

and not necessarily a bad one. But *Ys* did not leak—it surged through a broken dam. The word (and the downloads) spread through muso sites and beyond, to places that would normally not give a fig for Ms. Joanna Newsom, who, needless to say, was not particularly pleased.

Newsom had exerted her creative control throughout the entire creation of the album, and now she had lost it. Though *Ys* probably gained more in publicity than it lost in future sales, that didn't matter to the artist, who is a quality-over-quantity gal, and does not really cotton to such a calculus. She wants her album to be taken whole, as the old-school Album it is: a thematic and developmental sequence of songs wrapped up in a nifty package with a gorgeous cover, a beautifully-designed booklet for lyrics, and, ideally, a nice big gatefold sleeve. "I want anyone who has the record to feel like it's this little object of some worth or substance," she says. "So much stuff is throwaway nowadays and I wanted it to not feel that way. Ironically, of course, it leaked on the Internet, which is like the epitome of throwaway, or at least intangibility." Indeed, there was something almost mythic about the whole affair. It was as if the archons of the digital needed to visibly humiliate Newsom, with her brazen and well-publicized invocation of the old ways.

PORTRAIT A week before I met Newsom, when I was trawling Joanna fansites for bootlegs, I sampled some of the chatter about *Ys* and discovered that the most controversial aspect of the album by far was the cover portrait of Newsom. Some bitched about the "Ren Faire costume," and others compared the image to the cover of a fantasy novel. These reactions are understandable but still pretty lame. A great Album requires a great cover, and Benjamin Vierling's painting—which looks like a Dürer by way of Millais, but more pop-surrealist—is pretty great. Luminescent, esoteric, and vividly detailed, it mirrors Newsom's moodier new material as much as the strange and playful embroidery of Emily Prince's cover complemented *Mender*. In the portrait, Newsom sits stiffly in an old oak chair, wearing a plain brown maiden's dress, a broad leather belt, and a wreath of wheat and flowers in her loosely braided hair. She is framed by a horse skull, a blackbird, and more flowers, some of which—like the poppy in her hair and the morning glories surrounding her chair—are visionary plants. The color of the morning glories, which are somehow growing out of the floorboards, echoes the hues of the sky. The outside is within, they seem to say, just as the ordered, formal composition is fringed with wildness. But the symbolic heart of the painting lies in Newsom's hands. Like the skull on the wall, the nicked sickle in her left hand is a memento mori, a reminder of death, its lunar shape echoed by the airplane contrail in the sky, another image of impermanence. In her right hand, she holds a framed and mounted specimen of the order *Lepidoptera*. At first I took the critter to be a butterfly, which made sense, if for no other reason than the fact that Newsom loves Nabokov. The butterfly also represents the transformative emergence from a death-like state, and is a traditional symbol of the soul (the Greek word *psyche*, or soul, also means butterfly). But after a round of late-night Google searching, I finally

discovered that the thing is actually a moth—a *Cosmia* moth, to be exact, pinned and framed and protected, after a fashion, from the ravages of time.

I wanted to see this painting in all its original glory, and so Newsom and I finish our Solstice ales and drive over to Vierling's studio in downtown Grass Valley, which lies close to Nevada City. We arrive at St. Joseph's Hall, a ramshackle former convent and orphanage now given over to artist studios and the occasional concert. Climbing the shadowy exterior stairwell, I am not surprised to hear from Newsom that this place too is haunted.

Vierling's small studio is orderly and calm, and the 31-year-old man, who Newsom pegs as an "old soul," is thoughtful, friendly and gently reserved. The Newsom portrait is radiant. Its luminosity and juicy detail are the result of a laborious and exacting process of applying alternate layers of egg tempera and oil, an old-school technique that took Vierling six months to execute. Too eclectic to call himself a true traditionalist, Vierling is most directly inspired by the Nazarenes, a nineteenth-century group of German mystical painters who rejected the mannered styles of their day and looked back to medieval and early Renaissance models. As Vierling wrote in an email, "The Nazarenes glorified medieval art because it embodied a paradox: the perfection of the ideal as God intended, in contrast with the entropic negation that all matter is subject to." This attitude—which Vierling rightly says is more Gnostic than Catholic—influences his own dogma-free approach to sacred art. "I believe that a painting has the ability to reflect back to the viewer the image of what exists behind the subject, the spirit behind Matter if you will. It is my goal to reveal what is eternal in the subject, be it an object or a person."

Vierling did not paint Newsom's face from life or from a photograph, but from an image in his mind he constructed after studying scores of photographs taken of the singer from various angles. Some fans have complained that the portrait does not really resemble Newsom, but having spent half a day with her, I would counter that her face itself is mercurial. (And, except for the wreath, she is certainly not wearing a costume.) The painting's most excellent likeness, though, are Newsom's hands, which are also Vierling's favorite part of the picture. They are strong and lovely and articulate. Like the music on *Ys*, Vierling's rendering brings together an expressive, spiritual exuberance with an almost clinical execution of detail and technique. "The alchemists called it the Magnum Opus, the great work," wrote Vierling. "I call it a painting. It might just as well be a song, a verse, or even digital code. It is what you invest into in, nothing more or less."


MYTH The last element of Newsom's magnum opus to arrive was its title. Newsom spent a long time fishing for a name that would encapsulate the spirit of the project. One night she dreamed about the title, a swirling reverie that featured the letters Y and S smashing together in unusual combinations. Afterwards she began searching for a single-syllable word that bluntly combined the two letters. At the same time, Newsom also finally got around to reading the fantasy novel on her nightstand, which happened to be her best friend's favorite book. She thought the novel might be cheesy, but she loved it. And one night, there it was: a passage about a seaside castle that had been raised "by the magic of the ancient folk of *Ys*"

Et voila—Newsom had found her title. *Ys*, pronounced ees, is a lost city immortalized in the folklore of Brittany, a region that lies along the northwest coast of France. But as Newsom read more deeply into the legend, things got a little spookier. Here, in a nutshell, is one version of the tale: Dahut, the blond daughter of King Gradlon, begs her father to build her a citadel by the sea. And so he does, creating a city that's protected from the waves by an enormous wall of stone whose one entrance, a gigantic bronze door, is opened by a key that Gradlon carries around his neck. Like a lot of seaside towns, *Ys* attracts horny sailors laden with goods, and Dahut makes a wicked pact with the powers of the ocean to make the already decadent city rich. The agreement is rather kinky: every night the princess takes a new sailor as a lover, and

places a black mask on his head. In the morning, when the song of the meadowlark is heard, the mask strangles the guy, whose body is then offered to the waves. Eventually Dahut meets her match: a haughty crimson-clad lover who persuades her to slip the key from around the neck of her sleeping father. The rake then opens the gates of *Ys* to the raging ocean, which swallows the city. Father and daughter escape on a magic steed, but daddy is forced to drop the princess into the sea and she drowns. In some tellings, she is then transformed into a mermaid.

Newsom saw so many parallels between this story and her own that it freaked her out. There were the themes of decadence and excess, of fathers and daughters and boundaries burst, not to mention details like the meadowlark and the heroine's underwater metamorphosis. Then Newsom stumbled across the clincher: according to Breton folklore, on calm days along the coast you can hear the sunken bell of the cathedral of *Ys*, tolling evermore. Later, as Newsom finished the fantasy novel, she stumbled across yet another uncanny echo of her own tale: a line that spoke of "that damnable bell," a direct sample, as it were, from "Sawdust & Diamonds."

"To me that seemed like a chiming confirmation, that all was at it should be," says Newsom. Such synchronicities had ghosted her throughout the project, as the interwoven stories of her convulsive year became even more bound together in her lyrical retelling of them. That, of course, is one of the gifts of the creative imagination: a sort of gratuitous grace that can shelter us from the gaping sky, an excess of meaning that is capable of redeeming the mess we're in without denying how fucked up it is. Many of us have sensed a secret logic working through our lives, and at first Newsom resisted it.

"I fought angrily against seeing particular types of poetic organization because it seemed awful to see my own life and these actual events in that way. But when you put forth an intention into the universe to speak a certain truth and narrate a certain period of your life, you start to see the sorts of symmetries that you are not usually supposed to be able to see until you are on your deathbed and your life flashes before your eyes. And you see exactly why everything happened. And even the most painful things you've ever been through can seem unbearably beautiful." 



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