

Different Ways of Digesting: Laura Stevenson, October 4 at Bier Stube

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Laura Stevenson's song "Sink, Swim" could be called an apocalyptic ditty, a cheery, up-tempo rock song with soaring vocals that sketches out the destruction of the West Coast: "Oh California, I tried to warn ya. / The earth is gonna quake before ya. / You'll be real sorry but it won't be sorry. / The dirt is gonna crack and split you in two." The casual address certainly suggests the musical approach, but it's easy to miss the lyrics in such a joyous ruckus.

The song appears on her 2013 album *Wheel*, and she explained in a phone interview last week that "I like that juxtaposition of mood and ... undercurrent – the actual meaning of the song. ... Two different ways of feeling the same word[s]. You can read them on the page and take them at face value, or you could hear them put to music with a completely different mood. It's just a different way of digesting it. Kind of what life is like."

She and her band will be playing the Moline Bier Stube on October 4, and in that setting it will be easy to gloss over grim words. But Stevenson's songs are rewarding both musically and lyrically, whether you consider their sometimes disparate components together or separately.

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Stevenson said she doesn't worry that people will miss her meanings because of the occasional disconnect. "I think that it breathes life into maybe an otherwise overly heavy-handed, depressing song," she said. "People can take it for how it sounds aesthetically, or they can take it for the entire experience and experience the words, as well. If I wasn't crafting a melody that I thought was interesting with the words, then I think maybe the words would get lost. But I think that the melody kind of keeps the words pinned to the music, and keeps the listener open to the intention behind the words."

"Sink, Swim" isn't an outlier. On her 2011 album *Sit Resist*, there's "The Healthy One," which Stevenson said "sounds like a children's song. You don't really understand what it's about until you really pick it apart, and then it's crazy depressing." The subject? A mother and children with AIDS, with the narrator talking to the child

without

the disease: "And you will live long. / You will bury them all in the ground. ... / It hurts to be the healthy one."

Pairing this awful, painful story with such upbeat music should be disastrous – obscuring at the least, most likely insensitive, and at worst cruel. But the miracle of Stevenson is that she avoids those pitfalls. Part of that is her skill with words, both in terms of distilling the subject and finding the right details, as on "The Healthy One": "And you know they didn't mean to cut you. / They just had to see if your blood was sick, too."

Another element is a general thoughtfulness in the construction of the songs. The band's straightforward guitar pop contains multitudes, from pensive to cathartic – which means the stylistic choices aren't arbitrary. Stevenson writes the songs and arranges them with the band, which is when they often acquire the dissonance between tune and topic.

The performances were also key on *Wheel*, Stevenson said: "We kept takes that we thought had the right amount of emotion. Maybe they weren't executed absolutely flawlessly, but we picked the takes that were the most honest expression of ... whatever mood or emotion that song was supposed to evoke."

But *Wheel* was a struggle to assemble, she said: "With *Sit Resist*, when we went in, we knew exactly the track order, so we did songs in certain keys, so that they would blend into the next

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song. The ups and the downs were all pre-planned. But with *Wheel*

, we just went in. We were like, 'I don't even know what the first song is going to be.' ... I didn't know where any of it was going to go."

Each band member suggested a track order, but the winner didn't feel right, closing with the largely atmospheric "L-DOPA." So Stevenson quickly wrote "The Wheel," and it was recorded in one take. "I just thought it [the album] needed to be punctuated differently. Because 'L-DOPA' ends, and it's kind of like an ellipses. And I didn't want to fade out. I wanted to have a period."

Laura Stevenson will perform on Friday, October 4, at Bier Stube (415 15th Street, Moline).

For more information on Laura Stevenson, visit LauraStevenson.net.