



New Songs From an Old Soul

DIANE BIRCH DOESN'T COMPLAIN WHEN listeners hear echoes of the great 1970s singer/songwriters on her debut album, *Bible Belt*. "I love being compared to that stuff, because it's some of the best music out there," she says. "I consider myself lucky if my music reminds people of that era."

How did the young pianist/vocalist tap so convincingly into a sound that flourished before she was born? "I'm just an old soul," says Birch. "I've always been very nostalgic and obsessed with certain past eras. I love artists like Burt Bacharach, Elton John, the Carpenters, Carole King, Laura Nyro, and Carly Simon. But the truth is, I didn't listen to that music as a kid. In fact, it was only after people started making those comparisons that I started checking it out."

Diane was reared on a restricted musical diet: Her father, a conservative Seventh Day Adventist minister, filled the house with classical music and opera. Another influence was music Diane heard growing up in church, first in Zimbabwe, and later in the States. "It wasn't a gospel church," she explains, "but it was very traditional. There was a choir and organ, and lots of harmonies. I remember always hearing my mom harmonizing the hymns when I'd stand next to her in church."

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Diane commenced piano lessons at age seven. "I started out with the Suzuki method, then moved on to traditional classical," she recalls. "But while I have total respect for the classical genre, I found it too limiting, so I started making up my own versions of the classical pieces, much to my teacher's disgust. I'd say, 'I thought of another movement!' and she'd be like, 'Uh, it doesn't really work like that.'"

Birch never lost that youthful self-confidence. Once she was old enough, she moved to Los Angeles and started playing hotel and restaurant gigs. Eventually she landed a deal with Steve Greenberg's S-Curve records, for which she recorded her disarmingly mature and self-assured debut.

"I had a lot of liberty for a first-time artist," she says. "Which was great, because I'm a real control freak, and these songs are my babies. Everything was already written when we went into the studio, and I knew I didn't want to add a lot of 'production.' Basically, I just wanted to re-record the demos, but with really great players." Birch got her wish—while the songs seldom stray from her original concepts, they feature performances by members of the Roots, the Meters, Galactic, and the Patti Smith Group.

Though Birch sometimes writes on guitar, most of her music originates at the piano. "I have real love affairs with pianos," she says. "Each one has a unique soul that inspires different things. But it has to be a real piano—it's hard for me to write on an electronic keyboard, because I don't feel any soul within the instrument. I need to be inspired by the instrument itself."

The word "inspiration" appears frequently when Birch talks songwriting. "I just can't look at songwriting as a job," she says. "I have to feel inspired. I'm very 'in the moment' when I write, and I try not to think too much. I don't even think much about my lyrics—I just tap into that stream-of-consciousness where things start coming out. I don't always know what I'm saying at the time, but when I go back to look at it later, it all make sense to me."

At home, Diane writes on a Yamaha U1 upright piano. "I love grand pianos too," she says, "though uprights have that great rock-and-roll sound. But I could never fit a grand into my apartment in New York. Anyway, it's a great piano to write on, and it has a great sound. I've always loved the sound of Yamaha pianos. The first piano I ever bought was a Yamaha. I really appreciate Yamaha supporting me, and I'm proud to be associated with them."

Birch has already composed some material for her second album, but she says she's forcing herself not to proceed too quickly. "I'm trying not to get too far ahead of myself, because I want to be present in *this* album. I think the next record will take on a lot more colors than this album has. I'd like to explore more rhythmic aspects, maybe play around with some different instruments. But right now, I'm having fun on my first headlining tour. It's an incredible first-time experience for me: hearing people actually singing along to my songs!"

