**"Nothing So Pure - Interviewer Cyndi Elliott Gets Freakwater Fever", *Puncture Magazine* #34, 1995**

Current neo-country faves like the Jayhawks, or Uncle Tupelo and vaunted spin-offs Son Volt and Wilco, haven't so much gone back to their roots as gone back to Gram Parsons and earlier Neil Young, and while the scenery is fine enough, it’s a road we've been down a few times before.

Coincidentally or not, it's women artists who are currently taking country along some less-travelled paths. From Iris Dement's austere emotionalism to the '90s morality tales and lost-highway laments of the Geraldine Fibbers, they’re going way back to the source, and at the same time developing new themes for which country styles seem the best, most bittersweet form.

The time is ripe too for Freakwater, a band whose harmonies rival the Louvin Brothers, let alone Gram and Emmylou, and whose words and voices constantly juggle passion and irony, joy and clear-eyed fatalism, for effects that are by turns funny, chilling and breathtaking.

When Catherine Irwin returned my call, she apologized for not getting back sooner. “I took a couple of naps and it was a few days later,” she said, with a laugh in her southern-styled voice I would learn was never far behind. I cracked up, reckoning I might well have heard the blurry-eyed birth of the first line of the next song she’d write.

I expected as much from Irwin, the main songwriter of Freakwater. Her lyrics, like her outlook, present a twisted sense of justice and humor, a blend of amusement with, and distaste for, the world at large.

From her home in Louisville, where she earns a living painting houses and ballet sets, Irwin seems as willing to discuss the “nail-maintenance phase” she’s going through as her music (“I haven’t had nails this long since I got teeth. . .but it’ll end once we go on the road and I’m playing guitar”). And there are some musical questions she won’t even answer, like what was the first record she bought: “too near and too painful,” she claims, though she states proudly that the first concert she went to was a KISS show.

Irwin tells me she was raised on her parents’ Irish folk music, Pete Seeger, and Kingston Trio records. Then, like so many, she was inspired by the Sex Pistols and started her first band with her brother. They called themselves the Dickbrains.

She met her partner in Freakwater, co-singer and arranger Janet Beveridge Bean, at a Circle X show in Louisville.

“She used to wear this long army coat. I thought she was a crazy, punk-rock-hippie chick,” Bean confides from her Chicago apartment, which is hung with Irwin’s paintings.

“Cathy went to the Brown School, an experimental school that Will Oldham, Dave Grubbs, and the Slint guys all went to. I went to the opposite kind of school, where we studied Latin three hours a day and scrubbed the floor with toothbrushes. . .I switched schools to get out. It was 1981.”

Bean, whos still probably better known in the music world as the drummer in Chicago’s Eleventh Dream Day, claims the two avoided each other at first. Janet’s mother asked her, “Why don’t you make friends with that Irwin girl?” Janet’s reply: “But Mom... she’s mean!”

When the two finally met, Catherine was mean: so mean that she fell on the floor laughing when she heard Janet’s full name: “It cracks me up to this day,” she confesses.

“We began singing together when we met,” says Janet, remembering Freakwater’s origins some thirteen years ago. “But I think the last year or so we’ve grown even closer. Maybe because we don’t live nearby, we sing together so much better now. Cathy was my matron of honor and she’s going to be my son Matt’s godmother. We don’t really want to baptize him, but I like the idea of everyone getting together and saying they’ll look after this kid.”

Bean talks of the high-school years as a musical turning point. “I had played clarinet and piano; but all the other stuff that set the direction my life would take seemed to happen when I was seventeen. When Catherine played Tammy Wynette for me, I didn’t know if I liked it at first. Then the voice clicked.”

After meeting Catherine (around the same time she met her future husband, Eleventh Dream Day bandmate Rick Rizzo), Janet took up singing, something she hadn’t thought of doing. “I’d never sung, except once I was singing some bad Fleetwood Mac song on the radio and my Dad knocked on the door. He said, "We know one thing you’ll never be, and that’s a singer!"

“Singing makes people feel good. It’s a gift everyone should have, but I don’t think you really know if you have a gift. I still feel pretty inadequate most of the time. I’ve always been rebellious, so when my Dad said I couldn’t, I figured I would,” she explains as her son methodically applies Scotch tape to his mouth. “Now a lot of my day involves singing, with Matt in the car. I’ll be one of those Moms, my Mom did it too, sang the pop songs of the day with the car radio, whose kid is like, ‘Mom, shut up!’ Singing makes me happy.”

Freakwater’s self-titled debut and their second album, *Dancing Underwater*, have been out of print for some years. The band’s current label, Thrill Jockey, hopes to re-release them but, Catherine says, “the guy who put them out has a delusion that some day he’s gonna make a lot of money off them.” The band’s first release on Thrill Jockey, *Feels Like the Third Time*, was widely hailed by critics on its appearance at the start of 1994. Their style was taken seriously: this was no country piss-take, no glib rundown of trailer parks, guns, and Budweiser.

Irwin and Bean weren’t slumming, and their songs weren’t veiled in smirks.

Though they’ve been compared to country legends like the Carter Family, Irwin shies away when asked if she’s a purist. “There’s gotta be a reason we’re not as popular as everyone else,” she laughs. “Either we’re really bad, or we’ve got integrity.”

Music writers may label the popularity of country- and folk-influenced groups as a “new country” movement, or champion stripped-down, lo-fi music as it veers towards singer-songwriter solipsism. Self-taught and indie rock hands in the ‘90s have distilled elements of gospel, jazz, country, folk, and blues with a philistine’s passion. Chiseling away at grunge for the simple, bluesy, emotional blast of a vocal melody, or stripping off layers of ego and overproduction in conventional rock cliches, the underground has continued to listen for the heart of what it means to create. Perhaps hoping for the next Sex Pistols, Dylan, or Nirvana, the urgency and sincerity sought in the rock aesthetic seems sorely lacking.

“Yeah, maybe. There are people who come to our shows who I’m surprised to see there. They’re too urban and hip for a Freakwater show! After doing this for over ten years, I’ve heard it a lot: “the kind of music you do is really coming around! I hope it’s true, but I don’t know how it starts. It’s not that no one plays this kind of music just because it’s not “in” - the bluegrass guys are playing down at the VFW hall every Saturday night!”

Equally cautious about explaining Freakwater’s appeal, Bean adds, “If you’re really into music, your interests wander. I'm into jazz and all sorts of stuff. You need something new; and country music lends itself to age. I can envision myself being seventy and singing these songs. But not being forty or fifty and doing punk rock!

“It’s true that country is close to punk in terms of anguish, though. You can’t get any more down and out and disgusted than Hank Williams. Country and punk at their purest are pretty rigid. The country basslines are all the same to me, but the melody and the sentiment behind it - they go a million ways."

Catherine scoffs at the notion they might do well with the mass country audience. "We don't play the places those people play. And people with a punk background may think we're purists, but country fans think we're freaks."

"There are 'alternative' fans who don't really listen to country music who listen to us, and there are 'neotraditionalists' like Nanci Griffith fans who might have some interest in us," Bean concedes. "But most of the people who go to a Reba McEntire concert, and to church every Sunday. . .they make me nervous. I think if you played a song like [our] "Gone to Stay," which has a line, "There's nothing so pure as the kindness of an atheist," on country radio, you'd get a lot of shit. It wouldn't be appreciated any more than kd lang saying she doesn't eat meat. Freakwater are staunchly unconservative."

"I like Dwight Yoakam, but Garth Brooks? I'd like to tie him up and smack him!" Irwin responds when asked what country music she listens to. "He's done a lot for pudgy white men in America. That's who's buying those records. At the dance club in Louisville, that's how those guys look - balding, with Mondrian-ish cowboy shirts. They've never touched a girl, and now they're all the rage!

"Being hateful, I don't usually like people unless they've been dead thirty years. But I think Will Oldham's a genius. He's a smart-alecky little kid making records that are great. A lot of people would take his cleverness and make something horrible, but he's got restraint."

In a straight format, Freakwater veer away from revisionism with innovative, sometimes near-dissonant vocals, lyrics, and arrangements. The vital accompaniments of Bob Egan's pedal steel and Dave Gay's upright bass coalesce with Irwin and Bean's rhythmic strumming. Covers of Conway Twitty and Woody Guthrie songs evince both reverence and reinterpretation. When Irwin sings "You've Never Been This Far Before" (on *Feels Like the Third Time*) she bends gender lines like a pro. That song creeps Bean out.

"I'm glad we recorded it anyway. I hope we didn't kill Conway Twitty - he died real soon after that. I guess when you record other people's songs and you don't notify anyone. . .I don't know if you can get sued, but I was kinda hoping we would, and we'd get to meet Conway Twitty in court."

If there's a constant in Freakwater's work, it's the wrenching execution of the vocals, the lyrical perfection of the themes. Gettin' old and dyin'. Gettin drunk and cryin'. Cheatin' and lyin'. Who can't relate to that? Along with poignantly narrated simple verities, a healthy reminder of death haunts Freakwater's new album, Old Paint. Irwin herself seems haunted, wise beyond her years: the philosopher in a rocking chair, or the pontificating friend at the bar, telling tales that point toward truth.

There are reminder songs, like Guthrie's "Little Black Train" ("You may be a ballroom gambler/Cheat your way through life/But you can't beat that little black train that's coming 'round tonight") or her own "Gravity" ("All your beauty will be stolen/By a young girl in the night"). In the top-ten-simple-truths category: "Everyone who gets drunk will not write a good book." "The lyrics are kinda autobiographical," Catherine laughs. "Some things are made up, but some of the more horrible things are true."

Her personal tales uncover universal nuances, often dosed with morbidity for the finely tuned heart and strong spirit. On "Smoking Daddy," a song inspired by Catherine's father, a Lucky Strike smoker, the voices of the two women transcend country-music topics and reach into a sort of psychic call-and-response pattern as they articulate the unsayable: the devices one uses to rationalize doing something one knows to be harmful: "You never know/I might get Lucky/You never know/I might break that Camel's back/I'll be lit up/like those girls down in Salem. . .."

"Cathy's songs have a real balance of self-loathing and being pissed off at the world," Bean notes. "I have a problem not being the victim when I write. Cathy's never the victim, if anything, the world around her is. 'White Rose' is beautiful, it could be a classic bluegrass song about death and dying, but it's more. The White Rose were a group of anti-Nazi German students who were executed."

*Old Paint* credits the arrangements to Bean, but mistakenly omits crediting all the songwriting, apart from four covers, to Irwin, who notes, "Something's gone wrong with the printing on all our records!"

Bean explains what taking on the arranging meant: "These songs are just as much a part of me. I suggest structures, endings, ways of singing. I've often felt I wasn't represented; now I'm more comfortable. I don't have Catherine's prolific nature. This is the first Freakwater record I didn't write a song for."

*Old Paint* was recorded live (with Brad Wood at Chicago's Idful Studios). "The pedal steel was the only overdub," Irwin says. "Even if we have to do twenty takes of each song, it's still less painful for me than separating everything. The worst part of that is when the others are finished and you have to go do your part, and then you come out of the little room where you've been trying really hard to do something, and they're all reading magazines. . .."

The two musicians have been described as sounding like they look: Bean, the blonde soprano, complementing Irwin's tousled, crooning alto. That may be a writer's oversimplification, but the soothing, effortless listening and commiserating that Freakwater offer lends itself to idealization. Their songs evoke front porches, acoustic guitars, the wash hanging on the line. A funeral, a birth, and a broken heart later, Freakwater revel in a simple style that reflects life's vital statistics: a sound and view that is more in touch than it is archaic or glossy.

"I suppose my life is simple compared to others. . .I don't have to worry about investments or anything," Irwin muses. "I'm just painting and making some bean soup. But you know, you could still lose your mind."