

Fiona Apple's Freak Appeal

Sharon Steel | June 19, 2012 - 11:31 am



Fiona Apple opened one of the biggest shows at South by Southwest this year, at Stubb's. She came on stage dressed in a lacy pink and black tank top, her long, dirty blond hair pulled back in a high ponytail, her voice edged with gravel and smoke. She didn't address her audience much, except to tell us, a few songs in, that we were imaginary. "You're not real," Apple said.

It was an odd thing to say, but no less odd than the hundreds of odd things Apple

has said over the course of her sixteen-year career. That night, she performed, for the first time, a selection of new tracks from her latest record, *The Idler Wheel Is Wiser Than the Driver Of The Screw And Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do* (which is officially released today via Epic). The record is a brilliant continuation of the various emotional atlases Apple began inking on her debut, *Tidal*, which came out in 1996 when she was 19.

Now 34, Apple has released only a total of four albums, with wide spaces between them; this is her first in seven years. It's surprising to look back and realize, once again, that her body of work is really quite small; had she followed a more traditional pattern, she may have released seven or eight discs. But looking over her condensed catalog it becomes clear that Apple has done a rare thing, having managed to evolve immensely as an artist without ever really changing what she does. From *Tidal* to 1999's *When the Pawn...* to 2005's *Extraordinary Machine*, and now, *The Idler Wheel...*, Apple continues to walk back and forth across the same familiar paths. She is attempting to figure out what has happened to her, and revise, and rewrite, and retool her conclusions until she gets them right. It is unclear if she ever will, but watching and listening to her do so is part of what makes her fans' connection to her, and to her music, as weird and as obsessive as she herself has proven herself to be.

Apple has been in and out of the public eye for about half of her life, and she hasn't adapted to her situation and success in the normal ways. When *Tidal* came out, Apple was competing for our attentions at a heated time in pop music: Alanis Morissette told the world about how she went down on Dave Coulier in a movie theater. Christina Aguilera made a claim that what a girl wants is to get her brains fucked out. Tori Amos was channeling Kate Bush, writing intensely personal piano compositions about rape and miscarriage. Apple fit into a strange space. She was lumped in with Amos initially, because she wrote, too, of her rape and the trauma associated with the experience; like Amos, she also played the piano, weaving jazz inflections into her rich pop arrangements. And while there was certainly a crossover between Amos's hardcore fanbase and those who eventually found Apple, the former artist didn't achieve the mainstream

notoriety that Apple did. Apple's brand of weirdness was extremely appealing to me when I discovered her at 15. She made it clear that she was one of us — a teenage girl who was profoundly hurt by the fact that she was a teenage girl. Her eyes, in all the photographs taken of her, were fixed and intense, like other unhappy girls I knew at the time.

Even as critics praised Apple's music, they called her a waif, jailbait, over-sexed, suggested she was a provocateur, and kind of a bitch. My goth friends were pushing bands like Siouxsie And The Banshees on me, but I just wanted to listen to something sad and pretty made by a very perceptive type of badass lady rocker: Apple knew her brand of weird was about to become extremely popular and immediately addressed that fact when she accepted her prize for "Criminal" at the 1997 MTV Video Music Awards, muttering, among other things, "This world is bullshit ... And you shouldn't model your life about what you think that we think is cool and what we're wearing and what we're saying and everything. Go with yourself." It was as if she was insisting that it wasn't necessary to be her kind of strange, simply because she was making it cool — just be strange, or don't, do whatever, just leave her out of it, because she didn't know the answers either and certainly wasn't going to help us find them. That was good enough to cement my fixation with her both as a person and an artist.

As Apple's cult status solidified in the early aughts, her relationship with her label deteriorated. (Her relationships with the men in her life also crumbled; I was disappointed to hear that she broke up with the magician David Blaine; somehow it seemed like they were cut from the same strange cloth.) Apple's fans mobilized for the "Free Fiona" campaign in 2004, begging Epic Records to release the singer-songwriter's finished third album *Extraordinary Machine*, which the label deemed not sufficiently commercial enough to justify the expense of putting it out. (Apple later said that the delay was her own decision; she wished to rerecord the tracks originally produced by Jon Brion, who collaborated with her on *When the Pawn...*) The record finally saw an official release in 2005, replacing the unfinished tracks that had been circulating online for a year, and Apple retreated again.

Her fans missed her. Four years after *Extraordinary Machine* came out, a hardcore Fiona fan posted the following on her [official message board](#), moderated by her label: “I am truly sorry for the bizarre messages I have left on these message boards lately. I have been on a poetry writing binge and I was utilizing Fiona’s spirit to my advantage and disadvantage. Part of being a tortured genius, is dealing with unusual delusions.” Was he talking about Apple’s torture or his own? It’s hard to say what Apple would have said to this guy, but more than likely she’d have shrugged her shoulders and let him carry on. In the meantime, she continued to do things that were both interesting and puzzling, like touring with Nickel Creek in 2007, two years after *Extraordinary Machine* came out.

Everyone is talking about Apple again, now, and asking questions like: Has Fiona Apple grown up? Is her reclusive nature what makes her music so compelling? During this press cycle reporters have quoted her saying things like how she likes to watch snails crawl up and down her arms, because it helps her think. In September 2004 she [told](#) Sasha Frere-Jones of *The New Yorker* that she was thinking of trying to “do something else with her life.” Apple’s music is more moving than ever, and she becomes increasingly fascinating as she reveals more and more of her internal contradictions. And yet I find myself wondering if she is just making this stuff up and spewing it for her own amusement. She tells us everything we really need to know in her songs. She still isn’t sure if she deserves to be loved. She doesn’t know if she can be in a functional relationship. Her ability to feel everything is something that she both welcomes and despises.

In March of 2000, Apple sent a handwritten note to her fansite [Never Is A Promise](#). It was an apology for walking off the stage before finishing a show at Roseland. “So I’m sorry, and I’m not sorry, and I’ll make it all up, and I’ll be really embarrassed, & I’ll kick myself for awhile, and other people might too, but pretty soon it’ll be next week, and then it will be next month, and then there will something new to worry about, and many new things to not worry about.” Apple is done with the apologies now, although she was right about the handwringing cycle that perpetuates itself both in pop music and the best people who make it. There is always something new to make us feel badly about ourselves, and there

is always a new reason to move on and to try again. Apple's world may still be bullshit, but she continues to give it the benefit of the doubt. On the penultimate track on *The Idler Wheel...*, "Anything We Want," she sings: "We try not to let the bastards get us down / We don't worry anymore... after all, look around, it's happening, it's happening now." It's the closest Apple has ever gotten to a love song, and it's a clear sign that there are many more surprises in her yet.

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