

The Queen of Lillith Phair Returns



by "Reverend" Odysseus Johnson

Photos by Bob Cabella

copies and had the rock world wondering if Ms. Phair had already enjoyed her full 15 minutes of fame.

As her career came to a fork in the road, Phair saw that it was time for a break and took control of her life as only a woman can, becoming a first time mother. In the interim, marriage and motherhood have kept Ms. Phair quite busy and obviously added new perspective in the production of her third release, *whitechocolatespaceegg* (see review). She's no longer the same person that we came to know on her debut and should be prepared to accept her for that.

At 31 years of age, Liz Phair has now had the opportunity to revitalize her career by playing to sold-out shows with *Lillith Fair* on a roster that includes a virtual who's who of the female music world (Sarah McLachlan, Natalie Merchant, Bonnie Raitt, Shawn Colvin and Paula Cole). Plus, by touring with a vocal coach and leaving the night life for the younger gals, Phair has developed a confidence that's aided in overcoming her fear of live performance.

With her interview time at a premium, we were pleased to have an opportunity to meet with Liz during her late October shows at The Vic Theater (see review).

What took so long in getting *whitechocolatespaceegg* out?

"First of all, getting married and having a baby took a couple of years out of my life, and my focus was not music. I was making music the whole time, but I can't pretend that I was making good music. I was absorbed with being pregnant and having the baby the first year. Then it was because I wasn't sure what kind of album I wanted to make. Because I was removed from the industry, I got very esoteric. I had my head in the clouds musically, it wasn't until I got my manager and he pulled my album together and showed me how to finish it."

Are you happy with it?

"Yeah, I was in love with it for a long time, but now I'm getting tired of it. My friends play it. I'll come home and find my husband cleaning up to it, and I find myself being proud of it."

Calling this a homecoming would have been an understatement, but then again how often does Chicago's first daughter of rock'n roll have a chance to make a triumphant return home. With the release of *whitechocolatespaceegg*, Liz Phair appears to have made the transformation to a woman right before our eyes. It was only 1993 when she burst onto our collective conscience as a feminist shock rocker, with marginal guitar and vocal skills, singing "I want to be your blow job queen" on *Exile In Corvilles*. This home recorded album caught the fancy of rock critics and feminists alike with its primal urgency and obvious poke at the male rock establishment. It came out of nowhere to become an unprecedented choice as album of the year in both *Spin Magazine* and *The Village Voice*.

How Phair, the Winnetka-bred, daughter of a prominent north shore physician, with horrific stage fright, became default spokesperson for the frustrated female rockers of generation X is still uncertain and may have been a case of too much too soon. Her sophomore release, *Whip-Smart*, suffered from hurried release, tepid label support and Phair's reluctance to tour. The label sold a marginal 350,000



by Bob Gabella

LIZ PHAIR at the Vic Theatre

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Has motherhood changed your perception of your position as an artist?

"Once I had a baby, I thought, I don't have to do what the hell I'm supposed to do. I'd been working under this idea that I had to be what everyone wanted me to be. An indie-rock chick who says dirty words and came from a good background. I was so concerned with that image during *Whip-Smart* and it took changing my life to say, you can do anything your heart desires."

On your new songs, the lyrics aren't quite as direct and shall we say direct(explicit) as they used to be.

"'Big Tall Man,' the second single off the release was written when I was pregnant. I was reading all these books, because you can't drink coffee, you can't do drugs, you can't do anything. You are so sober it hurts. I got into this intuition book, trying to channel your deeper self and dreams and stuff, 'cause you have all these dreams when you're pregnant. The book said to channel someone and write down all these exercises. So I channelled Scott Litt, my record producer, and read him the poem and he's like, 'there's your song right there.'"

Do you still follow the Chicago scene?

"Not at all. I hear that I've been referred to as Sasquatch. Someone said I'd been seen jogging on the lakefront at some point last year. I love shows, but when when you have no time at night ..."

Has celebrity changed you at all?

"The only time I use my status is in restaurants. I enjoy when I get free desserts or when they seat me. The only way the world of celebrity has affected me is, when I had the most attention, I also had the lowest self-esteem. And I'm not sure why that is. But it seemed like the more scrutiny that came my way, the less sure I was about my own identity. But that doesn't happen anymore."

From the moment she stepped on stage at the Vic, Liz Phair was clearly in command of her audience. On the third night of a triumphant three-engagement return to the town where it all began, she was poised, confident, and clearly delighted by all the attention and acclaim. For good reason, *Whitechocolatespaceegg*, her third full-length album for Matador Records, has been riding a continuous wave since its release in late August, boosted along by the popularity of the first single, 'Polyester Bride,' a charming barstool tour-de-force. Some time in the writing, the release of Phair's third disc has once again placed the national spotlight upon the Chicago music scene.

And only Phair could be so unassuming and hard-edged at the same time. Her music defies attempts to categorize it - at times she is tender and reflective, as in the tune "Uncle Alvarez," from the new album. She mentioned that it was a personal favorite, and managed to wring a soft and gentle passion from the reflective lyric and wistful melody: "There's a portrait of Uncle Alvarez hangin' in the hall, nobody wants to look at it, but Uncle Alvarez sees us all." And yet on "Johnny Feelgood", which she states is "about liberation," she gets right at the heart of rock 'n' roll - meaning screams of independence, pounding drums (courtesy of Rick Menck), and a great wah-wah bridge (thanks to Buddy Judge). Additional band members included Jebin Bruni on keyboards, David Wilder on bass, and Janet Rains on backing vocals.

Phair's voice covers a surprising range, from a flattened, conversational alto to a soaring soprano. Though apparently untrained, it is full of raw emotion and always on the mark. On "Big Tall Man," the follow up to "Polyester Bride," she soars breathlessly into the chorus, "Yes I'm winning, spinning, I feel energy bein' pulled off from all sides, and it feels goooooed."

As she introduced "Flower," from her landmark 1993 debut *Exile In Guyville*, she mentioned to the audience that a lot of them probably knew the words, and encouraged them to sing along. The neo-baroque melody supports a remarkable range of sexual reference, but with less actual profanity than some people think (by this point in time, "blowjob," "fuck" and "dick" hardly phase most of us), and the song is remarkably expressive and rather pretty. Not since Marianne Faithfull let it roar with "Why'd Ya Do It?" nearly twenty years ago has an artist approached a series of expletives with such command and grace. It's this honesty and sincerity which have endeared her fans, and which carried through the entire show.

A hard driving bass line launched "Jealousy," from *Whip-Smart*, with the incessant rhythm of the anthemic lyric punctuated by lines like, "I can't believe you had a life before me, I can't believe you run around free." And from the same album, "Support System," the passionate demand shines clear: "I don't need a support system, put your hand on my heart and listen, what I need is your dedication to last me all the way through."

With the success of her shows at the Vic and elsewhere, Liz Phair is sure to receive adulation and more. With her live performances, she brings humor and warmth to her body of recorded work; honesty is indeed her best policy, and it shows! ITM