

R E C O R D I N G S  
I N R E V I E W



T I M O T H Y Y O U N G

Criticism is an artful business. The writer plays the game of couching observations about a work of art, a play, film, book, piece of music, a restaurant, in a context of values: cultural, intellectual, historical, even moral. But all the reader really wants to know is: Is it any good? The tug-of-war between a neutral evaluation of the thing and a gut-level reaction (delight? disappointment? disgust?) provides the wondrous tension in reviews like this.

Allow me to set aside two factors that give shape to critical reviews, the evasion of the first-person pronoun and the standard intellectualization of the critic's point of view, so that I may praise two musicians – one of them a long-time love who has consistently brought me joy and the other a relatively new crush who, at a tender age, shows talent worth celebrating.

The first object of devotion is Tracey Thorn, one of the great pop voices of the past forty years. As one-half of the group Everything but the Girl (EBTG), as a solo artist, and as a collaborator with an array of musicians, she has built a career that is at the same time mainstream and idiosyncratic. From her first two albums as a member of the Marine Girls in the early 1980s to her most recent decade's worth of solo work, she has forged an aesthetic that pays

close attention to many modes of popular music, but which leads her to make work that stands fulfillingly on its own.

Her young forays into post-punk playfulness while attending Hull University have been documented in her memoir, *Bedsit Disco Queen: How I Grew Up and Tried to Be a Pop Star* (2013), one of the really enjoyable rock-and-roll autobiographies that – while short on manic tales of self-destruction – touches on subjects about which many of us are curious: What did it feel like to become famous? What do you do when you’re grocery shopping and your children suddenly realize that’s *your* voice coming out of the loudspeakers?

Thorn’s story is also largely the story of Ben Watt, her musical and life partner, with whom she formed Everything but the Girl as a one-off project to record a Cole Porter song – a truly “punk” thing to do – in 1982. That single, a completely unironic cover of “Night and Day,” led to an album and, eventually, a massive career. Their debut LP, *Eden*, from 1984, showed the strengths of Thorn as a writer and vocalist and Watt as a multi-instrumentalist and arranger. The crucial fact of that album was how, comprised of ballads, jazz-inflected tunes, and laments, it held its own with the dizzy array of pop, New Wave, and power ballads that filled the airwaves in the mid-1980s. Though they are often categorized with acts such as Sade and the Style Council, EBTG were determined to carve their own path, despite sometimes wavering critical response. Their 1986 album, *Baby, the Stars Shine Bright*, was an unapologetic tribute to the Bacharach 1960s, expertly crafted and unlike anything else produced by a pair of twenty-somethings that year. Several smart, never less than entertaining and often surprising albums followed. Then, in 1995, EBTG blew up with a worldwide hit, “Missing.” They built on that success until 2000, when they went on hiatus, a status that remains in effect today.

Tracey Thorn’s reemergence as a solo artist began in 2005 as a project with the house music duo Tiefschwarz: the single “Damage.” It was no surprise that Thorn’s voice was brought out of the silence through a collaboration. Some of her most interesting work can be heard in partnerships with innovative musicians. The most important of these is her work with Massive Attack on their 1994 album, *Protection*. Thorn composed the title song with the band, creating one of the signature sounds of the 1990s, “I’ll

stand in front of you / I'll take the force of the blow / Protection.” But it was the other original song by Thorn on the record, “Better Things,” that includes some of the best lines she has ever written about relationships: “You say the magic’s gone / Well I’m not a magician / You say the spark is gone / Well, get an electrician.” Those lines, somewhat plain on the printed page, surge with cool contempt when sung by Thorn.

Surpassing her talents as a songwriter, though, is her voice — that voice — my personal nonobjective correlative. Sweet — pleasant — beautiful. Can those adjectives signify anything for the reader who hasn’t heard it? For the sake of a metaphor, I will state that her voice is as fresh and as sensual as a crushed coriander leaf or as memorable as Anita O’Day’s or Bernadette Peters’. That gets us somewhere, by providing points of reference, but a voice can be as particular as a flavor. It will send some listeners into ecstasy, while others cringe. (I recall playing Iris Dement’s wonderful debut album years ago for a friend, who sat politely for a few songs and then yelled, “Stop! No more!”)

As the saying goes, Thorn is not classically trained, and so a formal appraisal of her talents may find her lacking in comparison with other vocalists. But the quality of her voice — its smoothness is often singled out along with its mellow timbre — is consistent and enduring, which cannot be said about many of her pop music peers. Her partner Ben Watt refers to “the Voice of Thorn” as an independent, self-willed entity. Clear your mind and listen to “Fascination,” from EBTG’s debut album: “There must be so much, I know / that you cannot forget / I mustn’t wish your life began / The day we met” — a structured meditation on new love that, in itself, was wise for this young pair of kids in 1984. The song allows the Voice of Thorn an uncluttered stage — no studio tricks or amplification. (Thorn explored the nature of vocal performance in her second book, *Naked at the Albert Hall: The Inside Story of Singing* [2015], which dissects the nature of performing and, in particular, stage fright.)

Tracey Thorn performs particularly deft acts of skill when singing songs by other songwriters. The 1992 EBTG covers album, *Acoustic*, includes versions of songs by Mickey and Sylvia, “Love Is Strange,” and Cyndi Lauper’s “Time After Time,” both handled gracefully. A series of EPs that followed that album feature what

may be the high spots of EBTG's career. *The Only Living Boy in New York* features Neil Young's "Birds" and Thorn's own "Horses in the Room": "Once I saw a dry dock / And the rustling hulks of ships and trawlers / With a wind that could cut steel / It was so cold" — creating a scene miles away from the Top 40 charts. One of the best EBTG tracks is on the extended single version of "Roller-coaster," a cover of "Lights of Te Touan," originally done by the Irish band The Stars of Heaven.

Tracey Thorn's albums in what could be called Phase 2 of her solo work were all written and recorded to her specifications. While they may sound tangential to popular sounds of the past decade, the songs they contain intentionally avoid aping the sonics expected by major labels. "It's All True," the single from her "comeback" album, *Out of the Woods* (2007), is the closest thing to a pop single she's done recently. The best tracks happen to be in remixed form: Ada's treatment of "Grand Canyon" and Beyond the Wizard's Sleeve's playful edit of "Raise the Roof."

Just when we thought that our Tracey had reclaimed her place as a perfect purveyor of the alternative popular song, she produced *Love and Its Opposite* in 2010. The lead single for that softer, introspective collection, "Oh, the Divorces!" comes off as a cabaret song, sweetly following a waltz rhythm played on the piano: "He was a charmer, / I wish him bad karma / Oh I know we shouldn't take sides / And that one is his fault / And that one is her fault / No one gets out without paying the ride."

An even better collection is *Tinsel and Lights*, her 2012 Christmas album. This combination of covers and original songs bears little resemblance to the ten thousand holiday albums that compete for Muzak programming space two months a year. True, there is a version of Joni Mitchell's "River," but, as arranged for voice and brass band, it is exalted. Similarly, she reclaims "Hard Candy Christmas" for the canon. But the best piece is the original title track, "Tinsel and Lights," which should be added to the great big Christmas songbook.

The good news for the neophyte Thorn listener is that there is an album that compiles the best of her work. *Solo: Songs and Collaborations, 1982–2015* (Caroline International) pulls together thirty-four tracks from over three decades of her career before and after Everything but the Girl. Among the highlights are "The

Paris Match,” a guest vocal with the Style Council from 1983, “By Piccadilly Station I Sat Down and Wept,” from 2007, and “Without Me” with Tevo Howard from 2010. It’s an admirable collection, though her entire output is well worth seeking out.

Music is dependent on time – not just tempos and a time signature, but when in history we encounter a work. We can hear an aria from an open window on a warm evening; be introduced to the depths of Mahler while someone we love is holding our hand; go crazy over a frivolous bit of Baltic disco blather because it was being played at just the right moment at a nightclub we stumbled into with our friends while on vacation in a funny little Spanish town. Aesthetics are as conditional and contextual as anything else in our minds. Moments fit in when there is a shape that matches the contours of the experience – to say nothing of the chemicals and synapses and all that good stuff that cement songs into our brains, allying them to memories of places and people and feelings.

So there is Tracey Thorn, in my mind – in college, in the middle of fallings in love and break-ups, in transitions and challenges – because she released songs in reliable intervals, with EBTG, with collaborators, or as a solo act. It may sound too easy to say that she was there at the right time. If I had been born earlier or later, it would have been Maria Callas or Blossom Dearie or Carmen MacRae or Madonna or Lady Gaga (all of them fine performers), but I was assigned the girl from Hatfield who sustained a presence with her music and voice and incredibly touching writing.

Tracey Thorn isn’t an instigator or contrarian. She writes and sings about quotidian affairs – love, the making of a household, travel, memories of people and cities. Her work is more analogous to the poetry of a writer like Vita Sackville-West than to that of Elizabeth Bishop. She observes, and reports with the goal of artful clarity. Should I claim her as a muse? Certainly. Tracey Thorn’s songs have inspired me to contemplate and to write. It says something that her memoir was published by Virago, an imprint chiefly responsible for reviving and promoting women’s voices over the past forty years. *Bedsit Disco Queen* might be classified as a “pop music memoir,” but I consider it inspirational literature – direct, humble, and funny. (Her partner Ben Watt’s literary bona fides shouldn’t be overlooked either. He published the stunning

*Patient* in 1997 and the touching story of his parents' final years, *Romany and Tom*, in 2014.)

Thorn writes a regular column for *The New Statesman* on topics ranging from book prizes to politics, and she is reportedly working on a third book, a memoir of her early life in suburbia. It's a wonderful thing when a talented writer expands her range of expressive outlets . . . as long as she keeps singing – at least a few songs every couple of years or so. We need her voice. I need her voice.

Speaking of muses, I must also invest Conor O'Brien in that role. This young fellow, who performs as Villagers (a man and a band, at the same time), breathes the same rarified air as Tracey Thorn. Villagers has been a success story (at least in Ireland and the United Kingdom and a few other countries not allergic to intelligent songwriting) since the first LP, *Becoming a Jackal*, was released in 2010. O'Brien had left a verging on successful energetic pop group, The Immediate, to work on his first record as Villagers. What emerged was confident, mature, and complex – a debut record featuring unlikely themes, such as riding on a bus that breaks down while carrying “Twenty Seven Strangers” and the title song, which imagined release through dark transformation:

And each time they found fresh meat to chew  
 I would turn away and return to you  
 You would offer me your unmade bed  
 Feed me till I'm fed, read me till I'm read.

O'Brien played all the instruments for the record as well as creating the album's artwork. He had his project and controlled its direction and execution. The album was nominated for a Mercury Prize, and the title song was given an Ivor Novello Award for songwriting. *{Awayland}*, the second Villagers album, was released in 2015. While continuing to show his talent for fine lyric craft, O'Brien added layers of synthesized sounds to the record, diluting the effect of his songwriting. While impressive for its thoughtfulness and range of songs – “Nothing Arrived,” a paean to existential nihilism, “My dear sweet nothing, / let's start anew / From here on in it's / just me and you,” and “My Lighthouse,”

which contradicts the former's sense of resignation by sighting a point of light in the darkness – they are weighed down by the extraneous sound effects. Overall, though it is energetic and without a doubt sincere, the album doesn't have the impact of the Villagers' debut.

Things changed in 2015 with the release of *Darling Arithmetic*, a mainly acoustic effort recorded by O'Brien in his home studio. This record belongs to the genre *genius-in-retrospection* – a narrow category that includes such masterpieces as Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska*, and Bon Iver's *For Emma, Forever Ago*. Upon the first couple of listenings, the record presents itself as a work that one might expect from a near thirty-year-old assessing his life. Take "Courage": "Took a little time to get where I wanted / It took a little time to get free," followed by "Everything I Have Is Yours": "I am just a man tippin' on the wire / Tightrope walking fool balanced on desire." By the time you reach "Hot Scary Summer": "Remember kissing on the cobblestones / In the heat of the night / Then all the pretty young homophobes / Looking out for a fight," the picture comes into tighter focus. The record is a testament of self-assessment. It would be too limiting to call it an act of coming out or confirmation or even affirmation. O'Brien is singing about his life. We just need to pay closer attention. *Darling Arithmetic* received the Ivor Novello prize for best album in 2016. It got little attention in the United States, but deserves a reappraisal along the lines of *Astral Weeks* or *Spirit of Eden*. While the record is calmer than either of those two landmarks, O'Brien at his best can match Van Morrison and Mark Hollis as a songwriter.

A fourth release by Villagers in late 2016, *Where Have You Been All My Life?* put O'Brien and band in a studio to rework songs from his catalogue. The session simplifies the songs from {*Awayland*}, stripping the distracting electronic flourishes from the original versions; songs from *Darling Arithmetic*, conversely, are fleshed out with a full band, providing a welcome flush of energy. Something else happens in the process of redoing these songs. O'Brien is not an older singer returning to his glory days to make an "unplugged" album. He is reaching back only six years, but revisiting his words and chords with a heightened sense of conviction in his work.

The songs on the album sound as though they are being re-discovered, sung with deeper commitment. “The Waves,” from *{Awayland}*, is more like the grand gesture it was intended to be – building, arching, crashing. While he may not have intended to channel Virginia Woolf’s novel, his words are an analogue to her experimental, observational work:

When the waves  
 Cover the coastal plains  
 The tents and the cars and the trains  
 And the trace of honeybee cemeteries  
 Of well insulated dignitaries.

“That Day,” first heard on the debut album, is presented in a calmer arrangement – lacking the insistent percussion of the original, but infused with a mature understanding. The standout song is “Memoir,” a B-side from *{Awayland}* that was first recorded by Charlotte Gainsbourg in an odd quavery version. O’Brien reclaims the song as his own with a clear strong voice. On initial appraisal, the song is deceptively light, but it reveals itself to be a perspective on commitment as an act of surrender:

So I give myself to strangers like I gave myself to you  
 But the tenderness I felt has been replaced by something  
     new  
 And in the orgy I can vaguely hear the outline of your call  
 Well I might as well be anyone’s at all.

When a songwriter’s work can bear resetting and revision, when songs can show growth, this is proof of significance more profound than can be found in the average pop tune. It’s no wonder that O’Brien adds one well-chosen cover to the 2016 collection: “Wichita Lineman,” Jimmy Webb’s beautifully simple work from 1968 that has proven to be one of the greatest three-minute songs ever written.

Conor O’Brien may be as good a writer as Tracey Thorn. Thorn has created a library of stories, moods, and confessions over her decades-long career. It seems proper to refer to her as a writer, first and foremost – one who exercised her gifts in the medium of pop music for much of her early life and then refocused her talent on more traditional literary modes. She is one of the great musical

talents of the past forty years. Conor O'Brien displays the same musical and literary qualities – enjoying his time onstage, sharing his well-crafted songs about subjects ranging from lost love to loneliness to stray dogs. He may well transition into a novelist or cultural commentator of great talent. They are both brilliant singers. But that's just my opinion.