

The New Branch on a Musical Family Tree

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 13 September 2005 18:00

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You might think that it's only natural that Pieta Brown turned out to be a singer-songwriter. After all, she's the daughter of the legendary Iowa roots artist Greg Brown. Her second full-length recording, *In the Cool* (in stores this week), makes it sound like she's been doing this forever. And her musical rapport with producer-guitarist Bo Ramsey (himself a roots legend) is easy and confident, the sort of relationship that was likely forged over decades.

But when Brown and Ramsey perform at the River Music Experience on Saturday evening, put those preconceptions aside, and keep in mind that Pieta Brown – the musical entity – is a very recent development.

It was an encounter with a specific guitar five years ago – when she was in her mid-20s – that set Pieta Brown on a musical career path. Her dad showed her the guitar, a 1930s Maybell. She borrowed it and came back with songs. She recalled in a phone interview that her father listened and said, “Well, sweetie, I think that guitar is yours.”

It's not that Brown wasn't a writer or musician before. She played piano, and “I'd been writing for a really long time,” she said. But the two never really came together; the melody of the music never matched her words. “With piano and writing, it was never really one thing,” she said.

That changed with that guitar, even though the younger Brown doesn't really understand what happened. “That's a mystery to me, really,” she said. “I've always had a real feel for guitars, even though I never played. ... Instruments are really magical.”

There was another thing holding her back. Sure, it was a musical family, but a “musical family with really high standards,” she said. Pieta Brown wanted to make sure she could live up to the family name, and the inevitable comparisons to her father. “I have a deep reverence for music,” she said.

And beyond that, she saw firsthand what it was like to make a living as a working musician. “It's not a very pretty life,” she said.

But once she felt the kinship with that guitar, it didn't take long to get her into the studio. Her

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self-titled debut, produced by Pieta and Bo, came out in 2002. An EP was released a year later. And now comes *In the Cool*.

The relationship between Brown and Ramsey was quick and natural, not unlike the bond between the singer-songwriter and that guitar. "It's kind of unspoken, really," Brown said. She approaches him with songs, and they talk about them. "Bo's got such good ears for arrangement," Brown said.

Brown and Ramsey recorded the new album live in four days at a Memphis studio. "I felt really strong about recording them in the South," she said. "It's such a place full of music." And it also reflects her roots. Although Greg Brown is Iowa through-and-through, his daughter spend many of her formative years with her mother in Alabama.

Brown called the studio a "rock room" and noted that "I was kind of looking for a harsher edge."

There might be an edge there, but only in comparison to previous work. *In the Cool's* 12 tracks are familiar and comfortable like a worn pair of jeans. That's not to say they're derivative, but like the best Americana, they sound like they've been around damn near forever.

That's part of the point, Brown said. *In the Cool* is a reaction to the "state of things," she said. "Things are really unsettled in this country." The record is sleepy and measured, a calming influence.

The disease and the antidote are both in the title track, with its gently rocking groove: "Outside / It's a Tilt-A-Whirl / It's a teeter totter / It's a dirty world / A dirty world" followed by "Put on Jimmie Vaughan / We'll dance all day long / In the cool / In the cool." Even with songs that invoke the political – "Precious Game" references "a white house of sin" and "a tank of gasoline for the hunger of a child" – the music is a comforting embrace.

It's been noted that while Greg Brown is a storyteller, Pieta is the family's poet. She uses simple, everyday words in elusive, evocative ways, and the songs' meanings seem to shift depending on mood and attentiveness. The imagery is concrete, coated in the dust of rural towns, but the intent is more ethereal. In "#807," for example, Brown sings: "The glass in the lamplight was broken out / But the bulb still flickered as the birds flew around / In the morning."

Like many roots singers, Brown's voice isn't a powerful instrument, but she uses it well. She has casually slinky, sexy phrasing, at once natural and deliberate, particularly in the halting "I Don't Want to Come Down." In it you can hear the sound of somebody with age-old music in her genes who's just beginning to explore.

Pieta Brown, with special guest Bo Ramsey, will perform Saturday in the courtyard adjacent to the River Music Experience. Tickets are \$10, and the show starts at 6 p.m. For more information, visit <http://www.rivermusicexperience.com>.