

Keep on Moving: What Lies Between: Courtney Swain's latest heads for high seas

Courtney Swain - *Between Blood and Ocean*

Courtney Swain, the singer and keyboardist for Boston's experimental rock group Bent Knee, has taken the next step in an impressive solo career with her latest full-length, *Between Blood and Ocean*. For the type of genre pigeonholing journalists love, *Between Blood and Ocean* is a formidable task. Citing influences like Moses Sumney's *Aromanticism* and Dirty Projectors' self-titled for the album, Swain explores everything but the kitchen sink.

She started piano in kindergarten and started singing as a teen while growing up in Japan, moving to the States to attend Berklee College of Music, where she met the members of Bent Knee. The album is at times equal parts Gary Newman, St. Vincent and King Crimson. The impressionistic balladry of "Helka" and "Sand Angels" creates a landscape of fractured beauty, which clashes with "White Trees" and its off-kilter auto-tune. But it's Swain's intention to fly directly into the sun, her soaring vocals bringing together her music school pedigree and noisier more experimental elements.

Between Blood and

Ocean is more of a full band sound than her previous solo releases, which were produced during an RPM (Record Production Month) challenge where artists produce an entire record in a single month. The tour de force "Silver Needle of Pine" is like a cross between Regina Spektor and Radiohead, underlined by virtuosic drumming. "Black Sheep" has undeniable jazz influences, and "I'd Kill" brings in industrial noise elements à la Nine Inch Nails.

BB&O's

vivid soundscapes and highbrow musicality have obvious appeal for musicians, but could be good for the adventurous laymen. The catchy "Don't Look At Me" could've been a late-era WBRU single along the lines of Metric.

I caught up with

Courtney as she was about to embark on a tour with Bent Knee that includes The Met in Pawtucket this Thursday.

Jake Bissaro: Bent Knee has a lot of clout in the Boston area; why did you choose to bill yourself as a PVD artist? Any impressions of the music scene here?

Courtney Swain: I live in East Providence, and I really like Rhode Island and its quirks! I've been here for almost five years, and it's been a great chapter of my life. I honestly haven't spent much time going to shows here, but my impression is that there seems like a lot of interest for local and national, but not so much regional acts.

JB: People have noted the mix of genres in your music. Is that a purposeful thing, like, "I have a few softer ones, better throw in this heavy tune?"

CS: It really isn't. If I could write in one specific genre, I think I probably would, but I just go wherever the song takes me. A lot of the people I play with studied music in the academic environment, and you end up learning a whole bunch of styles in a condensed period of time. In a negative sense, I think you end up losing a "home base" identity, but it's super fun and interesting not to be limited by any style.

JB: How did this batch of songs come about?

CS: I usually write in big spurts — I could never just sit consistently in front of a deadline. For this album, I wrote all the songs during a residency awarded by the Turkey Land Cove Foundation. I lived on Martha's Vineyard for two weeks, and did pretty much nothing but create. It was a great experience.

JB: This album is way more of a full band sound than your previous releases, right?

CS: Definitely. Albums I made in the RPM challenge were a great experience, but there's a limit to what you can do. In a way, this feels like my first album. I was able to take time to put it together and involve other people in the process.

JB: How did you find working at Big Nice Studio?

CS: It was amazing. Bent Knee also spent a ton of time there last year, and the guys that run it are like family. Brad [Krieger]'s big thing is to make the process about feeling comfortable and having fun. It's not like "Oh, check out this awesome microphone I just bought."

JB: Any tracks in particular that mean a lot?

CS: "Snowflakes" and "Sand Angels" are a few of my favorites, both of which I wrote toward the tail end of the residency and are both about loving yourself and self-care. I was kind of intimidated by being by myself for two whole weeks, but I ended up loving it. The songs are about looking within yourself and bringing together the person we are and the person we want to be.

Listen to *Between Blood and Ocean* here: courtneyswain.bandcamp.com/album/between-blood-and-ocean

You can catch Courtney on tour with bent knee at The Met on Thu, Jun 20 with Thank You Scientist.

R.i.P iTunes

You may have heard that Apple recently announced the phasing out of its iTunes platform. Nobody seemed particularly sad to see it go, but I think it officially marks the passing on of the buy (or download)-to-own music format in favor of the streaming models.

I'll always fondly remember those halcyon days before an algorithm told us what to listen to. Getting those iTunes gift cards, figuring out what to buy, then spending hours lovingly curating my digital library, combining the iTunes tracks with digital CD rips and illegal torrent downloads. Only to have it all wiped completely obsolete by streaming services **sigh.**

Surprisingly, this new world order doesn't mean that the bloated, corporate music labels are in trouble; it appears these streaming models are actually reviving them. According

to Pitchfork, for every \$100 of consumer spending on CDs or vinyl, a label's profit is \$8; for every \$100 spent on iTunes downloads, it's \$9; and for every \$100 spent on streaming, a label's profit is \$13. As you might expect, this means an ever-shrinking piece of the pie is going to the artists. Experts also find that the streaming culture has been really good for artists at the top, but works to further squeeze out the mid and lower-tier musician.

So is there a solution? I admit to bending to the indisputable convenience of Spotify Premium, but getting out to shows, letting a touring act crash on your floor or buying the leftover XL t-shirt from your buddy's band always helps, if only a little bit.