

Loud and Proud

I Play My Bass Loud, Gina Birch (Third Man Records)

Despite the veneer of studio production at work here, this is basically a joyful, ramshackle album that clearly evidences its postpunk roots in The Raincoats, the band which Gina Birch co-founded back in the day. Her first truly solo album, *I Play My Bass Loud* has been many years in the making, but is well worth the wait.

The album opens with the bouncy, dubby title track (which also has an ace video), which is an addictive proclamation of intent: it's Birch's album, she plays bass, and here it is. But as the song echoes away into the distance, we get the first of several more intimate, seemingly confessional songs, the softly spoken 'And Then It Happened', which acts as a kind of introduction to the riff monster 'Wish I Was You'. Reminiscent of Patti Smith, it features killer guitar from Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, some addictive bleeps and moments of dub chaos as it roars along.

'Big Mouth' is a song about gossip, about passing information on and then regretting it, about secrets and upset. It features a dialogue between straight and vocoder vocals over a burbling, complex cauldron of rhythm and melody. It's both hurt and tongue-in-cheek, whilst the next song, 'Pussy Riot', is far too declamatory for its own good. Grooving over a more straightforward reggae backbeat, it assumes the voice of the Russian rebels and speaks for them, over a clatter of percussion and sequencers.

'I Am Rage' is surprisingly gentle, an almost plaintive song, with heavy effects and guitars lurking in the distance way behind the vocals, whilst 'I Will Never Wear Stilletos' is, I assume, a somewhat tongue-in-cheek feminist manifesto resisting patriarchal dress codes and expectations. Birch, of course, prefers brothel creepers or Doc Martens. And who wouldn't?

'Dance Like a Demon' is a more straightforward rocker, with disruptive echoes and electronics, that glides and sashays over a straightforward drum beat, whilst 'Digging Down' has a massive backbeat that ebbs and flows behind seriously processed vocals. 'Feminist Song', which apparently kicked off the project, is Birch planting her flag. 'When people ask if I am a feminist I say Why the hell wouldn't I be?' Despite some movement towards equality, Birch is still angry, a warrior, fighter and believer, and an artist. But she is no cliché rebel, she inhabits and moves through the real world.

The closing song, 'Let's Go Crazy', reasserts that 'you have to be free', and seems a fair assessment of this album. Birch is doing what she wants, expressing herself as she wishes (she paints and makes videos as well as music), making the music she wants at her own pace. If that music doesn't sound quite as anarchic today, that's fine, there are still enough surprises, twists and turns here to entertain, provoke and bemuse. And, of course, some great loud bass.

Rupert Loydell

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