

# THE FIRST COLLECTION OF CRITICISM BY A LIVING FEMALE ROCK CRITIC JESSICA HOPPER

Annie Clark is too perfect a rock star, but she will do. She has china doll features; she is put-together and glamorous; her manner is refined. She's beautiful, and you can tell she is used to being looked at and watched, as if she has been famous since long before now.

Looking at her when she's offstage, you imagine she should be doing something else, not staying up late with a guitar slung 'round her back and commanding a band into loud swells of her own design. It seems like the wrong job for her hands. She seems more coquettish than rock and roll as she's curled up on the couch backstage before her show in her emerald crepe dress.

When Annie Clark gets onstage as St. Vincent, her image is mere collateral. What fixes your gaze to her is the confidence, the ease, and the naturalness she exudes. You cannot imagine she was meant for anything else but stomping around the stage, coaxing new noise from her guitar, her eyes surveying the sold-out crowd. She solos; they scream.

"I'm not qualified to do anything else," she says, sounding a little concerned—as if she had been browsing Craigslist ads for admin positions while casting about for a post-Berklee-dropout plan B. "I didn't think I needed it. Which sounds insane when I say it aloud."

*The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic will be available in May 2015*



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good songs, or talent (talent usually least of all). One must be a capable player and have an appealing image—and, perhaps, most of all, a clear confidence that one deserves to be in front of an audience. In that regard, Annie Clark is a natural-born rock star; she just happens to be working below the arena radar. She doesn't disagree. "There are plenty of things I am not confident about, but *this* I can do."



**Jessica Hopper's** music criticism has been included in *Best Music Writing* 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010 and 2011. Her first book, *The Girls Guide to Rocking*, was named one of 2009's Notable Books for Young Readers by the American Library Association. She is Senior Editor at Pitchfork and the Editor-in-Chief of *The Pitchfork Review*. She lives in Chicago with her husband and two young sons.

Audiences want confessional bits from rock icons, and

impress people with my wit.”

impressing. Well...maybe. It's no longer about trying of her progress as a songwriter since: "I care less about Allen's work as much as explaining her own. She says favorite films, resulted in Clark rhapsodizing over Woody show off, even. Actor, purportedly a tribute to Clark's It seemed the work of someone eager to impress—to and Nick Cave as her inspirations for its theatricality. made up of vignettes and stories. She cited "Pirate Jenny" what, if anything, was personal. Her debut seems to be *Marry Me* (2007) and *Actor* (2009), it was hard to tell lowers the transmogrification a bit. On her previous two albums, With *Strange Mercy*, Clark moves closer to her audience,

presently all over radio and the blogosphere.

toured, fleshing out didn't exist, and her songs weren't albums had kept them entirely for themselves, she'd never be the case if everyone would buy a copy of her last few she says. Her guess: "Like, 100,000?" Perhaps that would to know exactly how many people have heard my songs," least presents as the anti-diva—"It would be interesting in its first week of release. Still, she plays modest, or at success are ample. For one thing, *Mercy* sold 20,000 copies *Mercy*, is her best and most pop album. The signs of her It's not. It's only reasonable. Clark's third record, *Strange*

expect them from female singer-songwriters. Clark doesn't give them up easily, but *Strange Mercy* is being called "candid." The singer is still cagey, though there is discernibly more of her on here. Was it intentional?

"Was I trying to be candid? Hmm." She munches an apple and considers what to say. "I want to give you answers, but I am also aware this is to be printed in a magazine, so I'm at a bit of an impasse. But I don't want to give you a rote answer, though that rote answer is quite true. There are songs here that are very, actually, candid. But I won't say which those are."

Although she hemmed over making her art more personal, the candor came naturally, which she characterizes as scary. She didn't have as much time or ability to dress up or intellectualize what was coming out of her, so some songs remained as visceral as they were when initially written. "2010 was a rough year. Tough stuff. Rough time. When life was actually hard, I had less time to wring my hands about music. It got to be what it should be, a great thing—a replenishing thing." She adds, apologetically, "Not to use a spa word."

Much has been made of the album closer, "Chloe in the Afternoon," which is somewhere between "Afternoon Delight" and Anaïs Nin, lyrically; it depicts soft sadism

To be a rock star involves more than just charisma, or

to people, nor would I want to be. I take it seriously."

unimpeachably great that I could afford to be an asshole but I have never acted like I was a person who was so I know it's counterintuitive to the whole rock 'n' roll thing. want to have a career for a long time, you need to act right. not a gray train," she says of the music business. "If you with as a teen. "It's not the '80s or the '90s anymore; it's and uncle, the folk duo Tuck & Patti, whom she toured she learned the value of professionalism from her aunt saint, and to her cultural inheritance as a Texan. She says her politeness to her mother, whom she describes as a truly letting it all (or, even, some of it) hang out. She credits The singer's measured control seems to keep her from

dance, I've got all the bases covered, don't worry?"

own that, then to keep being, like, 'Watch me sing and maybe it's more powerful to put that out there. To just with other people or in relationships. I feel that way. And has any kind of self-awareness, they've felt like a fraud—an adult also means feeling like a fraud. I think if anyone *New Yorker*, and it ends with a line about how feeling like she says. "I was reading this Miranda July piece in *The* whether or not you have a modest amount of notoriety," complicated to exist in the world—everyone feels that. Still, Clark says she feels like a fraud much of the time. "It's

with a girl in a hotel room. Is Clark put off by how this one song has resulted in people calling *Strange Mercy* "sexual"? "It's not like I should have called the record '*Get Down to Fuckin*,'" she laughs. "I think people focus on something like that because it's titillating." Given that female performers often have their work sexualized, regardless of whether their work is sexual or not, was she hesitant to make a song so blatantly erotic? "I was more reluctant to write a song about that power/sex/domination trifecta, that murky water where it all swims around together," she says. "That felt more complicated than it being about something sexual."

If there is a theme to be found on *Strange Mercy*, it involves dissolving an identity, or another person's idea of that identity. Clark's modesty is belied by her awareness of and use of her own image—as a beautiful woman, as a gossamer shredder of skill and confidence, as a woman in charge of her career, as a popular singer of pop songs. She knows what she is working with. She understands the machinations of fame, of why her audience likes (and loves) her; she is careful but solicitous enough with the press that pokes at her. "I have one answer for you if the tape recorder is on, and another if it's off," she says when asked about her awareness of her own image. "That's my answer there."