

tracy bonham

blink the brightest

With her new ***blink the brightest*** (Zoë/Rounder, June 21) album, Tracy Bonham cements her status in the first rank of contemporary singer-songwriters. Recorded in L.A., where she's lived part-time since 2003 (she splits time between the West Coast and Brooklyn), Bonham's third album is musically sophisticated, whip-smart, teddy-bear tender and utterly genuine.

Its centerpiece is her remarkable vocal instrument, which ranges from a sonorous alto to a soaring soprano—the opening track, “Something Beautiful,” for example, begins with the former and climaxes with the latter in a glorious chorus. What's more, this multitalented young woman plays most of the instruments on the album—violin, piano, a variety of other keyboards, guitar and vibes. She's a classically trained violinist and pianist and an untrained guitarist, but she finds that both extremes have their place in her music. “Guitar-wise I have a certain style that I can't seem to get any guitar player to mimic, and it's because they're good and I'm bad,” she says with a self-deprecating laugh. “And I don't mind. There's a way I want to hear it, so I just do it myself.”

On ***blink the brightest***, Bonham makes full use of a palate containing far more colors than you'll find on those of most writer/artists. “This record comes from the music that I really love, incorporating classical influences, rock and pop, sometimes an R&B or soul flavor,” she says. There's no equivocation in her assessment of it, either. “It's my best work yet,” she asserts. She uses these varied stylistic elements to create consistently inventive arrangements that transcend genre conventions and are bound only by the needs of a particular song.

And what songs they are. “Whether You Fall,” a first-take solo performance with Bonham accompanying herself on piano, sounds like a modern-day standard. “Wilting Flower” is pure art song, perched somewhere between Joni Mitchell and Emily Dickinson. The final verse of “Shine,” which celebrates the human spirit in characteristically unconventional fashion, is a stunner: “When we're eighty years old and you can't see a thing,” she sings, “you must never forget how much light you bring.” The fact that “D.U.M.B.O. Sun” [an acronym for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass, a Brooklyn neighborhood] and “Did I Sleep Through It All?” are inventively autobiographical doesn't limit their relatability one iota. The coda of the latter—a string quartet and piano vignette composed, arranged and played entirely by Bonham—powerfully underscores the song's resonance. “That song is about looking back at your life and the mistakes you made, and realizing that you were sleepwalking,” she explains, “I've been married and divorced, and I look back and go, ‘What was I doing? Was that me?’ It's sort of hard to accept those parts of yourself, but now it's about coming into consciousness—living my life and being present for it.”

Again and again on the album, Bonham manages to pull off perhaps the most challenging task facing any songwriter: coming up with uncommon love songs. “I like the craft of finding something new,” she acknowledges. “All Thumbs” contains a metaphor that anyone who's been in a dysfunctional relationship will readily relate to: “Love is a two-headed beast clumsy and stupid / ready to crush everything.” It's also, she points out, “a bottle in Tijuana / it

puts up a good fight / willing to lose everything." "Eyes" gets inside the thrilling first moments of a relationship—a to-die-for pure pop hook reinforcing the sense of seemingly unlimited possibility—while "And the World Has the Nerve to Keep Turning" just as incisively describes love's debris in the wake of its bitter end:

the kid inside your head
keeps asking why the
world has the nerve to keep turning?
and why the sun has the balls to keep burning?
and why the moon has the gall to keep staring?
and why your heart can not stop caring stop caring stop caring?

Bonham co-produced the bulk of the album with Greg Collins (U2, No Doubt, Matchbox 20); Joey Waronker, who has drummed for R.E.M. and Beck, co-produced four tracks. Along with Bonham, the players include drummers Waronker and Butch (eels), bassists Sebastian Steinberg (Soul Coughing, Neil Finn) and Davey Farragher (Elvis Costello, Sheryl Crow), guitarists Joe Gore (Tom Waits, P.J. Harvey) and Dave Levita (Alanis Morissette, Jewel) and keyboard player Mitchell Froom (Paul McCartney, Los Lobos).

Unlike Bonham's first two albums, which were underwritten by Island, her former label, Bonham paid the recording costs of **blink the brightest** herself with money she'd made from selling copies of her EPs while touring with the Blue Man Group in 2003 (she previously appeared on the group's album, **The Complex**). Those organic circumstances fit the nature of this album, which is the first one she's truly made for herself.

"I think this record was blessed, in a way," she says. "All this inner work I've been doing with my personal life kind of transferred over into the recording process too. I surrounded myself with better people, people who cared and my friends and some others who just did it because they liked the songs. And I was able to do it myself—I co-produced and executive-produced this thing. Nobody was telling me what to do, and it just felt good."

A native of Eugene, Oregon, Bonham began singing at age 5 and playing the violin at 9. She started writing songs in 1994 after moving to Boston and proved to be a quick study: her 1996 major label debut, *The Burdens of Being Upright*, went gold, spawning the hit single "Mother Mother," and leading to a pair of Grammy nominations. The follow-up, *Down Here*, was released in 2000 and since that time she's continued her career, playing her music around the country—as well as growing as an artist and person.

When asked about the maturation of her songwriting, so dramatically in evidence throughout **blink the brightest**, Bonham replies, "I think I stopped trying to prove so much to people. I went inward and realized that being honest and not being so veiled and cryptic can actually touch more people. In the past, I wanted to be deep, but then I went too far and was over-thinking everything. Now I just write from the heart."

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