**"Freakwater Runs Deep" by Thomas Peake, originally published February 1998 in Atlanta's alternative weekly *Creative Loafing***

Anyone who has appreciated the disturbances underneath the surface in the writings of Southern authors like Peter Taylor or Flannery O’Connor will understand Freakwater. For that matter, all ordinary folk have been there.

Freakwater’s pretty country music harbors more compelling, complex imagery than any pop music. Principal songwriter and singer Catherine Ann Irwin -- a Louisville, Kentucky, resident and painter of houses, sets and canvases when not knee-deep in Freakwater -- is indeed a fan of Southern literature.

That tradition, however, isn’t the mainstream of her band’s rough-hewn folk sound. “I don’t know how I’d feel,” warns Irwin, “if I read somebody saying ‘William Faulkner’s a big inspiration to me as I’m writing my pop songs.’” Nevertheless, Cormac McCarthy and Dorothy Allison are among the self-deprecating Irwin’s favorite living Southern authors. They may not be influences, per se, but the same sullen, perceptive desperation often exposed in Southern lit helps lend Freakwater more lyrical and musical credibility than they really need.

Record stores may stock Freakwater in the rock section rather than under folk, country or bluegrass. That may be because they have little in common with label mates on Thrill Jockey, like pop gurus The Sea & Cake or electronic media-manipulists Oval.

A better explanation for the confusion of genre, however, is their roots. Irwin’s folk aesthetic always coexisted with an affection for the energy of punk rock, and fellow singer/guitarist Janet Beveridge Bean also plays with Eleventh Dream Day. “I was always interested in bluegrass music,” explains Irwin, “but it’s just really fun to play really loud electric guitar.”

Loud, fast music was just something to do and a way to get into bars when Irwin was in a punk band, the Dickbrains, with her brother. As of *Springtime*, Freakwater’s fifth record, however, Irwin has long been making more melodic -- perhaps more haunting -- music with Bean and catalyzing bassist David Wayne Gay. Irwin and Bean, a childhood friend, have been singing and playing together for umpteen years now.

Though she and Bean both play guitar, singing is Irwin’s passion. “Vocal harmonies and singing with Janet,” explains the adult Irwin, “is more fun than playing electric guitar.” It’s more than fun to hear, too. Irwin, the alto, trudges through her songs with ragged glory. On 1995's *Old Paint* she even conjures up a femme-Johnny Cash on “My One Desire” while singing about rings of fire. Together, the duo’s intertwining harmonies are inundated with comparisons to the Carter Family.

The band has its own suitably disturbing portrayal of Irwin’s and Bean’s combined vocal impact. “If you feel like your head is being crushed in a vice, that’s me,” says Irwin. “If you feel like a drill is going through the middle of your forehead, that’s Janet.”

Freakwater’s attitude on record makes sense of their good-natured sarcasm, but their performances are anything but painful, as evidenced by Irwin’s and Bean’s enveloping delivery and the stunning arrangement of “Twisted Wire,” written by a Louisville friend.

On *Springtime*, the band is joined by new bandmate Max Konrad Johnston (ex-Wilco), whose adroit guitars, banjos, mandolins and other acoustic marvels seem to bring the songwriting out from the murky depths.

Bean, the one with the precious soprano drawl, penned three songs that go down with an eery equanimity. Johnston’s “Harlan” is a simple yearning. Irwin writes the remaining tunes -- timeless and gripping narratives, actually.

Freakwater fans will be thankful that the new record is all original material. On 1991's wonderful *Dancing Under Water*, eight of the 13 cuts are covers. Precious few recordings in this world have strung together three more jaw-dropping songs than Irwin’s first three on Feels Like the Third Time, a 1993 CD with five cover songs.

It’s not that the covers are poorly chosen or performed. Irwin’s songs are just so clever and biting one can’t help oneself. “I’m just really compulsive about lyrics,” Irwin explains. “I tend to go over things a million times.” Her songs indeed bear the mark of painstaking craftsmanship. On “Heaven,” Irwin revisits the territory of self-deception as she ponders her lack of faith. It’s a song about her deceased friends. “I forget, actually,” she says. “People that have been dead for years -- I think I should call this person up and go have some coffee. And I think, oh, that’s right, they’re dead.”

Philosophical allusions join her repertoire of witticisms on “Washed in the Blood”: “Way down at the bottom of a slippery slope/ When I start my decline/ Fast waters flow/ I’ll be lost in the flood.”

The songs on Springtime branch out marvelously from personal spheres, however. “Lorraine” is a neo-Strange Fruit, shedding tears (which “dry faster than good luck/ In a gambling game”) over hardcore racism. Irwin’s own “One Big Union” (“Which side are you on’s/ Got more angles than the Pentagon”) rivals the band’s version of the traditional “Dark As Dungeon.”

The keeper is “Louisville Lip,” which masterfully and deliberately explores the time when Louisville’s protested-minded Muhammad Ali cast his Olympic gold medal into the Ohio River after being refused service in a nearby restaurant. “Whip the world/ Whip this town/ Whip it into the river/ And watch it go down/ Whip the world/ Your lashing tongue/ Big men crying like a baby/ From where the bee stung.”

Freakwater’s temperament isn’t entirely dark-sided because it’s redemptive. Irwin, Bean, Gay, Johnston and their listeners clearly draw joy in tossing out worst-case scenarios, but it’s all in the name of embracing our constructive cynicism.

As on previous records, *Springtime*’s jacket is graced by Irwin’s original painting. Its pretty colors and shapes even belie the album’s title. There’s a bail bonding firm in Athens, Georgia, that caught Irwin’s attention. “I had some matches from there, and their motto was ‘Where it’s always springtime!’”

Despite their aversion to traveling, Freakwater is touring. But they’ll miss a large chunk of the country. The way Irwin thinks about places she’s never been, the West for example, is revealing, if not hilarious. “It must be really different in Colorado. I have no idea,” she speculates. “I don’t have any idea what’s wrong with everybody out there.”