**Alt-Pork to the Future! Susan Moll Shares a Straight Bacon Platter with Freakwater**from the Atlanta free weekly *Stomp and Stammer*, Vol. 4, No. 11, September, 1999

So many qualities interlock together to make good music: solid but not overly heavy-handed production, pleasant melodies, danceable rhythms, lyrics you can sing along to, a memorable hook.

Songwriters are what feed them. For country-bluegrass-folk afficianado and Freakwater freak Catherine Ann Irwin, that concept is probably far more literal than she'd like it to be, for that which spurs her creatively can be found not in her record collection or in the annals of music history, but in the meat section of her nearest grocery store.

"It's all about salt and fat to me, really," she explains. "Bacon is really the essence. We walked past this restaurant last night and there was a woman that had a big giant oval platter with nothing but bacon on it. It was so excellent - she had like eight slices of bacon and we just had to stop at the window and stare at her in awe and admiration for the way that she just seized the reins and narrowed it down. No toast or anything - no fluff, no filler. A straight bacon platter. She looked so happy."

"That's Catherine's future!" laughs Irwin's co-conspirator, Janet Beveridge Bean. "She says she's a vegan except for bacon and coffee." Yeah, but coffee comes from beans. Beans come from plants. "She wants milk in her coffee, and that's where it crosses the line." Ah so. Bean, too, enjoys a special relationship with pork products. Not those crappy Bac-0 things either - the real thing, baby. "I'm not into faux bacon," says she. "Catherine used to live around the stockyards in Louisville, and it would always smell like you had a rat taped to your head at all times. They had these big trucks driving by with entrails and offal just bouncing around in the back. Chicken gizzards and meat intestines of all various types. It was foul.”

Irwin is rather giggly, but not in the obnoxious-sorority-girl-who-demands-euthanasia sense. She's Butt-Head to Bean's Beavis, Lucy to her Ethel, Wayne to her Garth, Cheech to her Chong. While Bean is more contemplative and more straightforward, it's not difficult to envision them sitting side by side on a dusty porch in rocking chairs with guns across their laps. Both play guitar; both sing. Both write songs that would've been way too appropriate for the Thelma and Louise soundtrack. Hell, they wrote a song called "Your Goddamn Mouth" - could anything conceivably be cooler?

In Louisville a dozen years ago, Freakwater burst from the head of the noisy underground alt-rock outfit Eleventh Dream Day, for whom Bean still sings and drums. (They plan to enter the studio sometime this fall to begin recording their follow-up to 1997's Eighth, but in the meantime her hubby and the band's singer/guitarist, Rick Rizzo, is putting the finishing touches on a collaboration with Tara Key that will see the light of day in January. Bassist Doug McCombs, disguised as Brokeback, just released Field Recordings from the Cook County Water Table and is preparing to stampede through Europe with his other band, Tortoise.) Growing up, Irwin and Bean, whose friendship dates back to those famously hellish teenage years, both cut their teeth playing in punk and rock outfits. Irwin and her brother, whose father regaled them with Clancy Brothers records, folk ballads from England and his native Ireland, and pretty much anything that had a bagpipe on it, sat around picking out Woody Guthrie tunes long before that. “All of a sudden we discovered how to make a bar chord on the guitar and then we realized that we could be in a loud rock ‘n’ roll band, she giggles.

But the tie that bound the two budding songstresses together (aside from pork products) was, ultimately, vocals. “The songs I started singing with Catherine were Irish folk ballads and country standards," Bean remembers. "It was all about the singing. You got to be dramatic without looking too stupid." Irwin concurs. "Playing guitar is not that much fun to me, but harmony singing is something that we could just sit around and do all day. Country and bluegrass music have that great potential for singing that punk rock doesn't necessarily always have."

Freakwater's sixth outing. *End Time* (Thrill Jockey), supposedly echoes Emmylou Harris and Gram Parsons - a comparison that Irwin insists is all their label's doing. "First of all, Janet and I would be in a huge fight over who got to be who: 'I wanna be Emmylou Harris!' 'I wanna be Gram Parsons 'cause I wanna wear that suit!'" Its title was taken from the beaten-to-death phenomena known as Y2K. "Do you ever watch those Christian evangelical TV stations?" asks Irwin. Hell, no! But do go on. "That's what they call it; that's the Armageddon," she explains. "We're living in End Time now. We stay in a lot of hotels, so we see a lot of that. I can't really bear to watch it for the most part - it's too terrifying! Janet and I call each other from our rooms: 'My finger's on my credit card! I just have to call!' I'm not afraid of the Apocalypse - I'm just afraid of those people! I'm afraid of living forever with them!"

*End Time* marks Freakwater’s first encounter with a full drum kit and a string section. The banjo that figured so prominently on *Springtime* is nowhere to be found, but pedal steel, dobros, mandolins, David Wayne Gay's bass and the Hammond organ all fend themselves to more subdued melodies and downbeat tempos, but grander arrangements. "With Springtime, I don't think the lyrical content of the songs was really any perkier, but it had banjo on it so it sounds more cheery," muses Irwin. "When you take away banjo everything suddenly becomes turned up a notch of misery. I don't think of it as being that different in terms of the mood. They're still just songs about me and Janet. But luckily we don't ever write songs about each other. That would be ugly: “And then she said. . .”

Irwin sings in hoarse bleats amidst the venomous “Sick Sick Sick”’s sinewy guitars, but creates an unusual euphony with Bean’s lilting buttery soprano on “Raised Skin,” “When the Leaves Begin to Fall” and “Queen Bee.” "Janet's a much more versatile singer than I am," Irwin admits. "I can either sing really high up or else I can sing really croaky. There's not much in-between. That's probably why I have to write songs, so I'll be able to sing them!"

Bean took on a larger share of songwriting this time around as well, singing more melodies and, true to Freakwater form, penning lyrics that often ooze viciousness from every pore. All are emotional, palpable and real; all are fueled by the Sturm und Drang that is life.

"I guess we're influenced by English and Irish folk music," speculates Irwin, "because they have great melodies that can endure for 400 years. If you can get something narrowed down to the point where it can last for that long without ever having been put on a compact disc and people still know how it goes 200 years later, then I think there's something worth giving thought to."

"I like the leaps we made in songwriting," Bean summarizes. "I'm proud of that. And I think for me, just writing those songs was a good thing for me to get out.” But fame isn't a priority. Neither is selling zillions of records. "We're not very goal-oriented,” she admits, almost apologetically, with a laugh. "It's probably why we're at the point where we’re at.''

Just as the less cerebral sector of the music-buying population are caught up in the if-it-gots-trumpet-it’s-ska mentality, others immediately assume that if it’s got fiddle and banjo it’s alt-country - a label both Irwin and Bean loathe as they would annoying insect pests. "I don't think of us as being a country band," confides Bean. "I don't feel hemmed in by any particular type of writing. I don't think “Cloak of Frogs” really is a country song; the instrumentation makes it have some sort of a swampy feel to it. I am just as much a fan of Nick Cave or Neil Young or MC5 as I am George Jones, really. I think the music that we make is just defined by being Freakwater."

Perhaps, but then again Nick Cave and the MC5 never endorsed their own brands of "food" products, a far more common practice in the country music world, which sets Irwin pondering: "Have you ever seen that George Jones dog food? It seemed like it should be possum-flavored or something. If I was running that marketing agency it woulda been George Jones' Possum-Flavored Dog Food. Considering that it is probably made out of possum, they should just come out and say it." Hmmm... so maybe someday as you're flinging plastic packs of dead animal carcasses into your shopping cart, you might just see the faces of Janet and Catherine beaming out at you from a package of Oscar Mayer or Sizzlean. Freakwater Brand Chicago-Style Bacon Strips. All The Fat, Twice The Grease. Absolutely No Possum or Possom By-Products... The mind reels.

Me, I'll have a platter straight up, no sides, please.