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BACK ISSUES
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Sleater-Kinney March On To *One Beat*

By Neal Alpert

It is tempting to try to draw a corollary between the absence of Sleater-Kinney and the sliding of the U.S. into war and chaos. Since the band went on a voluntary hiatus two years ago, the presidential electoral crisis took place, the terrorist attacks occurred, the government clamped down on civil liberties - and for a long time, the best the music industry could muster was the chest-thumping, empty-headed, patriotic jingoism of Toby Keith and Lee Greenwood. What happened to intelligent

discourse in rock music? Where had the protest song of the past gone? In short, where was Sleater-Kinney when we needed them?

Almost as if by design, Sleater-Kinney re-emerged from their hiatus, jumping back onto the stage and into the public forum, asking the questions that needed to be asked, and, with its sixth album *One Beat*, making some of their most passionate music yet. The Portland, Oregon-based band has carried on in the proud tradition of bands like the Clash, mixing politics, social conscience and hip-shaking swagger in an unbeatable combination of scorching guitar riffs, dynamic rhythms and intelligent lyrics. Releasing their material through indie label Kill Rock Stars since the mid-'90s, Sleater-Kinney has built a loyal following, has been heaped with critical (if not commercial) acclaim and has even been called the greatest rock band in the world by influential music critic Greil Marcus. The trio - consisting of guitarists/singers Carrie Brownstein, 28, and Corin Tucker, 29, and drummer/singer Janet Weiss, 37 - has come back just when the music world needs a shot in the arm.

Every Sleater-Kinney record manages to touch on the issues of the day. On 2000's *All Hands on the Bad One*, "#1 Must Have" focused on the degrading treatment of women in the media, while other songs addressed the rape of girls at rock concerts and issues that the band members have witnessed in everyday life. On *One Beat*, it was inevitable that the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington would be discussed. "Yeah, I think it would've been really difficult to just sort of ignore what happened," Weiss tells me over the phone from Portland. Two tracks in particular directly address the attacks. One of those, "Far Away," features militaristic guitar and drum sounds, Tucker's trademark shrieking and an ominous vibe. "As far as 'Far Away' goes," Weiss says, "I heard Corin say she really wanted to write a song about September 11 from the perspective of a housewife, which is what she was doing at the time with her baby. She thought that was something that wasn't going to get said very often."

The other song, "Combat Rock," addresses the mood of the country in the months following the attacks, a time when the government restricted civil liberties. Weiss explains: "There are many points in history - pretty much *all* points in American history - where you could write a song like that. It's just, things were getting so unbearable, and the government was getting so much publicity that the sort of evil nature of government was getting crammed down our throats."

Weiss states that the nature of the band, operating on the fringes, is one of the reasons why Sleater-Kinney are free to write such material. "We don't consider ourselves part of the mainstream. It gets a little bit irritating when 'the savior of rock 'n' roll' has to be a guy singing about nothing, basically," she says. "That that is looked up to as the ideal can be sort of frustrating. I just try to look elsewhere. There are bands like Fugazi and X, bands who've been writing political music for years, and will probably never make it into the mainstream like Eminem, but I'm not sure the mainstream is really ready right now for anything except sort of blind patriotism."

Being one of the few bands to tackle such tough topics has earned Sleater-Kinney comparisons to the Clash, which could be a weighty mantle to carry. However, Weiss says that what critics say is put into perspective and is never carried into the studio. "Do people compare us to the Clash? They are one of my all-time favorite bands, so I would never complain about that," she

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- ▶ [CD Reviews Canyon, Shuggie, Squires of the Subterranean, Mike Shupp](#)
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- ▶ [Features: Sleater-Kinney](#) March On to *One Beat*... *and more.*

says, laughing.

Weiss is also quick to point out that there is far more to Sleater-Kinney than just the serious, political material, saying that their repertoire features plenty of good, thrashing rock songs. Referring to their last album, she says that "we were basically enjoying playing together so much, and we needed a few songs that weren't so heavy, like 'You're No Rock 'n' Roll Fun' and 'Ballad of a Ladyman.' We're always interested in a little ass shaking."

One Beat also features some new sounds for Sleater-Kinney, such as the horns on "Step Aside," a rollicking, Motown-meets-punk rocker, and the organ on "Prisstina" and "Oh." The drummer says the band members were all ready to experiment. "Obviously, we speak this certain language between the instruments, primarily two guitars and drums, and that limits us in certain ways. But we try not to rehash the same ideas. It's really challenging. This record was laborious to write. We didn't just put down the first thing that we thought of and go with that. We really pored over the songs and tried to make them as rich as possible."

Weiss says that getting back on the road has been "really good, really fun." After each show, the band goes out into the crowd and mingles with their fans, which Weiss says is "something I've been doing since I've been playing rock shows. I like getting to talk to the kids." Despite the excitement over playing the new songs, Weiss says that the band will continue to compose new material over the next few months. "We're not the kind of band that can go on tour for two years playing the same songs. We'd kill each other."

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