

# WAITING ON A FRIEND: Liz Phair and the Weight of Expectations

by Tom Roznowski

Liz Phair is spending the summer of 2008 consulting her own legend. She is booked for a tour of major American cities where she will perform all 18 songs from her landmark 1993 album "Exile In Guyville." For many fans attending these sold-out shows, this set list provides the only remaining reason to see Liz these days. The persona she created on "Exile In Guyville" – that of an articulate, adventurous, unapologetic woman – was as complex as it was timely. Liz Phair has been trying to step around that long shadow ever since.

It's frequently been said about Bob Dylan that if he never existed, it would have been necessary for the culture to invent him. Actually, you could apply this statement to any pop icon. Chaplin, Elvis, Picasso...the perspective of time inevitably makes revolutionary innovations seem almost logical. This is not to deny the obvious talent involved in creating either the work or the persona, but it does place the breakthrough itself in a broader context. Time waits for no man. History finds whoever she needs.

Elvis Presley's sudden emergence will always be associated with the prescient genius of Sam Phillips, who first signed him to Sun Records. Phillips had already recorded edgy blues sessions with Howlin Wolf and early black rockers like Jackie Brenston and Ike Turner back in 1951. One day, he mused to his secretary Marion Keisker, "If I could only find a white man who had the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars." Sam was absolutely right, more or less. His later fortune would actually come from a timely investment in a small Memphis motel chain called

Holiday Inn. It was Colonel Tom Parker who made the big money off Elvis.

By the mid 1950s, rock 'n roll had come to symbolize the ascendancy of the youth culture and the sexual release of the Atomic Age.

Something completely unexpected was just waiting to happen. With Elvis, it did. And then it just kept on happening. The British invasion, Punk, New Wave. In the meantime, sex got adventurous, then confrontational, then cynical – which eventually led to the sudden emer-

gence of one of America's finer singer-songwriters: Liz Phair.

I own every one of Liz Phair's albums and I eagerly await the release of her next one later this year. I've spent a fair amount of time

over the years arguing with the disaffected who still think her best album was her first one. I've shared my favorite cuts with musician friends who love rock n roll but just don't get Liz. I remain undeterred. I guess you could say I'm a fan.

In the absence of a juicy article in *Tiger Beat*, I've pieced together what facts and innuendo I can. I've heard she's the daughter of career academics from Evanston, Illinois. Apparently, she was married to a film editor. Had a son by him. Divorced him. Wrote compellingly about all of these experiences in various songs that I like. As someone who's comfortable with whatever illusion I've constructed, I don't really desire much more information or, Lord knows, a formal introduction. I prefer my pop icons either distant or deceased. That said, I hope Liz Phair records till she's 80.

But aging with grace in public is a monumental chal-

lenge. Fan expectations, while never actually stated, tend to calcify as time passes. After the raw and quirky "Exile In Guyville", Liz Phair started to use large label advances to work in better studios with more session time, more outside musicians, and more producers. One could call the results uneven, but I prefer to think of them as unpredictable. That's a trait I value in any artist.

The problem for women is that men get away more easily with being unpredictable in their art, just like they do in their everyday lives. And so, Bob Dylan can go from folk to electric to Christian. Picasso can move from the Blue Period to the Rose Period to Cubism. They stray, we follow. Meanwhile, Liz Phair signs with a major label, ups her production values, hires Matrix to gloss her rhythm tracks on a few cuts, and suddenly the quality of mercy becomes strained.

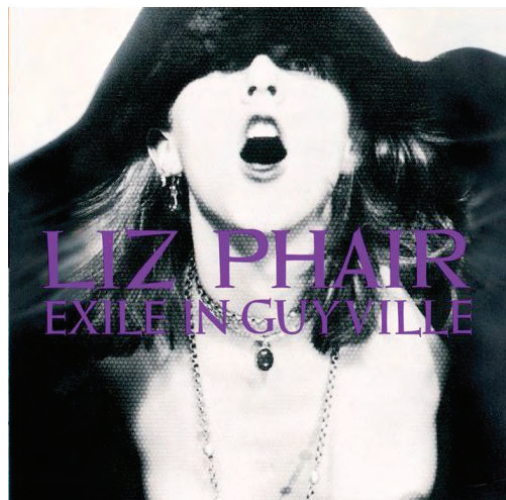
So over five albums in 15 years, let me tell you why I like Liz Phair. For one thing, she writes songs off electric guitar as impressively as Tom Petty or Chrissie Hynde. It's about how the chorus comes off the verse. It's about how the bridge finally breaks the levee. It's about writing a beat with words that are so insistent,



The artist in her element

It's about how the chorus comes off the verse. It's about how the bridge finally breaks the levee. It's about writing a beat with words that are so insistent, any band you've assembled bounces it back true. Liz Phair knows all of this. Keith Richards and Mick Jagger may know better than anybody else, but then they also know Charlie Watts.

any band you've assembled bounces it back true. Liz Phair knows all of this. Keith Richards and Mick Jagger may know better than anybody else, but then they also know Charlie Watts.



Cover for *Exile In Guyville*

My personal favorites among her rockers: "Polyester Bride", "Count On My Love", "Love/Hate", and "6'1". Each of these songs is a three to four minute gem perfectly designed

for heavy radio rotation and Friday night Top 40 countdowns. Since these media relics no longer influence the way pop music is heard or delivered, Liz Phair's A-sides and juke-box hits travel on an alternate frequency. As with a strong AM signal late at night, static-free reception just tends to find some people.

I should also mention the expansive beauty of her ballads. Great thoughts on

everything from the weight of past generations ("Uncle Alvarez") to the weight of passion without love ("Canary"). "Little Digger" from her self-titled album

is a heartfelt effort to explain the unexplainable. When her young son encounters her new lover the morning after, Mom is left to grapple with her guilt, her determination to build a new life, while all the time crafting a response to the inevitable questions to come. It's a great song that amplifies her knowing strength. Liz Phair won't pretend that something doesn't exist just because it happens to make you uncomfortable.

Ultimately, what charms me the most about Liz Phair is the same thing that hooked me with Brian Wilson. I was a twerpy little Catholic kid living in upstate New York when I discovered the Beach Boys. It must have been the dead of winter. Through his rockers and ballads, Brian Wilson detailed a small distant universe: high school life in Hawthorne, California in the summer of 1962. Years later, when I discovered that it was Dennis Wilson, not Brian, who actually surfed and drove muscle cars, it illuminated the power of pure imagination in a way that mere truth-telling never could have. I wasn't there and neither was Brian. But he guided me there somehow.

Liz Phair grew up well-heeled, well-educated, and sexually precocious to become, in her own words, an "average, everyday, sick, psycho, super-goddess." Like Brian Wilson, Liz Phair convinced me that she's actually experienced the things she's been writing about. I hope she continues to do both as she gets within hailing distance of menopause. I expect to be initially disappointed by her new album this fall, which only means I'll have to spend some more time listening to it. No problem there. I'll be sticking with my gal. It's love, baby.

"Exile In Guyville" has been re-released this summer with a companion DVD that features a short documentary film directed by Liz Phair.

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