**"Freakwater: Plays Well With Others" by J.R. Jones**

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Catherine Irwin's door stands open, her keys hanging from the lock. I know it's her door because I recognize the National acoustic guitar standing in the front room: she strums it on the cover of End Time (Thrill Jockey), the sixth and latest album by her warped country band, Freakwater. Irwin lives in a ground-floor apartment at the south end of Cherokee Triangle, one of Louisville's most coveted neighborhoods: a hundred years ago, the city's leisure class lined its hilly streets with stately brick houses, marked by two-story white columns, leaded glass, and decorative ironwork. Irwin's building is no mansion, but last night someone tried to get in through her kitchen window, so she and her roommate have stationed a plastic watch frog on the sill; it has a motion sensor in its belly and croaks urgently as her next-door neighbor passes outside. "Maybe the frog is too sensitive," says Irwin, giggling. "It's probably gonna get on that guy's nerves pretty bad." Way up in a hollow tree, perfect idolatry.

For more than a decade Freakwater has been a long-distance band, held together by the stretch of I-65 that connects Louisville to Chicago and by Irwin's long-standing friendship with Janet Beveridge Bean. The two met in their teens at a Circle X show, and spent several years as a couch-bound country duo. But in the mid-80s Bean moved to Chicago, where she cofounded the rock band Eleventh Dream Day, and Freakwater didn't make its recorded debut until 1989. She and Irwin have been friends for 18 years now, but neither woman seems interested in moving closer to the other. "The beauty of living in a place like this is there's just nothing to do," says Irwin. "You really do have to make your own fun. So people just sit around. I think that's probably what drives Janet crazy, because she's a little more active. But that's why they have all these dumb bands--'cause there's nothing else to do."

Freakwater may have begun as one of those "dumb bands," but End Time shows how far it's come as a vehicle for Irwin and Bean's modernist twist on traditional country music. Over the past few records--Old Paint (1995), Springtime (1998), and now End Time--the two have adapted the genre's unsettling harmony and extravagant drama to life in the 90s with a wickedness and poignancy few No Depression bands have been able to match. Irwin has always been the principal songwriter, but the two women divided the new record down the middle; they also brought in a drummer, Steve Goulding of the Waco Brothers, and decided to use a string section. The album aspires to the full-blown orchestration of Elvis Presley's Memphis sessions and Vegas bands, and both Irwin's dark hollers and Bean's grieving waltzes blossom under the treatment.

"Horrible," says Irwin, describing the sessions, which took place at the beginning of the year. "We didn't have much time to get it done, and it was very frustrating trying to explain to people what I wanted. It was a bad January." Bean had just separated from her husband, Eleventh Dream Day bandmate Rick Rizzo. Freakwater bassist Dave Gay had left Chicago for Asheville, North Carolina, making him the second commuting member. Max Johnston, whose sterling banjo and pedal steel were highlights of Springtime, had moved to Austin and played his last show with Freakwater in Louisville on New Year's Eve; replacing him for the new record was steel guitarist Eric Heywood, formerly of Son Volt. Just after they convened in Chicago, the blizzard hit, and Irwin got sick. "It was a lost month," recalls Bean. "It was like a month that doesn't exist within time as we know it." Learning to play with a drummer was the biggest challenge for a group whose material has always relied heavily on dynamic range. "Catherine and I drove the band, rhythmically speaking," explains Bean. "We were working with free time in spots where we would stop singing, and we just cued each other. Now you realize they have to be more concrete, or else you have to play with the drummer for a long time, so he understands all your little movements and stuff." Bean, who drums in Eleventh Dream Day, says her songs are naturally more rhythmic than Irwin's. "It should make everything easier," admits Irwin. "That's what Janet always says. Really, it should. It does put constraints on the drama: you can't just make things longer or shorter in such a random way, as we always did before."

End Time was recorded at Uber Studio, on Division in Humboldt Park. Producer and owner Brendan Burke--who recorded Springtime and works frequently with local free-jazz outfits--asked cellist and composer Fred Lonberg-Holm to arrange the strings; Bean and Irwin wanted to avoid the usual country cliches, so they agreed on a sparse chamber sound similar to Big Star's Third or John Cale's Paris 1919. Lonberg-Holm, bassist Kent Kessler, and violinist-fiddler Joel Batty played the charts; in addition, the De Milleian cast included Jim Baker on piano, Jeff Jacobs on Hammond organ, and Freakwater alumnus Jon Spiegel on Dobro and mandolin. The numbers made a tough production job even more difficult. "This record has more time-signature changes than a lot of Rush records," says Burke. "There's a lot of really weird nontraditional stuff here. These guys are singing in 11ths and 12ths, and the actual structure of the tunes is very strange, and I like that. But yeah, it was a struggle to put other players on it."

Yet End Time came out sharply focused. Jacobs's soulful, literate organ and Heywood's sunny pedal steel knit together beautifully on the quiet final verse of Irwin's weary gospel tune "Good for Nothing." Bean's terrifying blues on "Cloak of Frogs" combines fiddle, Dobro, and vibrating pedal steel into a ghostly drone. Her love of Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris inflames the waltz-time ballads; the heartbreaking "My History" melts together organ, piano, and strings but seems still and spare, while on "Raised Skin" a cold, clear string line frames the conjoined voices. And for all the record's layering, among its best cuts is "Sick, Sick, Sick," for which Irwin's guitar, vocal, and tapping foot were recorded live through a single room mike. "Even though we needed more time, it was good that there wasn't any more time because people would've been dropping like flies," says Irwin. "If we'd been in there for another week, there'd probably be open real estate in Chicago."

On Friday, September 24, the band kicks off a three-week tour that will come to Chicago's Athenaeum Theatre on October 9--one of only two dates on the schedule that will feature the string section. But today, the afternoon before Labor Day, is just another lazy Sunday in Louisville. Outside Irwin's front door--from which she's long since rescued her keys--sits her "chia man," a nylon stocking filled with grass seed, crude features shaped with rubber bands, eyes marked with red beads. A little green grass has already begun to sprout from his forehead.