

## Kelley Ryan - *Twist*

### Biography

“I didn’t do this record the rock’n’roll boy way...it’s my own sound,” says Kelley Ryan.

Note the emphasis there—on the word “boy.” Kelley Ryan, the front-woman for the California band astroPuppees and a go-to songwriter and collaborator (most recently on Marshall Crenshaw’s *Jaggedland*), took a decidedly different approach to recording her first record under her own name. *Twist* is an album told from the female perspective; a theme encompassing everything from the lyrics to the instruments to the album’s many moods.

“I had this idea: the record was only going to be about girls, be it the daughter I never had, a heroine of my mine, my grandmother or a woman who lived near me in Ireland,” says Kelley. “It’s all from the feminine perspective. Even in the music – there’s no electric guitars, it’s just acoustic and loops and strings. I mean, I *love* three-minute electric-guitar pop songs, but I wanted to create something more comfortable for me and stay in that mood.”

But don’t get the wrong idea – *Twist* isn’t a polarizing record, a long lost Lilith Fair soundtrack or an angry feminine response a la *Exile in Guyville*. It’s a gutsy record with ambitious production, smart collaborations (with the likes of producer Don Dixon (R.E.M., Smithereens), legendary arranger Van Dyke Parks and singer/songwriter Marti Jones), and a personal touch and warmth that crosses all musical boundaries. If anything, the album is reminiscent of something like Beck’s *Sea Change*...which, not so coincidentally, is represented here by a cover of “Lost Cause” (more on that in a minute).

Ryan originally approached the new album as another astroPuppees record, her long-time, free form collaborative project that’s released four albums of critically acclaimed pop. But during the recording process, something changed. “Don Dixon was like, ‘this is *your* record’. And he was right. For the first time, I wrote all the words, and everything I say on this record is totally from the heart. So it made more sense for it to have my name on it.”

“I was a little excited, and nervous, about working with Kelley on her first record under her own name,” recalls Dixon, her co-producer on the record. “Kelley’s tough! She’s a hard nut covered in delicious, sweet chocolate. We’re good friends, and I knew it was going to be a challenge to work on this. What if I got mad, picked a fight and she beat me up? She could do that!”

Thankfully, the two avoided blows. In the end, *Twist* is labor of love of between Ryan, the record’s heart and soul, and her musician friends: Dixon, Jones, Parks and drummer Jim Brock. “I had to kick my game up with all those talented people working with me!” says Kelley. “I mean, Van Dyke, what he does with the strings...in songs like ‘Bridie’s Eyes’ and ‘Beautiful Child,’ they reflect the words perfectly. And Marti – her voice is like butterscotch, it just melts, it’s so incredible. And Dixon’s bass, same as Van Dyke, it just echoes the words exactly and carries the whole thing. And Jim, wow. Every song, he had a different instrument, be it drums, bells, chimes, whatever he could get to fit the mood.”

Besides his percussive backdrop, Brock also provided Kelley with the album’s biggest compliment. “He said, ‘You know, I like your stuff because it’s soft...but it’s got edge. And that’s hard!’”, Kelley recalls.

*Twist* was recorded in various spots in California, Ohio and Ireland, a country that both serves as a second home for Ryan and her husband (Bug Music founder and music publisher Dan Bourgoise, a.k.a. “My biggest fan and critic” says Kelley, laughing) and a focal point for the album’s many moods.

“It’s a very inspirational place for writing,” says the singer, noting that the album standout “Bridie’s Eyes” is actually about a woman who lived down the road from Kelley in Ireland experiencing the onset of dementia. “If anything’s sad on the record, it’s definitely influenced by the country, the grey and green and windy weather. It’s beautifully sad.”

(Interestingly enough, the country also deserves credit for jump-starting Kelley’s career. “I took a three-month cooking course there a long time ago, and I kind of never left,” she says. “My teacher, Darina Allen, was so inspirational, and taught me so much about strength and perseverance. I got signed right after I came back from the school!”)

As Ryan says, *Twist* is both beautiful and sad...and much more. There are plenty of different moods and styles here – the sweet acoustic pop and sweet harmonies of the opener “About a Girl” hints at the album’s themes, but not the full musical landscape. “That’s All” is Beatlesque pop, “Monkey with a Flashlight” grooves and the Van Dyke Parks tracks, “Bridie’s Eyes” and “The Beautiful Child,” are nearly cinematic in their scope, with the orchestral backdrop enriching two very contrasting stories – one of death near the album’s beginning, and a story of youth at the end. Even in reverse order, they’re complementary bookends to the album.

“I love it. It’s a grown-up record that allowed Kelley to shine in all aspects,” says Ryan’s friend and frequent collaborator Marti Jones.

Now, about that Beck cover, the album’s most interesting “twist.” “I loved the record (*Sea Change*) that song ‘Lost Cause’ was on,” says Kelley. “And I know it was written from a boy’s perspective, I think about Beck breaking up with his wife. But for me, it took on another meaning. I had a friend of mine with a really bad drug problem, and she committed suicide. On the way to her funeral, I was listening to that album, and every line in that song seemed to fit that girl. So every time I hear that, I think of her.”

Although Kelley has been busy in the last few years recording and collaborating, there are plans in the works to take *Twist* on the road, hopefully with Dixon, Jones and Brock as back up. “But if that doesn’t work, I can go alone,” she says, “just a girl and a guitar.”

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