

New Release Spotlight

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

THE BE GOOD TANYAS



CHINATOWN



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NEW RELEASE SPOTLIGHT THE BE GOOD TANYAS

MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST/vocalist Frazey Ford doesn't have to prove herself as a competent songwriter. Words—much like the inventive arrangements found on *Chinatown*, the latest from The Be Good Tanyas—come from the heart, without pretense or philosophical rambling. “We all write from a very personal perspective,” Ford says on one of the trio's rare days off during a recent U.K. tour. “We don't feel like we're skilled enough to really express longwinded stories or satirical lyrics or any of that. We keep it really simple.”

Their lyrics may not read like a Faulkner novel, but they're far from shallow. Whether they're noticing the drug dealer around the corner, mourning the loss of a pet or regretting a broken relationship, the sophomore album's seven originals invite us to slow down, take a deep breath of fresh air and savor the present moment.

“It's Not Happening,” introduces the sweet three-part harmonies and acoustic melodies of Ford, Samantha Parton and Trish Klein, who share guitar and mandolin duties while adding individual touches of banjo, harmonica and ukulele. The rolling, up-tempo song also addresses the frantic pace of today's society. “I was driving around in traffic with [a friend], and this person was so busy and just seemed so lost and removed from reality,” Ford says. “I know it's cliché, but I think it's true that we miss what's going on in our lives because we keep ourselves on this running pace.”

Sometimes our hectic lives keep us from noticing the events in our own backyard, as evidenced in the languid “Junkie Song.” “Fill up our days with so much distraction / It makes it easier not to see what we don't want to,” Ford sings, her voice wrapping soulfully around each word, while Olu Dara's lonely cornet solo adds a sophisticated touch to the sparse guitar-mandolin arrangement.

The group's songwriting and composing skills have matured since their 2002 Nettwerk debut, *Blue Horses*, resulting in a focused blend of dusty old-time country, gospel-blues and folk. “You can't help but change and grow over time, and when you do, your ideas get a little more complex,” Ford says. “The first [album] was completely innocent. This time around we had more experience and a better idea of what we wanted.”

The group gained enough studio knowledge to self-produce their follow-up, though Ford admits that their responsibilities didn't change much. “Basically, we went through the same process except that all the final decisions were ours,” she says. “[Producer] seems like such an unnecessary title, because it's just sort of a natural thing that we do in the studio. We get the sounds we want and the arrangements we want, so to have a title for ourselves or someone else—it just doesn't really suit the way we go about things.”

The new, but not all that different, recording process did afford them extra time to experiment with public domain works such as “Rowdy

Blues” and the chilling “I Wish My Baby Was Born,” a song Ford picked up from fiddler Jolie Holland.

The group doesn't exactly study sheet music before rearranging a traditional song. Instead, they let the song evolve naturally over time. “It's kind of an organic thing,” Ford says. “I might hear a song somewhere, and maybe a week later the song gets stuck in my head, and I just start singing it. We might play a song for a year, and eventually it takes on your form because it's coming through you, and you were drawn to it because it allows you to express something that's real for you or the band. It's really kind of natural, like a story that gets passed down.”

Townes Van Zandt's “Waiting Around to Die” becomes even more haunting when expressed through The Be Good Tanyas' rolling banjo and steady percussion. The trio also breathes new life into classics such as Led Zeppelin's “In My Time of Dying” and the Animals' “House of the Rising Sun,” as well as Pete Rowan's “Midnight Moonlight.”

Listening to the new album, one can almost imagine Ford, Parton and Klein gathered in someone's living room, engaged in a late-night jam session on a rainy Vancouver night. The album takes its name from the historic neighborhood in which they live. “Where we live is the heart,” Ford says. She couldn't be more right. ■