
Crosswinds Weekly
November 22-30, 2000.

Band: Lois Maffeo & Brendan Canty
Album: The Union Themes
Label: Kill Rock Stars
Catalog: KRS 356
Release Date: March 14, 2000

I was surprised when I put in this CD. From Kill Rock Stars, a punk and spoken word label, I had expected something more aggressive. Something...punk. Which The Union Themes seems, at first listen, not to be. It's sunny folk music played on an acoustic guitar and sung with Lois Maffeo's clear, strong, melodic voice. I know she likes punk—she once DJ'd a punk radio show and co-founded a band named Courtney Love.

But, on further reflection, I realized that the punk ethic is really about going your own way. Doing your thing no matter what the rest of the world thinks about it. Suddenly this sweet-sounding, summery album makes sense. Lois Maffeo put out four folk-rock albums under the name Lois on Olympia, Washington's K label, and The Union Themes continues her exploration of folk stylings and intimate lyrics. Her rebellion consists of saying what she believes and hoping her words impact others, the ultimate acts of subversion.

Her co-conspirator in these ten songs of reunion and loss is Brendan Canty, Fugazi's drummer, who she's worked with (and toured with) before.

This is the kind of music that can be played at a campfire or a coffee shop. It's the musical equivalent of late afternoon, when the sun is still bright, but starting to go down, and you realize the long day is fading. Each song is calming and warm, but in the brief pauses between tracks, you're left with an aftertaste of melancholy.

The Union Themes, it can be said, sounds like life. It sounds real. The founder of Kill Rock Stars wrote, "I named my record label Kill Rock Stars because I'm afraid of rock stars and the industry/process/system they represent that is killing kids and killing music and killing our culture and killing me." These words demand a lot for a label to live up to, or against, and in this CD Kill Rock stars has found its weapon.

This CD is mature. By which I mean, Lois Maffeo sounds like someone who's played and sung for a while (which she has), and doesn't need to resort to tricks or shouts to get her point across. She knows what she wants to say, and how it needs to be said, and she does it with stunning and simple honesty. The result is a collection of straightforward and balanced songs that sound as though they could not be presented better any other way. It just goes to show that some of life's most profound moments aren't the most melodramatic.

Subtlety is a dwindling art form in the music business (KISS provides a good example here), but these ten songs, linked by discussions of relationships, ranging from jazzy soul ("Being Blind") to country-reminiscent twang ("How I Came to Know"), provide an excellent demonstration of how it's done.

The Union Themes gets better with age, every listen sinking you deeper into new nuances. It imprints its melodies on the listener. Although complaining about things is more fun, it really does deserve a review this good.