"Freakwater", an article from the OOP music periodical *Option*, Jul/Aug 1990, by Gordon Anderson

Draw a little family tree tracing the evolution of hillbilly harmony in this country. It all started with the Carter Family, right? And then there were the Wilburn Brothers, and the Everlys, too. And now, there's Freakwater.

Freakwater? Don't ask, just play the damn record. It's all there... the fiddle, the lap steel, the country weepers about broken hearts and, most of all, those plaintive female harmonies risin’ like the sound of a sob in thin mountain air. But the real question is: what’s a member of one of America’s hottest indie guitar bands doing singing high ‘n’ lonesome harmonies on the side?

Freakwater is composed of two women named Catherine Ann Irwin and Janet Beveridge Bean. Both born and bred in Louisville , Kentucky , they got to know each other about ten years back when, as Cathy recalls, “Janet had gotten kicked out of her parent’s house and was staying at my apartment.” (“We don’t want to say that! My mother may read this magazine,” Janet laughs.) Discovering they shared a love for Dolly Parton, Tammy Wynette, and Emmylou Harris (“Janet’s voice kinda reminds me of hers,” says Cathy), they soon began writing and singing songs together that were a far, far cry from the music favored by the punk-rock circles they were frequenting. This process culminated in a gig at a small punk club in Louisville in 1982, but the next significant event doesn’t take place until 1985, when the still totally obscure “Country Ham” sessions were laid down.

Janet: We did this song for WNUY (a Kentucky college radio station) for a compilation called Hog Butcher for the World, and we were under a different name then, Mojo Wishbean and Trippi Squashblossum. . .It was kind of a silly name, I didn’t think anyone would take us too seriously. We had a song on there that was from some very early recordings. They were called the Country Ham recordings because we did it in my parents’ basement on a little four-track, and my parents had this huge country ham down there sitting right beside us while we did it. It was kind of our inspiration for the whole thing."

A meaty source of inspiration indeed. Not only did the "Country Ham"recordings land them a song on the Hog Butcher comp (appropriate name, no?), but when they finally got around to sending them out to labels, one of them actually bit. "We sent it to Keith, the guy at Amoeba, and he seemed to really like it," says Janet. "He actually wanted to put that out as a record, but we wanted to do something new.

To which it was readily agreed, but in the meantime something momentous had occurred in the Freakwater fold: Janet left her old Kentucky home and went to Chicago. Cathy: “Janet moved up here because she fell in love with some fella (that’s Rick Rizzo, Janet’s husband and singer/guitarist for Eleventh Dream Day, Janet’s other band). And then I came up here to work on this record, and that sort of took forever, so I ended up living here as a result.

Thus Cathy and Janet were reunited as roommates, albeit under highly different circumstances. In fact, as of late Janet hasn't been around much, touring with Rick and the rest of the band to support Eleventh Dream Day's recent release, *Beet* (Amoeba is trying to get Freakwater back in the studio). But in between times the two of them are always writing the songs. "Cathy basically is the mastermind of Freakwater," Janet states firmly. "She just sits in her little room and writes and writes and writes. And I write some stuff... I don't think I've ever written a song that was just for Freakwater, usually it's for both bands."

Cathy does shoulder the larger share of the songwriting on Freakwater's self-titled debut, and her songs are among the highlights, ranging from the political "Miner's Song" ("who makes the diamonds on her hand/worth more than the life of an African man/under the earth those diamonds should stay") to a gently self-ironic love letter to Bob Dylan ("A Mile Away"). Throughout all her songs, though, runs a deep fondness for good, old-fashioned, cry-in-your-beer country, which Cathy's deep sob and Janet's high quaver (and the sympathetic backing by various Chicago area musicians) only accentuate. Says Cathy, "I try to write a happy song every now and then, but I get halfway through and something awful happens, either in my life or in my song." And as a real traditionalist ("I don't listen to too many records that are under 30 years old"), she also harbors a healthy ambivalence towards the "new" folk and country that's been getting so much press and label push lately.

"A lot of people, me included, have this attitude that a lot of these new folksingers are kind of fake somehow. But what about those collegiate guys with letter sweaters and crew-cuts sitting around in the '60s singing some slave song? So what sort of fabulous tradition of folksinging am I trying to defend?"

One could hardly confuse Freakwater with the Four Freshmen, though; as Cathy states, "It's really more hillbilly music than folk music." And these two women have, with their first release, offered a defense of the viability of Appalachian music that's as eloquent as it is unassuming. "I think the record company [Atlantic , Eleventh Dream Day's label] would prefer I not do it," Janet says matter-of-factly. "It's pretty important that I do it.”