

# Entertainment

## Jane Siberry: A Speckless success

by Don Teplyske

Eighteen months ago, few people west of Toronto had heard of Jane Siberry. Few had been exposed to the refreshing juxtaposition of rock and poetry contained within the grooves of her second album, *No Borders Here*.

However, as quickly as the hype machine could be warmed up, the critical praise of this former waitress and folkie from T.O. began to pile up. Suddenly, soft spoken reserved Jane Siberry was thrust into the spotlight once occupied by the Dylans, Mitchells and Cohens.

Presently, her current album *The Speckless Sky*, is showing signs of surpassing the success of *No Borders Here*. Normally, an artist may be concerned about following a critical and commercial favourite.

"I work to make myself happy with each album, and if I'm disappointed, then I worry," said Siberry. "I feel as good about *Speckless Sky* as *No Borders* anyway."

Her latest album is not only stunning musically, its packaging is also of the highest calibre.

"It's not extravagant, really," Siberry declares, slightly offended by my suggestion that it is. "For the booklet (which comes with the record), I thought I had too many lyrics for an inner sleeve. For *No Borders Here*, they had to shrink them down so much (to fit on a sleeve) people couldn't read them."

For a recording artist whose real strength lies in the message conveyed in her lyrics, I found it surprising that she had such difficulty discussing her writing. However, we did discuss two of the standouts from *The Speckless Sky*, "The Empty City" and "Seven Steps to the Wall".

"It ("The Empty City") is a poignant song - neither positive or negative (of big cities) but leaning to the positive aspects," Siberry explains. "It's sort of a sad song - a feeling you get in a city created by hundreds and hundreds of people when hundreds and hundreds are missing. You feel their presence more clearly because of the absence."

Siberry opens up a bit when discussing "Seven Steps to the Wall", perhaps the album's strongest song.

"(The song is) about all sorts of things," Siberry says. "The last part ('there/all my life/where there's white/i have words/ so i write/what i hear/...perfect white/...with no words') is about writing, about me. Other parts are about this man in prison, solitary confinement."

Siberry continues, "It's partially inspired by a book of Arthur Kesler's *Darkness Noon*. He's a political prisoner who's about to be executed. The guy in the cell next to his says, 'Don't turn around when you walk down the hall. When they go to shoot you, don't turn around-be proud-don't turn around.'"

Leaving music for awhile, I was curious to find out what Siberry surrounds herself with at home. What her apartment looks like, for instance.

"I rent a very cheap flat in a house. It's a great little apartment with a mish-mash of furniture. We have a friend who's a photographer so we have some of his photos on the walls," Siberry describes. "It's pretty



Jane Siberry: her strength lies in the message conveyed in her lyrics

Photo Tim Hellum

bare, we haven't lived there long enough to get it together."

I never did discover who was included in "we".

The meagre existence of many artists has not escaped Jane Siberry. Financial comforts are only now appearing.

"I'm just starting to pay back some debts that I've built up over the years," Siberry laughs. "Even this winter I had to take advances on my Visa to pay my rent, and that was after a successful album," she concludes.

Citing these types of financial hardships, many people call for increased government funding for the arts. Siberry sees an alternative possibility.

"I don't believe in a freeloader mentality, but I think there may be a middle ground where it would benefit people to contribute to the arts. A patron of the arts idea," Siberry explains.

Jane Siberry also has strong words for those who are currently pushing for warning labels and rating systems for records. And, while it's doubtful that her albums would ever come under fire, this doesn't diminish her disdain for the idea.

"I think the whole thing is ridiculous," Siberry declares. "And I hate that kind of interference from prudes. If parents want to keep their children from something like that, then they can. But it's up to the individual parent, the kid and how they were brought up."

In the booklet that accompanies *The Speckless Sky*, a statement is made concerning home taping. Siberry considers taping to be a problem.

"Definitely, (home taping) makes it a bit more difficult," Siberry explains. "I think a lot of people tape my records. People tell me they are so enthusiastic-"I sent six copies to

my friends". They don't realize that for people in my position, who are trying to please a record company, who are trying to earn their keep, that we lose a lot of record sales."

Before our very brief interview concluded, Jane Siberry discussed another of the songs of *The Speckless Sky*. "Map of the World (Part II)" is, in title, a continuation of a song from *No Borders Here*. However, its title is the only semblance to the original song.

"That's the beauty of it - it's two different maps," Siberry explains. "In Part I, there are three different maps, and when they are all put together, there's a fourth. A collage - just the way things shift."

Siberry is gaining a reputation as a tough interview. Not that she is rude and ungrateful - she is actually just the opposite. Siberry would just like her music to speak for her, instead of having to speak for her music.

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