

Moved by Movies

by Greg Burk

Jennifer Nash was seized by music. The spirit just pointed a finger: You — singer, songwriter. No other explanation seems to make sense.



An argument for casting against type
(Photo by Gregory Bojorquez)

Obvious chanteuse? No. Valley girl, you'd think, the San Diego-raised version. (She lives in Sherman Oaks.) When Nash talks, the words spill out like jellybeans — every fifth one is *like*, and *ohmigods* and *weirds* are in regular rotation. She has zero pretensions. Her parents are businessfolk. She's tall enough to pick pears without a ladder. She makes good money as a movie-music editor. Can this be an artist?

Yes, and then some. Nash has just unleashed her first album, named after herself, on (honest) Fluffy Puppy Records. Half of it is brilliant, and the rest is at least deep. A first hearing can knock up realizations: This is how songs can be, without most of the pop filters and preconceptions. Nash is naive enough to revel in head-sticking melodies and bold-faced drama, yet sophisticated enough to try unusual sounds, structures and subjects just because the road feels right.

Her voice is unusual, too. Nasal, vibrato-touched. Penetrating. Full of white soul without being bathetic. Not distant, but slightly out of reach. It's her voice, nobody else's. And she says it's gained range recently since she stopped smoking weed every day.

Nash has amazing musicians around her at all times — partly because they're attracted to her talent, and partly because she can sort of afford to pay them. One pianist on her record is David Troy Francis, whose harmonic somersaults and blues feel lend fantastical ruffles to the jabbing, staggering "Pockets." Another pianist, on record and live, is Billy Malpede, a versatile film composer and arranger. Still another pianist is Nash herself — "It always came naturally. I didn't take lessons." She also looks and sounds good playing accordion.

And her bassist and backup singer is usually the very remarkable John Avila, known for his work with Oingo Boingo.

Oingo what? The Boingo tinge is undetectable in Nash's music, although she describes the '80s nuevo wavo outfit as "my maiden influence." A friend dragged her as a teen to one of the notorious Boingo Halloween shows, and bulbs started lighting up in her head. The transition to songwriterhood took a few years, as she considered careers in bioengineering and film scoring: "I was just being stupid. I didn't know that you could work as a musician without having a college degree in music."

Then there were developments. It seems Nash had always responded strangely to music that connected with her.

"I would feel scared and frustrated, and cry, and feel confused. I would listen to [Oingo Boingo leader] Danny Elfman's film scores, and go to his concerts, and listen to his records, and I would just freak out." While she's remembering, she's looking at the floor, actually wringing her hands and vibrating. "I would start writing pages and pages in my journals. And I would smoke packs and packs of cigarettes. I didn't know what to do about it for years. I thought that there was something wrong. I just kept writing and writing, and then I finally came to the conclusion that it was like someone talking to me, and I was mute, like I couldn't talk. And I thought, Well, I have to respond. And I went home and started playing the piano, and I started making up *all* this shit! And I was like, 'Yay, I'm a musician!'"

Through the persistency she inherited from her salesman dad, Nash landed an early job as Elfman's film-scoring assistant. And she thinks that the structures of movie music have had a big impact on her own writing. She explains how a shift in time signature is often required in order to squeeze scraps of melody into segments of film narrative; she began to think unconsciously in the same terms. Nash's wonderfully mysterious "Lay It On," for instance, mostly surges in a schoonerish 3/4 — a meter she likes, saying her songwriting intersects with some stylings of the Mexican pop singer/accordionist Julieta Venegas — but the song's instrumental bridge moves to 5/4. It's the kind of thing she wasn't even aware of till people started to write up her charts. And her rhythms have their own twists, even when she's in 4/4: Her hookiest tune, "Down on the Highway," accomplishes a magical transformation of hesitation into momentum.

Cinema sneaks into Nash's lyrics, too. You're right, the Gypsy-ish "Angelina" is about Jolie — "I had a huge crush on her." And the loopily arpeggiated, nightmarish "Falling" is an image/reality meditation on John Cusack, for whom Nash did sound work on *High Fidelity*. Visualizations are omnipresent; she's allusive, poetic, borderline

psychedelic.

That is, her art is the near opposite of the self she presents to the everyday world. When Nash performs, though, the abstract and the corporeal combine well. She's all shoulders and closely waving fingers, eyes often closed, as if imagining both her music and its effect. Avila and Malpede balance her; drummer Svend Lerche supplies loose-limbed support; cellist Guenevere Measham draws straight lines through the middle with her string parts and vocal harmonies. People listen closely and applaud a lot.

Avila has known Nash for 10 years, since before she started writing songs. One day she asked him if he wanted to hear some of the stuff she was working on; when he did, he was rather stunned. "She has a unique way of thinking, and she's a hard worker," he says. He describes her first show, at Rocco nearly two years ago: "She could hardly look at the audience, but I felt some kind of buzz. At her second and third gigs, people were coming back, and new ones were showing up." Asked to capsule her appeal, Avila struggles, then finds the word: "Charm. She radiates huge amounts of charm, and shyness is a part of that."

You get the feeling it's something she'll never lose.

Jennifer Nash's quintet appears at the tiny and undoubtedly crowded Hotel Café on Friday, February 6; her trio plays the Derby on Wednesday, February 11. Nash's CD is available only at her shows and at www.cdbaby.com.