**It's "Not Pretty," It's Freakwater**

from Country Standard Time

By Brian Steinberg

Have you heard Freakwater yet, Amy Ray? Emily Saliers? The Indigo Girls would do well to shiver when this stuff floats through their radio speakers.

Freakwater does what few bands have been able to do in this era of modern country, which is take the stark, acoustic stuff from the olden days and breathe new life into it.

What's that? Certainly, the concept is nothing new. Will Oldham makes you think you're in the Appalachian hinterlands with the songs he makes with his Palace collective, and Uncle Tupelo got their twanger's cred by bringing traditional folk songs screaming into today with March 16-20,1992.

But one might argue Freakwater is the real deal, simply because they write their own songs and make them live and dance. They make them their own.

With the point-and-counter-point of Catherine Irwin and Janet Beveridge Bean's voices, not to mention the addition of former Wilco multi-instrumentalist Max Johnston, Freakwater's new album, *Springtime*, promises something old, something new, nothing borrowed and lots of the blues.

That makes sense to Irwin, who says in a recent phone interview from her Louisville, Ky. home that she has lately been listening to lots of Lefty Frizzell, peppered with selections from the Sex Pistols.

"It's not pretty," she says of the band's fifth album, which includes songs about whiskey, unions, cars and death. "They're just regular things. (The subjects) certainly aren't specific to country music. Maybe that's just what everything's about - sex and death. Maybe that's what it comes down to."

But her songwriting process certainly isn't a cerebral one, she says: It's just individual songs, really, and something will annoy me, and I'll just have to go write a song about it."

As for the band's sound, she says, "I think that (Oldham) may have more of an intellectual approach than we do...I don't know if (our music) is really more emotional. It's just really simple. It is emotional, but it's pretty stripped down, in every sense, even lyrically."

Still, the tunes are somewhat different from previous efforts. Irwin attributes that to Johnston, who arrived in a trade of sorts that sent the band's pedal steel guitarist, Bob Egan, to Wilco. "Banjo pretty much changes stuff automatically," says Irwin.

The personnel change wasn't an acrimonious one for either band. The two groups went on tour together for a brief stretch, and "they had their eye on our pedal steel player, and we had our eye on their fiddle player."

Johnston, who also plays dobro and mandolin, contributed one song, "Harlan," and the male voice makes for an unsettling but vibrant entry into the rest of the mix. The band's bass player, Dave Gay, has been on board from the start.

For now, however, Irwin et al will look forward to the road, the mini-van and sharing a room in various Motel 6's across the country.

No matter how many of the trappings of a full-blown rock band Freakwater might take on, however, Irwin says the group will stay true to independent record-making and stripped-down, emotional songs. "I really have no idea where we fit in," she says. "Every once in a while something will happen that makes me think that maybe people have heard of our little records. A country-type encyclopedia will have a listing for us, right next to Janie Fricke. That was one of the most thrilling moments of my life, but in general, I don't know where we belong."