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Heavy Hitting New Album

EMM GRYNER

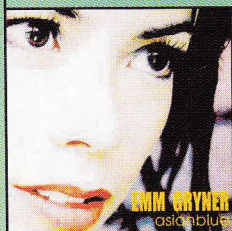
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by Jim Kelly

Emm Gryner

"It's officially
pissing rain."

Emm Gryner makes this announcement in mock-officious tone, leaning in close to the condenser microphone on my portable tape recorder that's sitting on the tabletop between us. We're seated in a spacious U-shaped booth by the window in a diner in Toronto's Little Portugal, looking out onto Dundas Street. The place is virtually empty, save for a few scattered patrons munching on diner fare and sipping cool drinks to escape the sweltering July heat wave that's been weighing on the city.

With the mercury climbing into the mid-30s, and the humidity making it feel more like 40 degrees, it's been one of those days when you don't need to be a meteorologist to know that a thunderstorm is inevitable. It lurks in the damp, heavy air like a tiger waiting to pounce. Gryner has spent the past year living and working in Los Angeles, but being from Forest, Ontario (near Sarnia) and having lived in Toronto for several years, she's well acquainted with this type of weather, and she's actually been looking forward to the impending atmospheric chaos.

"I'm really excited, because it never rains in L.A. and I hate it," she says. "There are no thunderstorms like there were here last night, which I love." We watch as the heavens open up and sheets of rain smack the asphalt and concrete and brick, spanking the old neighbourhood out of its hazy stupor.

She's right though. There's something beautiful and cool about a tumultuous thunderstorm. Aside from being an exciting event, it serves the purpose of clearing away the oppressive humidity and providing a fresh start to the day.

At 26, Emm Gryner has seen her fair share of thunderstorms – in her life and in her career. But more importantly, she's come to know the value of a fresh start. Having had the experience of riding high with a hit single off her major label debut in 1998, and then being dropped cold by Mercury Records in the wake of the Universal-Polygram merger, Gryner has picked herself up and resumed her career the way she started it: as an independent artist. And she appears to be flourishing.

Her sixth and most recent album, *Asianblue*, released this past July, is a completely self-financed record put out through her own independent Dead Daisy label. It's apparent after only a few spins that *Asianblue* represents Gryner's best work to date. It's packed with engaging melodies and sing-along choruses. The lyrics clearly express her own emotional life, but leave lots of room for listeners to plug in their own experiences. And her singing has never sounded better. Sonically, the album rides the rich, sparkling '80s-influenced pop-rock textures favoured on Gryner's major label debut, *Public*, while also finding room for the intimacy and immediacy of her self-produced and virtually self-recorded independent follow-up, *Science Fair*, with enough contemporary beats and flourishes to

Photos by Karen Baer



Emm Gryner

keep things fresh. It's the sound of a self-assured artist operating comfortably in the eye of her own creative hurricane.

The album contains several ripe summer radio anthems that compare favourably to her 1998 hit "Summerlong", such as the first single "Beautiful Things". Other tracks visit the timeless terrain of lost love and relationship turmoil, but these are balanced by several songs that deal with themes of moving on and letting go of past hurts.

"The past three years have been really crazy for me. There's been a lot of dramatic, tumultuous situations," she explains, just as a peal of thunder cracks the air outside.

Mother nature, sounding off in sympathy. Gryner mentions the split with her manager as one source of upheaval, and the inspiration for a couple of the new songs. "But I also feel a little bit more confident about dealing with situations now. Instead of letting it defeat me, I want to move on, and that's the kind of feeling I wanted to have on the album. It's not an album you put on as a break-up album, to wallow in. It's the album you put on to get out of it."

Affable, well-spoken and rock-girl stylish (she gets bonus fashion points from this scribe for wearing a black, sleeveless Ron Sexsmith T-shirt), Gryner is petite but looks strong. Her dark hair is corralled into two pony-tails that hang down at the back, arching over her shoulder blades, while in front, a single braid of hair disaffiliates from the rest, twisting down from temple to cheek. The Asian features inherited from her Filipino mother are tweaked into ultra-cuteness by the contributions from her German-Irish dad. It's not hard to imagine that some of her boy-fans (and perhaps some of the girl-fans) may be drawn to her shows for more than the music.

Gryner's been drawn to music since she was just a lower-case Emm. She began taking classical piano lessons at the age of five and was writing songs when she was ten. In 1995, at the age of 19, she followed her dream to Toronto, and the next year released her first independent CD, *The Original Leap Year*, on her own indie label, Dead Daisy Records. Shortly thereafter, Gryner signed a deal with US-based Mercury Records. In 1998 she released her major label debut, *Public*. The single

"Summerlong" became a North American hit, and soon Gryner was opening shows for acts such as Alanis Morissette, Ron Sexsmith, The Philosopher Kings and Big Wreck, and playing Lilith Fair. Later that year she received a Juno nomination for Best New Artist. Things were looking good for the now 22-year-old.

Then came the Universal-Polygram merger. Gryner's supporters at Mercury (a Universal subsidiary) were fired and she was subsequently dropped from the label. But she didn't feel defeated. In fact, she saw it as a blessing.

"I was really quite happy," says Gryner. "It was like going out with someone, and then they get struck by amnesia, and you realize you're dating someone that you don't really know, and you'd rather just not do it anymore," she adds with a low chuckle.

In the spring of 1999, Gryner returned to her indie roots, resurrecting Dead Daisy Records to release *Science Fair*, the bulk of which she recorded over a two-week period on an 8-track home studio. She played almost all of the instruments, and engineered and produced the record herself. It was received very warmly by the music press. Gryner also forged a distribution and publicity deal in Canada with Outside Music.

To promote her new work, she launched the Living Room Tour, playing for gatherings of no more than 50 people right in fans' homes – literally in their living rooms – spreading word through fan-run e-mail lists and her Internet site[www.emmgryner.com], driving herself from show to show in her sometimes cantankerous Toyota, and selling CDs and T-shirts at each show.

Then, in late summer 1999, on the recommendation of a friend, Gryner was invited by rock icon David Bowie to join his touring band as a back-up singer. That fall she sang with Bowie in front of 110,000 people at London's Wembley Stadium and at the huge Glastonbury Festival in England, returning to America for appearances on *Saturday Night Live* and *David Letterman*. She sang with Bowie over the next couple of years, and appears on the live album *Bowie At The Beeb*, released in 2000. Along the way, she was also recruited to sing on albums by Rob Zombie and Bran Van 3000.

Meanwhile, being president of her own indie label meant that she could release records on her own schedule and put out whatever type of records she wanted to. In 2000, she released *Dead Relatives*, a collection of early demos and unreleased material. 2001's *Girl Versions* was a collection of cover songs; piano-based re-imaginings of tunes by the likes of Ozzy Osbourne, The Clash, Def Leppard, Blur, Stone Temple Pilots and Fugazi. Critical praise for the album helped sell out a series of successful club dates in the Northeast US. *Girl Versions* also earned her another Juno nomination for Best Pop Album. It was the only independent release in its category.

Gryner seems to be proving that you don't necessarily need a membership in the club to play in the big leagues.

"I think that one of my goals has always been to make what I do seem attainable to somebody; that you don't need to necessarily go through those channels to make something that's on par with a major label album. It's kind of a crazy amount of work, but you don't have to deal with any of that stuff. With all the corporate craziness that's going on right now, it does kind of feel like it's been such a happy project making this album, because there's been no interference really, and no hold-up – just put it out the way you want to."

Although touring in David Bowie's band was an incredible opportunity and a wonderful experience for Gryner, the time came when she needed to get back to her own music and her own career. Leaving Bowie's band was a difficult decision, but going on tour with him again would have meant being on the road for the entire summer, keeping her own career on the back burner.

"It was a hard decision because it's such a beautiful group of people, and I learned so much from David," says Gryner. "But I looked at the things I wanted to do, and it's really what I have to be doing right now – my own thing. It's so easy to get into the hired gun situation, and I didn't want years to go by and suddenly I'm just a hired gun. Mind you, David Bowie is not a bad person to be a hired gun for," she says with a smile.

Gryner drew a lot from the Bowie experience, including several of the songs on *Asianblue*, including "Symphonic", "Beautiful Things" and "East Coast Angel", which were directly inspired by her time in the band. The experience also helped her formulate how she wanted to approach her next album.

"It inspired me musically, not to start writing like Bowie, but to find what is unique about me and kind of expand on that," she says, "which is why I didn't want to make another album in my bedroom. I wanted to make an album that would be exciting for me. I wanted it to be a full produced record. That inspired that decision as well."

She also decided that she wanted to bring in a producer to help make her new record. A change of pace for this do-it-yourselfer, but it was something she felt was necessary for this project.

"It's more of a challenge to let go and let someone else produce," she says, "because nowadays, with Pro Tools and all that, you can just make an album on your own, but it's not necessarily the best way to go. And that's how I felt for this record. I wanted someone to help me out on a few songs."

She had met Wally Gagel (Eels, Folk Implosion, The Rolling Stones) last summer and the two ended up working on a few things together. Things went so well,

Gryner decided that she wanted to finish some new songs with Gagel, so she moved down to Los Angeles in January to be able to work with him. Gagel ended up producing five of *Asianblue*'s eleven tracks.

She liked working in L.A., but says she never quite felt that it was home, so she plans to return to Canada. "It was just really convenient to be there at all times. That way we could work any hour of the day, and I wouldn't have to fly down and stuff. So it's been a really hectic year that way, but it's been good."

The album was recorded at four different locations in all: at Gagel's home studio in L.A.; at The Crypt in England with Mike Rowe (of Sheryl Crow's band); with long-time friend Daniel Burns at DB Studios in London, Ontario; and three songs that Emm self-produced at Umbrella Sound in Toronto.

And though she was happy to share-out the production duties, Gryner still kept a close eye on costs. "I still maintain that you can make a great record for not a lot of money," she says adamantly. "With *Public*, I definitely was not in control of the money situation at all, and in hindsight, I kind of wish that I had been, because in a lot of ways we didn't really need to spend that much money on that album. With this record, I was a little bit more in control of how much was spent on different things, but it was nowhere near that amount, and that feels good, especially because I don't have that [major label] funding behind me. When you're funding it yourself, or your fans are funding it, it can't be a really astronomical amount."

Another change with this album was the fact that Gryner co-wrote quite a few of the songs. This marks the first time that she has ever written with anyone else, and it proved to be a bit of a challenge.

"I refuse to compromise on lyrics, so there was a bit of weirdness there," she admits. "But I think it was actually pretty smooth because I trusted everyone a lot. I trusted Mike, and I trusted Wally and Dan. Not too much chaos."

But with respect to her lyrics, Gryner says that some of the new songs show growth in her approach to songwriting, even though she claims, perhaps rather facetiously, that her songs are "all about boys."

"I'm starting to be less self-obsessed about things," she says. "I think when I was writing the first albums, it was all about me, me, me. 'Someone dumped me, so I'm gonna write 55 songs about it.' And as you get older, I think you start to observe other situations and see that you're not the only one with a 'unique' situation. So some of the songs I'm writing now, and even some of the songs on the album, like 'Young Rebel' and 'Northern Holiday', are a little bit more observational as opposed to being about me, per se."

One of the key songs on *Science Fair*, "Stereochrome", contains the line: "Brave




or blind, I'm not sure which am I." I ask Gryner if she feels she's gotten any closer to answering that question.

"Not really," she chuckles. "Not really at all. I think it's a little bit of both now, and some of my favourite people are the same way. They're not totally jaded and they're not totally optimistic. I think a lot of people feel this way, because you do all this work, you try so hard to make music thinking that fame or selling a million records is your ultimate goal, and we just keep doing it without really thinking 'Is that something that you really, really want?' You think you want it. But a lot of people I've known who have achieved that, it's not really a destination necessarily; it's more like this goal in your head, and when you're there, it's not always what you think it is."

So maybe it's time we start to re-evaluate how we measure pop music success. After all, we've recently seen mega-watt artists who have fallen out of favour with their record label for selling only a few million copies of an album.

Emm Gryner seems to be content with the level of success she's currently experiencing. "I think the best part is just seeing people enjoy the music," she says. "And right now it's at a really nice comfortable number of fans. I can go and do house concerts, I can interact with people on the Web site and I can do this for a living. I'm very reluctant to change that."

On the way out, we pause in the alcove outside the diner's entrance to survey the rainy streetscape. In Gryner's hands is a book about battling fear, which she says she's reading in conjunction with a self-defence course she's been taking. I want to ask her more about it, but she's late for a band rehearsal. So we exchange good-luck's and good-bye's, and off she runs into the afternoon downpour, book in one hand, umbrella in the other. It's gonna take more than a little rain to slow this girl down. 



Jim Kelly is a Toronto-based freelance writer.