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Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: May 28, 2010 12:29 PM

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Exclusive: Tracey Thorn on Her Brilliant New Album

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Who but **Tracey Thorn** (of the beloved UK duo Everything But The Girl) would deliver a first single from her new album that could be sad, observant and yet make you laugh? That's exactly what she does with the song "Oh, The Divorces." Anyone who has reached their 40s and suddenly realized that the wave of weddings they attended in their 20s is now being followed by a wave of separations will smile ruefully at the first lines: "Who's next? Who's next?"

Then comes the killer observation of a familiar moment delivered in her trademark voice of quiet compassion: "the afternoon handover by the swings."

You're immediately struck by what a commonplace

event it is - one ex-spouse passing the kids along to another -- and yet how piercingly sad it is and the fact that Thorn is the first to capture that.

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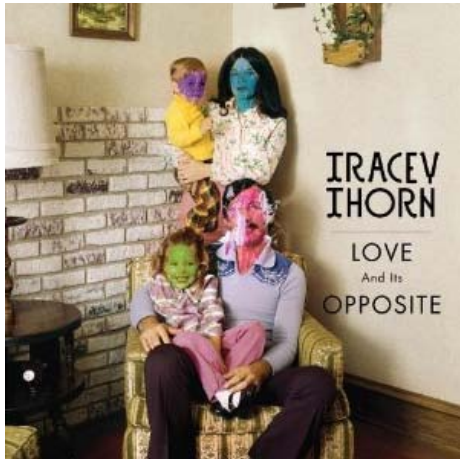
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That's just the first salvo in what may well be the best solo album of her career, *Love and Its Opposites*, out now. In the UK, where Thorn's profile is higher, the reviews have been stellar. The Word calls it "adult pop in the best sense: reflective, compassionate, drily witty," Mojo gives it four stars and the Guardian's music podcast raves, "Absolutely fantastic. A really, really brilliant record." Here in the US, positive reviews have started appearing in the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times, which called it "a pathos-filled electro-folk stunner." You can [listen to streaming audio of the album here](#).



Just don't cross your fingers hoping to hear some of these songs in concert. With three children to raise, Thorn doesn't plan to hit the road. (The last time she and Watt toured as EBTG and took the kids with them, Thorn felt like she was doing both roles -- mother and pop star -- poorly.) Helpful fans sometimes earnestly tell her that you can in fact get quite good child care these days, as if she might not be aware of the options.

"I'm not hear tearing my hair out wishing I could go on tour," jokes Thorn, who realizes that in this digital day and age it may not be the wisest move, commercially. "It's the completely wrong choice, isn't it? Everyone keeps saying to me, the recording industry is completely collapsing. But at least the live world is where it's happening!"

Mind you, while fans are always thrilled to hear about new music from Thorn and her partner in music and life Ben Watt - tour or no tour -- they were a tad freaked out when Thorn airily told people on MySpace that the topic dominating the new solo record was "divorce and heartbreak." Given the confessional tone of her music, fans feared the worst for the duo which had been together ever since meeting in college.

"Immediately, everyone kind of leapt up, 'Oh my God, you've gotten divorced!'" laughs Thorn, talking via Skype from her home in London. "When in fact at that point, we'd only been married about two months."

Yes, the curious fact was that after 28 years of being together, Thorn and Watt decided to tie the knot...and then she celebrated the event by releasing an album suffused with sadness on their record label. Suddenly ironic tunes included "Long White Dress," an exhumation of Thorn's long-held suspicions for what is supposed to be every little girl's most special day.

"That song is about the aspects of weddings and marriages that I always dreaded," says Thorn, who admits she kept her distrust of the event to herself growing up, presumably under the impression that it was hard enough on her respectable parents that she wanted to punk out and was going to gigs in high school. (Ben's family was much more bohemian.)

"The whole sort of complete, romantic, fantasy - you've got to dress up in a meringue, that sort of stuff. It did always fill me with horror as a child. I thought, 'My God, you really have to do that? Aghhh. Is there any way around it?'"

Later she adds, "I was a bridesmaid twice as a girl and I remember just hating it and hating the dress you had to wear. But lots of my friends dreamed of being bridesmaids and a lot of women friends now tell me growing up they longed for their wedding day and used to dream of being the girl in the long white dress. That really does just seem alien to me."

So it's no surprise that when Thorn and Watt did the deed last year, it was as low-key as possible.

"There's still a side of weddings that really, really puts me off. I think I wrote about it on that song and almost got it out of my system. It allowed me to step back and think, you really don't have to do any of it at all. You can absolutely do it completely on your own terms. We did have the tiniest, most un-Long White Dress wedding imaginable.

Did they even have a wedding song, something to dance to?

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"No music," says Thorn. "No poetry. You have to fill in a form when you book the room - all the things you want to have. Do you want a reading from this poem or do you want to play any music? We just sort of ticked the 'no' box through everything.

"When we arrived, the woman who was the registrar or whatever they call them, she took us aside and said, 'Are you really sure you want to do this? It's going to be over in like a minute, a minute and a half.' We went, 'Yep! That's the one we want. Just do it! Okay. Just say the words. We'll sign here.' So that's what we did. I don't mean to imply it was an unemotional, hard-hearted event. It was actually really really sweet and very moving and it lasted about a minute. It was great."

Thorn has always been bold. Even as a teenager she was striving for a mature, adult perspective on the world and never felt constrained to write about typical pop obsessions. That's one reason why **Everything But The Girl** have endured. From their debut album -- called *Eden* in the US -- to classics like *Idlewild*, they were always exploring sophisticated pop with touches of jazz and writing songs about very un-cool topics like a woman yearning for children ("Apron Strings") and wistful tunes of friendship ("The Road").

They were sidetracked in the early 90s by a mysterious, life-threatening illness that tackled Watt and almost killed him. (It's detailed very well in **his absorbing memoir**, *Patient*.)

Quite unexpectedly, they roared back bigger than ever with their massive worldwide hit "Missing," sending the band deliriously into the arms of electronica and dance music, which paired beautifully with their intelligent lyrics to provide the substance dance music so often lacks. It was a new creative and commercial lease on life that lasted for years. Then Thorn took off time to raise three children, Watt began a record label and a substantial career as a dj and so EBTG has been on hiatus as they enjoyed new phases in their life.

Thorn dipped her toes back into recording with her solo album *Out Of The Woods* three years ago and admits the prospect of taking a long weekend off and heading to Berlin on her own was a real treat when it came time to record again. (I mention reading recently that someone said that for a parent being alone "is like pornography" and she laughed knowingly.)

"I started this record very much in a sense of having enjoyed doing the last one," says Thorn. "I really enjoyed just tinkering about in the studio. That's the bit I loved. I said to Ewan [Pearson, producer], I don't want to book a studio: I don't want to make a big statement that we're starting a new album. Can I just come out and hang out for a few days and maybe start working on some songs? As much as anything, it was so great to be in a different city for three days, away from the kids, no responsibilities. I just walked the streets for half the day and then went and sat in Ewan's little demo studio and just started recording some songs I'd already written, thinking they would be demos. And quite a lot of what got recorded on that first little trip there we've ended up keeping."

But surely Thorn and Watt have a recording studio in their home?

"Yeah but that's not the point," she laughs. "The point is to get away. You're right; yes. All sorts of things could be done at home. But it is often a question of putting yourself somewhere else and you do immediately feel a bit different. Especially when you're a mom, a full-time mom and a lot of your life is very much to do with looking after other people's needs and being what they need you to be, if you're still inside that environment it's quite hard to think of yourself outside that box and think of yourself as an independent person. So I had to remove myself physically."

Here's Thorn actually in that home studio performing another track off her new album.



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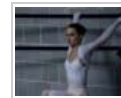
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In preparing for an interview, a good reporter used to read all the previous articles they could get their hands on. Now you're just as likely to be combing through the artist's blog or reading their tweets. **Reading Thorn's tweets**, you know immediately you're going to be speaking with someone who is smart and has a delicious sense of humor. Indeed, in the last few months, fans could read Thorn dealing with a gay frog ensconced in her backyard, watch as her children cajole Thorn (a "pushover," she admits) in a few hours to switch from "considering" a hamster to actually driving to the store and purchasing one, to seeing an offhand comment about biscuits getting her name-checked in the Times of London newspaper.

"What I like about all those Facebook, MySpace, Twitter things," says Thorn, "is that you suddenly identify those people who are otherwise just numbers on a spreadsheet from the record company as individual people who have a reason why they like a particular song. When you just get sent your sales figures and it says this album sold 400,000 copies or something, it's meaningless. But then five individual people actually communicating with you directly telling you exactly what they liked about a certain lyric or when they heard a song has more impact. The numbers can be tiny but it's still more meaningful.

"We're really lucky to have those ways of communicating directly now. For years and years, when we were making music there was no means at all of communicating with people. Everything was done through intermediaries whether it was the record company or journalists or whatever. Your voice was constantly being mediated and being spoken in a slightly different tone of voice maybe than the one you would actually like to use. I find it easier now. I know a lot of people don't enjoy it and feel it takes the mystery away and the fans will get too close and know everything about you. I don't really mind that. I don't think I need to be too mysterious, really."

Of course, fans have always felt they knew Thorn and Watt from the music they created, which is why people posted in panic on hearing "divorce" dominated the new record. That voice of Thorn's is so beguiling and confidential and the lyrics are so specific and true, that one just assumes it is drawn from their lives. Not quite.

"On most records it's been half the stuff, I can say, right, that's really directly from me," says Thorn. "And then maybe half of it has been a story more from observation. But I often put things in the first person because I think it makes songs seem more immediate.

"'Singles Bar' is sung ostensibly by me but it's not really me," she says, referring to a tune on the new album about an older woman desperately trying to feel comfortable while looking for love. "But I just think it's a more vivid way of writing a song. To be honest, there's often a bit more of a sense of distance between me and the actual person in the song than perhaps people sometimes think there is. I don't think it's important that it's confessional in the sense that it's you laying your own life bare. I think it's just important that it's interesting really, that you're making observations that strike people as being realistic and true."



So Thorn has opened up herself artistically and reaches out more than ever to fans via social networking. People feel a real kinship with an artist when, for many years, they knew only the minimum about her private life. But of course it's not necessary to bare your soul in order to make a genuine connection with people. And some things are better left private anyway.

"I've never really believed the idea that it's the press's fault if your story is all over the papers," says Thorn. "It's really not that difficult to keep your head down if that's genuinely what you want to do. It's just a choice you make. And it does mean you have to keep your head down in various areas and it means you won't be as famous. It's as simple as that. It's a choice. But it's one as a grown-up you can make. You can choose not to be that famous. You can choose to keep lots of your life to yourself. You have to know where the front door is and when to shut it."

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Her version of the Style Council's "Paris Match" remains one of my favorite songs from my dissolute youth. Hearing her in such fine form in her late 40s makes me feel a little younger.

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Absolutely. As I'm sure you know, that's just one of her many outside collaborations, including her marvelous work with Massive Attack on "Protection."

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