

Caitlin Canty's "Neon Streets" expands her sound

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Since 2007's independent release "Green," New York-based songstress Caitlin Canty has been offering up the bittersweet, but rare variety of acoustic folk pop that could make even the most callous barfly both weep and sing along in one three-minute tune. But her latest album, "Neon Streets," released in May 2010, is a first for Canty.

In addition to her masterful beyond-her-years songwriting and vulnerably pure voice, she has an ace up her sleeve on this record; or rather, five aces. As opposed to her prior recorded works, which solely featured Canty on acoustic guitar and vocals, Northampton string-rock quintet provides instrumental accompaniment on each of the seven tracks.

The result of this unique collaboration of the folksy singer-songwriter genre and classical-tinged acoustic rock is exactly what pop music should be like: compact, catchy and uber-melodic songs set against sparse but perfectly paced instrumental accompaniment. Every track is built upon the foundation of Canty's acoustic rhythm guitar and hook-laden vocal work, while Darlingside adds the final touch by way of varying layers of strings and percussion, depending on the song.

Basically an acoustic album in its entirety, "Neon Streets" most immediately endearing property is its sonically organic nature. Despite straddling the genres of folk, pop, country, blues and soft rock, the album never alienates the listener. One could easily lose him or herself in wistful tearjerkers such as "Shore" or "In The Way," and somehow immediately snap into the driving, percussive rhythm of country-blues rocker "Two Hands."

The sublimity of Canty's songs lies within the serene yet painful sincerity that pours out of every last verse. Thematically, the lyrics speak softly, but carry a big stick, so to speak. They are soft-spoken yet hard-hitting, evoking emotionally and physically visceral imagery out of a vulnerable backdrop. But while the subject matter tends to drift on the melancholy and meandering side of things, it never becomes weighed down with pointless and self-pitiful dreariness. Rather, there is a redeeming sense of purpose and carrying on amidst the trials and strife of everyday relationships.

As Canty sings, "If you're a boat without a shore, I will try to be your sun, but I burn too bright or not enough." Leading in the climactic key change of the bridge to "Shore," she highlights the main lyrical theme of Neon Streets; identifying, but not dwelling on, the sometimes deceptively devastating troubles and snags encountered every day, and, at the very least, a glance in the right direction.

The other half of Canty's immense talent as a singer-songwriter is of course her clear-as-day, sultry-as-night vocal stylings. While displaying a decent amount of range on the album, the moods on "Neon Streets" are perfectly set by Canty's frequent usage of her lower register, allowing for a sleepy, ethereal ambiance on most of the tracks. However, even when deep in her chest voice, she manages to make every line as purely melodic as the last. Her voice is unadulterated in that there is no overbearing raspy or twangy quality, but simply a resonance that rings through every track. The perfect dichotomy of her vocals ends up resonating in her songwriting: she has the uncanny ability to sound serenely soft and self-doubting yet immediate and hopeful to a fault at the same exact time. As a result, we are left with gems such as the opening track Halo, perhaps the strongest track on the album, in which Canty, both vocally and lyrically, confronts personal vulnerability with an undeniable independence and self-solidarity.

What makes the album really shine more than most others of its kind is the lush instrumental provided for each song by Darlingside. Unlike most rock quintets, the Noho residents are known for using various relatively eclectic instruments such as cello and mandolin. Tracks such as the aforementioned "Halo" and "Thin Moon" are lent extra depth in the form swelling and building movements of strings the likes of which are only heard in professional movie scores. As a result, Canty's already brilliant ballads and acoustic folk anthems are transformed into a truly atmospheric sonic experience that is paced to a tee.

Furthermore, several Darlingside members lend their voices for harmony vocals on some of the tracks. While getting male and female harmony vocals to sound just right is often a struggle, many of the songs, such as the title track have harmony lines that simply take the melodic choruses to another level. Even more impressive is the ever-so-hard-to-do-just-right element of percussion in mostly acoustic settings. Songs such as "Halo," "Thin Moon" and "Two Hands" are rhythmically driven by the slow and steady beat supplied by Darlingside drummer Sam Kapala, who manages to oversee this process without walking all over the mix, thus preserving the intimate nature of the songs.

Ultimately, "Neon Streets" exceeds as an excellent album of the singer-songwriter genre, because it walks the razor concerning all the aspects that make it so intimately organic for its dimension, and yet powerfully exotic for its genre. Production wise, the beauty in the songs is brought out in a shimmering texture, yet it never feels glossy or plastic. Darlingside's musical accompaniment, while never overbearing, provides a flourishing frame for Canty's creative talent. And last but certainly not least, Canty's songs are equal parts genuine melody and unrelenting emotion. She is endlessly reflective, sans the whining and defeatism, and it's this quality that constitutes the foundation of Neon Streets as an A+ record.