

COURTNEY BARNETT

QUOTIDIAN BLUES
BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN



“**S**hit I basically just re-wrote ‘Handshake Drugs’ by Wilco,” wrote Courtney Barnett on her Facebook page in the summer of 2012, a full year before the Australian singer-songwriter would begin receiving international acclaim and adoration for her uniquely off-beat, stream of consciousness songwriting. The Wilco-inspired tune was called “Avant Gardener,” an eccentric, anxiety-ridden story of a Monday morning gone wrong told in Barnett’s trademark, disaffected monotone. The song would end up changing her life.

“Whenever you think you’ve written some great song, you realize it’s exactly the same melody as something else,” says Barnett, calling from her hometown of Melbourne. She remains confounded by the success that her signature song, which begins with the couplets “I sleep in late/ Another day/ Oh what a wonder/ Oh what a waste,” has brought her: “I still find it hilarious that ‘Avant Gardener’ was the song that drew attention to me all over the world.”

It took Courtney Barnett some time to find her voice. After struggling with her early attempts at songwriting, everything changed for her when she started listening to Australian artists like Darren Hanlon and Dan Kelly, whose approach to writing about commonplace occurrences struck a chord with the young artist.

“That’s when I swapped my songwriting style from trying to write a great song that everyone will love about heartbreak or something to something much more natural,” she says. “Peo-

ple do tend to overlook everyday subjects in songwriting, but it doesn’t make it any less important. It’s stuff that everyone goes through, normal stuff.”

Barnett’s sarcastic charm and singular, observational songwriting is at its best on her new debut full-length album *Sometimes I Sit And Think And Sometimes I Just Sit*. The album’s 11 songs cover the types of everyday irrational anxieties and tragicomic struggles that are generally considered too bland, too ordinary, or too unromantic to serve as fodder for pop music: On the album, she questions the value of organic produce on “Dead Fox” and tries to impress her crush by holding her breath longer than usual while swimming laps on “Aqua Profunda!”

But the best song on the album is an understated, mid-tempo tune called “Depreston.” The premise is simple enough: a young couple goes house hunting. Yet the 27-year-old songwriter manages to turn a narrative about real estate and open houses into a story about the heartbreak of old age, the surreality of crass capitalism, and the existential trappings of that period in life somewhere between young adulthood and middle-aged domesticity. “And I can’t think of floorboards anymore/ Whether the front room faces south or north,” Barnett sings after her narrator learns that the house she’s being shown was formerly inhabited by a recently deceased elderly woman. By the very next line, she’s ashamed to admit that she’s back to thinking in dollars and cents: “And I wonder what she bought it for.”

It’s a masterful display of songwriting that serves as a breath of fresh air and a challenge to the self-serious genre constraints that singer-songwriters too often feel the need to abide by. Barnett’s use of biting irony places her in the same tradition as Randy Newman, and her plain-faced humor recalls John Prine, but that’s not who she sounds like, nor who she listens to. She used to play slide guitar in an Australian country band, but Barnett, who fronts a scrappy, four-piece garage-rock outfit on stage, takes most of her musical cues from ’90s alt-rock standards like The Lemonheads, Nirvana, and the Dandy Warhols. Her new album shows off her ability to write both carefree pop hooks and extended instrumental breakdowns: Most of the songs on *Sometimes I Sit* last either three minutes or seven; there’s little in between.

Another one of the finest songs on Barnett’s latest is the all-too-wisely titled “Nobody Really Cares If You Don’t Go To The Party,” a peppy, grunge-pop rocker in which two friends ponder and debate the eternal question of whether to go out or stay in. At one point, the narrator’s friend tries to convince her to come out: “You say you’ll sleep when you’re dead/ I’m scared I’ll die in my sleep,” she sings, turning rock and roll mythology on its head, before second-guessing herself: “I guess that’s not a bad way to go.” Talking about the song, Barnett sums up the power of her artistry better than anyone: “The whole idea is hard to explain,” she says, “even though it’s something so obvious that I’m sure lots of people go through.” ★