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MUSIC



Photo credit: Jenna Wakani

Unchained melody

BY DAVE MORRIS January 13, 2010 21:01

BASIA BULAT

plays Trinity St. Paul's Church (427

Bloor W) with The Luyas on

Saturday, Jan 16. \$20 from

[Ticketmaster](#), Rotate This,

Soundscapes, Horseshoe. Doors 7pm.

I'd never write about someone whose work I didn't enjoy. Sometimes, though, you want to reach up through the newsprint and shake the reader by the shoulders until they're as excited as you are. Of all the things to admire about [Basia Bulat](#) — and there are plenty, not least the wicked wit that keeps threatening to get us chucked out of this quiet café for laughing too hard — I never stop marvelling at her voice.

It took the rise of both punk rock and American Idol for the distinction between “singer” and “diva” to lose all meaning. Today's singers often either model themselves on coiffed country crooners and pop stars indulging in some degree of lung-busting R&B acrobatics, or worse, indie folk who go for breathy mumbling and aggressive caterwauling. On her sophomore album, *Heart Of My Own*, Bulat belts it out even more heartily than on her first album (listen to the thundering “Run,” or the desperate pleas of “Gold Rush”) and renders her intimate passages with a whisper (the gentle but urgent advice of “Sparrow”), but you can't easily categorize where she's coming from. Forget genres and influences; the one overriding quality of Bulat's music is her passion.

“When I was recording the record, I was listening to a lot of gospel music,” the Toronto-based singer says, mentioning singers like Sam Cooke and Odetta while stirring her tea and occasionally glancing past me out the window of Bloor West's Saving Gigi. “You never know when it's going

to come through in your work.” Figuring out what was emerging when she sang, and why, was a process of self-discovery that came to a head during the tour for her Polaris Music Prize–nominated debut, *Oh My Darling*. A set opening for Wintersleep in Newfoundland, the first time she had performed completely solo, proved an important part of the process.

“Playing live completely by myself on a huge stage in front of a lot of people, it made me more sure of myself, and I felt a lot stronger after that. I was, like, ‘people will still like me if I’m just being myself.’ And that was a really powerful thing.”

Like the photo on its front cover, [an ominous shot](#) taken along the highway during a revelatory visit to the Yukon, you can’t tell from listening to *Heart Of My Own* whether the storm is on its way or whether it’s just passed. Bulat and Montreal producer Howard Bilterman do allow a melancholy haze to settle over songs like “Once More, For The Dollhouse,” with its lyrics such as “your dreams are so quiet / don’t you need me anymore?”

She resists nailing her words down to a single definition. “Having grown up a little bit since writing my first songs,” Bulat explains, “the things that interest me the most about songs and about life is that nothing is necessarily as difficult or as easy as it seems. I think everybody gets to feel at some point that measure of happiness, and also I think it’s not good to let yourself go too dark, you have to leave a little bit of light, you have to be cognizant of the fact that there is a crack in everything — that’s how the light gets in, to quote one of my favourite songs.”

Bulat’s musical knowledge is rich and varied, which isn’t surprising coming from an artist whose influences are so well-digested that it’s hard to pin them down. But along with a cover of Cooke’s “Touch The Hem Of His Garment,” she also has been performing [a languid version of The Strokes’ “Someday.”](#) It’s an unexpected choice for someone whose connection to indie-rock has more to do with the label who plucked her from obscurity (venerable UK indie Rough Trade, who handle her in the rest of the world save Canada, where she’s represented by Secret City) than with her original music. Bulat credits her mother with encouraging her and her brother Bobby (who’s also her drummer) to sample a variety of sounds.

“My mom grew up in Poland and a lot of things at that time were controlled. So, I think that she just wanted us to have the freedom to listen to what we wanted. She was the one helping us get tickets to rock shows. You know, calling radio stations for concert tickets, winning contests. She was actually a really cool rock ’n’ roll mom.

“The only way to rebel against that is to become a chartered accountant, and I am no good with numbers.”

This is a good thing, since it can be harder to stay in touch with your passions if you have a day job balancing someone else’s books. Bulat gives a nod to Rilke’s *Letters To A Young Poet* — with its injunction to “ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write?” — as something that helped crystallize her desire to follow her passion, which permeates every note of the new album.

“On tour you’re holding onto what makes you feel like yourself. And that’s why I ended up picking that title, Heart of My Own. I wrote [the song of the same name] when I was first starting to tour, when I was starting on this new journey. And I do think I have the right road, the right path, for me.”

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