jenny Lewis could do no wrong. I was a late passenger on the Rilo Kiley train—getting on board for their fourth album, *More Adventurous*. But with that album I found kindred spirits in Lewis's plucky lyrics and the band's catchy hooks, and soon after, plunged headlong into their catalog. I played RK non-stop during the summer of 2005. I was relentless (annoying). In fact, I recently thanked my then-roommate for not throwing me off the balcony after I queued up *The Execution of All Things* for the five-thousandth time and smiled into the dusk-light at the joy and pain of being twenty-two, cute (at least in my own mind), and just a little confused. Just like Jenny! It didn't help that growing up, after *Labyrinth*, *Troop Beverly Hills* was a favorite movie (Lewis famously co-stars as Shelley Long's wise, stylish daughter "Hannah"). It also didn't help that I also saw her perform live that summer and she was wearing the coolest high-waisted jeans, like, ever.

But eventually, the So-Cal winsomeness, the pluck, the adorable solipsism of Lewis and her boys started to lose its luster—summer became fall, I grew up and recommended the band to my teenage sister, who took to them with the same rabid enthusiasm I had first exhibited. I felt things were as they should be. I said goodbye to Jenny, I made my peace with the past, or so I thought. Then she went solo.

And once again, I was a fool. In *Rabbit Fur Coat*—her 2007 venture with the Watson Twins—it seemed that she had grown up as a songwriter, with spirited soul-country songs like "Rise Up With Fists!!!" and "The Big Guns", yet the Jenny Lewis I knew and loved from Rilo Kiley was still recognizable and I realized I'd missed her. The album was an intimate affair, featuring the same themes that had driven her Rilo Kiley efforts, those of dissolving families and destructive relationships. But for the first time, Lewis sounded like a woman, not a little girl, and she seemed to be charging forward into a new chapter of what surely promised to be a unique career.

Yet there's been some rough water for her in the last year. The release of Rilo Kiley's divisive fifth album, *Under The Blacklight*, was met with sell-out accusations from loyal fans who were turned off by the band's switch to a major label and the album's polished, processed songs about LA's gutter glitterati. Lewis has defended her creative decisions by citing a need for a change from the "strictly confessional" songs she had focused on in the past—but at what cost?

In Lewis's latest solo effort, the backroom-blues-y *Acid Tongue* (which—on September 23rd—was released almost two years after her soul-baring *Rabbit Fur Coat* and a year after the stagey *Under The Blacklight*), it seems she has once again decided to forego the effective personal and thematic elements that glued her prior successes together. More than ever before, stories take a backseat to sound, and though they do crop up inevitably, at times *Acid Tongue* feels like a follow-up report on the deadbeats from *Blacklight* wherein they finally give up on their dreams of stardom, commit to their vices, and caravan down to Baja to make smaller mistakes and start a blues band at a local dive. These tired character sketches never add up to much more than the springboard for a down and dirty guitar riff or a rumination on being "bad." While all of Lewis's musical reference points are present in *Acid Tongue*,

and she tackles Dusty Springfield-like soul as adeptly as she conjures up Dolly Parton's twang, little of her previous candor and vulnerability are present. In short, it rocks harder than anything she's put out so far, but for the most part, it's missing a real driving heart. Or the driving heart we've come to expect from her.

But let's stop for a moment to focus on the positives, because there are many here. First, the album was recorded live, so it has the general atmosphere of the kind of jam session you'd want to attend and participate in—the type with pitchers of beer and slide guitar and a lot of backwards sitting in chairs. That casualness is a refreshing change after *Blacklight*. Then there's a slew of fascinating supporting musicians lending their talent, including Elvis Costello, She & Him's Zooey Deschanel and M. Ward, Black Crowe Chris Robinson, and Lewis's boyfriend and collaborator—singer/songwriter Johnathan Rice.

The album's standouts include the title track—a song about a hapless lady-drifter, with a heartbreaking melody and ethereal backing vocals that soar and enhance her own impressive range. In the three-part "The Next Messiah", she conjures up the exciting grit that thrilled in Lorretta Lynn's *Van Lear Rose*, but ambitiously applies the medley form to howling blues. What it lacks in lyrical continuity it makes up for in fun. In the pounding, "Jack Killed Mom", tinges of The White Stripes can be heard, and Lewis doesn't pull any punches here, ending the song with wails and vocal acrobatics worthy of Tina Turner's "Proud Mary."

But the album hits some rough patches—the first two songs, "Black Sand" and "Pretty Bird", while sexy, and at times intriguing for their unpredictable melodies, offer little to return to. The album, likewise, ends on an unremarkable note with "Sing a Song", which centers on Lewis's favored "there but for the grace of God, go I" theme, but feels like a too tidy castaway from an early Rilo Kiley excursion. "Carpetbaggers" is a perplexing track, mainly because of the presence of Costello, who swoops in unexpectedly and sounds way more excited to be singing the song than Lewis herself.

Mid-album is a ballad called "Godspeed" in which Lewis unsuccessfully beseeches a friend to leave an abusive relationship. It's probably the most reminiscent of early Rilo Kiley on the album and the chorus repeats the wish: "Godspeed/Keep the lighthouse in sight"—asking the friend to stay true to what drives her forward, what makes her tick. Though I don't find myself missing the Jenny of yesteryear when I hear the song, I can't help but apply this request to Lewis herself as I conclude this review. While I'm glad she's kicking back and having a good time, it seems she is treading in murky waters with *Acid Tongue*, and that she is running the risk, career-wise, of becoming much more a mimic than a musician with her own road to hoe. We expect more of her, because she's shown herself to be not only unique, but capable of surprise. But maybe there's no real cause for concern. In a recent interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Lewis explained, "Everything tends to be a response to the thing that I've written before..." So maybe this should be considered a vacation from herself, and we should remember that through looking outside ourselves we are better prepared to later look within again. Let's hope she does this sooner rather than later.