



JOANNA NEWSOM

Since *The Milk-Eyed Mender* was released, two and a half years have passed, more or less. And...

Joanna Newsom spent a lot of time moving around — first touring much of the United States and then Europe, over and over and over. It was nice sometimes. There was an amazing tour of Japan, Australia, and New Zealand (with Smog) and a beautiful trip in Iceland where a couple of shows were played. Along the road, there were lots of festivals to play as well: Bonaroo, Sasquatch, Green Man, Roskilde, ATP, and the Patti Smith-curated Meltdown Festival...maybe even a few others. Joanna played a benefit concert with her hero Neil Young too. She blew everyone away at all these shows, by the way.

In moments not involving the harp, the singing and the audiences around the world, there were other travels — like a car trip through Portugal with her flute-playing friend Ariella (one of the few people Joanna's played with so far onstage; though shows of the near future will hopefully involve many other players) and a few weeks in Costa Rica on a family kayaking vacation. At some point in there, Joanna moved from San Francisco back to the hills of northern California.

The eleven or so months preceding the recording of *Ys* were spent like this (take it, Jo!):

Two of the songs were already written by the time I came up with the plan to set them to orchestral accompaniment. Three more were written from the ground up with the intention to orchestrate them in mind. All are intended to be playable with or without accompaniment, and I've already played them solo in a live context quite a bit. Vocals and harp parts were recorded first, with Steve Albini. The main reason for starting this way was that Van Dyke wanted to base his arrangements on a final version of the songs, not "scratch" versions, given the fact that I tend to improvise and vary each performance slightly. Van Dyke felt that every nuance of the performance would inform his arrangements. A happy byproduct of this necessary order of events was that the vocals and harp were recorded in a climate of quietness, ease, and spontaneity, allowing for the retention of a sense of intimacy and immediacy. The goal I had in mind was for the harp and vocals to feel like they were developing unawares of the presence of the orchestra, unburdened by any of the self-consciousness/formality/austerity/stiltedness this might provoke...as if the orchestra is hanging in a hallucinatory shimmer around the more substantial harp and voice.

Albini mic'd the harp in an insane and never-before-done manner! I'd love to describe it further but I don't want to give away his ideas, in case he wants to do it again sometime.

Van Dyke was then given the vocal and harp tracks, along with a pile of notes from me (mostly non-technical, i.e. describing moods, colors, images, scenes and concepts I wanted to project or produce in each song, line-by-line, bar-by-bar). In the months that followed, he'd send me various drafts of the arrangements, and I'd send him back notes about what worked for me and what didn't. Everything he sent, from day one, was amazing and lovely; the struggle, in editing and refining the drafts, mostly cen-

tered on trying to come up with arrangements that reflected Van Dyke's singular compositional voice and ideas, but still resonated completely with me and felt seamlessly bound to my own music. This took many drafts!

Eventually I went to LA to work directly with him in his studio, combing through the arrangements bar-by-bar, till both of us felt happy with the result, and both felt a sense of ownership and closeness to it. All the arrangement work took approximately eight months. The orchestral recording sessions took place in the spring, over three days, with an additional day at the end for vocal harmonies, percussion, and Van Dyke's accordion. Van Dyke conducted the orchestra. He is a great conductor.

The engineer for these sessions was Tim Boyle, who did an amazing job. The recording was done in analog (as was, of course, the session with Steve); many of the younger orchestral musicians had never recorded to tape before...and the older players hadn't recorded to tape for years (this is in LA, remember). There was much ado and freaking-out at the sound of tape rewinding.

Mixing was done in New York City by Jim O'Rourke. He ruled so much. I'm a huge admirer of all his work and I couldn't think of anybody else who matches his combination of symphonic/ classical literacy (in both arrangement and engineering terms) with experimentalism and analog-fluency. He made the record sound the way I wanted it to sound. He edited quite a bit, and tweaked and carved it, allowing the songs to be at the center of the record, above and beyond all the instrumental influences. Just about every track on the whole album is in constant flux, and Jim was able to achieve the hallucinatory orchestral wash-effect I wanted, with parts rising up and dropping in and out almost weightlessly, disappearing without much notice and reappearing as if they'd been there the whole time. ...and that's just about how it happened!

...thank you, Ms. Newsom. As the record was being conceived, written, recorded and completed, more requests for shows and more shows and albums and personal appearances and interviews and correspondence of all kinds were pouring in. What little could be afforded to do was done and the rest was put off until the album was done.

The release date for Ys is November 14, 2006. Joanna will tour America in October, November and December and consider what to do with the rest of the world afterwards.