

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'God's lucky man: The "charmed life" of Shane MacGowan' by Matthew Hennesy, City Journal

} 'MacGowan sussed out the political and attitudinal affinities between British working-class heroes such as The Clash and balladeering Irish folk heroes such as the Dubliners'

Blank generation

For Neneh Cherry and her producer Four Tet, restraint can be fruitful. Andy Battaglia enjoys their exercise in subtraction

The operative parts in *Across the Water*, the striking first song on Neneh Cherry's new album *Blank Project*, are sparse and plain: nothing but the click and clack of some drums and a voice stretched across an empty expanse of space. A subtle wisp of reverb wavers around the edges, but no more than figures in any normal resonant room. No elements of "studio craft" can be discerned. None of the production rises up or preens for attention. In fact, there's very little there, in terms of actual sound.

So how does it all amount, so utterly and astoundingly, to a swelling symphony of human musical presence?

The answer owes in part to the voice, which sounds both stylistically accentuated and straightforwardly sung. As a musician recently matured into her 50s, Cherry is in tight command of her instrument, and her experience is clear. *Across the Water* begins in medias res, as if in the middle of some private ritual for which the singer intones poetic incantations to herself, and it's not long before Cherry is off on an internal journey projected outward.

"We reflect in the quiet times inside our heads," she sings, "and give thanks for our children tucked up sweetly in their beds - inside their heads." Other sources for contemplation include God, wisdom blowing in the breeze and "trickling water dripping down, slow like some rivers without a sound". It's quiet and majestic, pitched with drama but attuned to the everyday.

Cherry has been a surprising musical character since she made it big decades ago with her 1988 hit *Buffalo Stance*. Inescapable at the time and resilient ever since, that song prof-

fered Cherry as a sassy, brassy woman hip to the swagger and style of youth on the streets of London. The song was about a group of fashion mavens with whom she shared a scene - the "buffalo" lifestyle abounded among rude boys and rebellious girls whose ranks, as eulogised once in the UK newspaper *The Guardian*, included "new breeds of free-range urban cowboys in Ray-Ban aviators and hats; a suited and booted beauty accessorised by a feathered Native American headdress; a smiling black boxer with a blowsy red rose tucked behind his ear; boys in highly polished brogues worn with tracksuits...".

The list continued, in tribute to the late stylist and image-maker Ray Petri, who masterminded the look. No artefact of "buffalo" culture, however, travelled more widely or persisted more strongly than Cherry's hit. It was surprising for its specificity and for its playful shifts in tone, which flipped seemingly trifling matters into matters of lasting consequence.

But all makers of pop music, or at least a majority of them, traffic in novelty and surprise. So what made Cherry more surprising than most? The answer to that can be heard in the singular and idiosyncratic choices she has made, some of very recent vintage. In 2012, for her first full-length album project in 16 years, she teamed with nobody's first guess for a crack team of collaborators: a Norwegian free-jazz band. That meeting, with the group known as The Thing, found her singing and scatting over muscular, vein-straining jazz played at extremes of intensity on a celebrated album titled *The Cherry Thing*.

The track list included a mix of originals with covers of sludge-punk

band The Stooges, jazz luminary Ornette Coleman and the hip-hop duo Madvillain (featuring Madlib and MF Doom). It all made more sense than would seem sensible, and joining it all in together was Cherry, with her seamless voice and her special, almost mystical sort of cohering presence.

For *Blank Project*, credited on the cover to Cherry alone, she united with three similarly eclectic collaborators: the London-based fusion duo RocketNumberNine and Kieran Hebden, aka Four Tet, an electronic producer with unusual and increasingly impressive reach. RocketNumberNine handle most of the musical playing: the rumbles of drums, live-wire runs of electric bass, elements of electronics that swirl and seethe all around the background. On the title track, the "band" creates a dynamic, agitated racket while Cherry vents vocally over top. Via lyrics on the subject of love, she gives voice to the anger and agreeability that can govern amorous affairs. "I feel so small," she sings, before finding the centre of so many matters of the heart: "I hate you, I hate you, I love you, I love you - I love it all."

That one plays more or less like a rock song, albeit with an experimental bent. But then others make the electronic presence of Four Tet felt. On *Naked*, synthesised drum sounds accent more organic percussion, and others (*Weightless*, *Out of the Black*) veer towards certifiable dance grooves. Never too much, though - which serves as a testament to Four Tet's wisdom and reserve as a producer.

For an artist whose own music slots in with club-bumping brands

of techno and house, Four Tet, as a producer, has shown a remarkable ability to shift up in terms of style and sound. And sometimes by removing style and sound almost entirely. In an interview with *Fact* magazine, Cherry spoke about the album's remarkably spare opening track. "It was a much bigger production initially," she said, "but we ended up taking a lot of the stuff away and stripping it back and making it simpler."

While mixing, Four Tet evidently erased a synthesiser part and the sound of timpanis too, hearing something more monumental in the selective quietude he could make surround Cherry's voice. "The way he worked was taking things away more than anything that might complicate the process," said Ben Page of RocketNumberNine, lending praise to a process that put parts of his own playing on the chopping block.

Four Tet makes another remarkable display of restraint on another recent album he produced, *Wenu Wenu* by the Syrian musician Omar Souleyman. When word went out that the



Neneh Cherry
Blank Project
Smalltown Supersound
Dh50

two were working together, predictions tended toward imaginings of an all-over-the-place, mash-up sort of Middle Eastern techno fantasia. The result, though, is more faithful and restrained than that - and more powerful too.

Rather than assert himself to distraction, Four Tet sounds content to

lay back in the studio and join in the act of listening himself, with only subtle embellishments and refined knob-twiddling that focus the otherworldly intensity that Souleyman had already long-since made his own. Songs like *Ya Yumma* benefit from a sense of space that seems to be Four Tet's addition to the mix, but otherwise the spotlight shines elsewhere: on Souleyman and the musicians he jams with.

With work of this sort, Four Tet has evolved into one of the most interesting thinkers in sound at work in any genre, with an approach that is both subtractive and additive. There's another display of his handiwork for an online video series, *Beat This*. There you can watch him craft a track on the fly using nothing but sounds from a very specific source. With only 10 minutes on the clock, he bounds around a vinyl copy of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and mines it for samples. He moves the needle around and grabs a gong sound, a couple of different drum breaks, the bass line from *Billie Jean*, a key-

board arpeggio, a swell of synthetic strings. Then the task turns to his laptop, which he uses - in real time, with the clocking ticking down at the bottom of the screen - to create something that proves to be both a ramshackle tribute and a rapturous remake. Listening back after the clock strikes zero, he smiles wide. "I'm going to play it in the club this weekend, as is," he says.

His work with Neneh Cherry sounds drawn from a process that is similarly selective and heady, as well as energetically impromptu. In that, *Blank Project* brings Cherry back once again to jazz. None of the album is jazzy in a literal sense - there's not a horn to be heard - but the vibe has much in common with a cerebral jazz band jamming through ideas out loud.

The magnetism makes sense, as Cherry was raised by a stepfather who was a storied jazzman, the late trumpeter Don Cherry. In the 1960s and 1970s, his experimental allegiances helped guide the incendiary spirit of "free jazz" and made him a spiritual

peer of the best practitioners of the form - including the Art Ensemble of Chicago, who figured in another recent offering that all involved in *Blank Project*, and Omar Souleyman too, might admire quite a bit.

Released in 1969 and reissued by an archival label in California, it's called *Comme a la Radio*, and by any measure it's one of the most arrestingly strange records ever made. The name on the cover is Brigitte Fontaine, a French singer who worked her way out of pop and into ever more adventurous sounds. The music behind her is played with a mix of wild abandon and cultivated control by the Art Ensemble, who pushed jazz out past its own boundaries. Some parts are busy and kinetic; others are plain and spare. All of it is resounding in ways suggestive of nothing other than music of its own proudly singular and idiosyncratic kind.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, The Wire, Spin and more.

playlist

What the critics have said about Neneh Cherry's four other albums

Raw Like Sushi

EMI (1989)

"An unorthodox and brilliantly daring blend of R&B, rap, pop and dance music. Full of personality, the singer/rapper is as thought-provoking as she is witty and humorous when addressing relationships and taking aim at less-than-kosher behaviour of males and females alike." - ALLMUSIC.COM



Homebrew

EMI (1992)

"She triumphs with a seamless and unorthodox blend of hip-hop, R&B, dance music, and pop, and on *Trout*, the presence of REM's Michael Stipe brings rock to the eclectic mix. As humorous as Cherry can be, her reflections on relationships and social issues are often quite pointed." - ALLMUSIC.COM



Man

Circa (1996)

"The album is a high-quality collection of alt-rock women's anthems, at times bluesy, at times folksy, and much more akin to her previous rock-leaning effort *Homebrew* than her breakthrough *Raw Like Sushi*. The songs have an organic, earthy feel, in tune with the Lilith Fair alternative-style musical movement." - ALLMUSIC.COM



The Cherry Thing

Smalltown Supersound (2012)

"The Cherry Thing is a collaboration whose immediacy, dynamic and motion are organic; its creative originality singular. It unabashedly and nakedly displays its seams and inspirations. It is a serious contender for any representative year-end list." - ALLMUSIC.COM

