

JOAN

AS POLICE WOMAN

BIOGRAPHY - OCTOBER 2017

'This record is darker and more pensive,' says Joan Wasser of her new Joan As Police Woman album, *Damned Devotion* (released February 9, 2018). 'The title is undeniably dramatic but it's a subject I've been tangling with all my life: how does one live a devoted life without becoming obsessed or losing one's mind?'

Already acknowledged as a thrilling live performer and starkly honest lyricist, *Damned Devotion* finds Wasser at her rawest yet. While her 2014 album *The Classic* was a soulful celebration of life and her 2011 album *The Deep Field* a lush moody expansion, this new release sees her stripping her compositions back to the core, the bare-all lyricism and timeless melodies harking back to her accolade-winning album *To Survive* (2008) and the universally acclaimed debut album *Real Life* (2006). But not just lyrically.

'I'm always searching for new ways to create wilder, freer songs,' she says.

'One of the things I did differently for this record was to experiment more with drum programming: editing and manipulating Parker Kindred's live beats as templates for new songs.'

Essentially, she explains, these new compositions were written in three distinct ways. A few were recorded as Wasser has done in the past, which is to bring the song to the band, rehearse it and then take it to the studio and record live. Others were crafted using grooves that Parker Kindred, on drums, and Wasser, on bass, had created in the studio. 'I'd go back to my home studio with hours of material, chop up the improv and create songs from them.' And, finally, several songs employed her programmed drum tracks as the foundation, with Kindred and her good friend and brilliant keys player, Thomas Bartlett, recording over them.

'Parker, Thomas and I are the crux of this album,' she acknowledges. 'Ninety per cent of the sounds you hear are made by one of us. They intrinsically felt

what I was going for on this record, so I was able to keep it very close-knit.’ The first track to be shared from the album is *Warning Bell*, a tender, bewitching song of regret Joan wrote about “being a romantic and the naiveté that goes along with it. While I don’t ever want to lose that innocence, I’ve been in situations where I wish there had been an alarm to wake me from my dream state.” She plaintively sings the chorus, “If there was a warning bell, I’d know, but all I hear is music, soft and low, I never see it coming.”

Of *What Was It Like*, she adds: ‘It’s clear I can’t make an album without involving the subject of death. Both my fathers died since I made the last record. *What Was It Like* is about the dad I grew up with, about feeling grateful for his calm, sensible presence and at the same time acknowledging that, even though we were very close, I’ll never really know who he was. I have had four parents [Wasser was given up for adoption in infancy] and now three of them have gone. The questions I wished I’d asked but never thought to will always swirl around in my mind.’

A further, noticeable element in this new work is the focus on syncopation. ‘I’ve lived my life consumed with rhythm and this time I took it to another level. When I first began writing my own songs, the thing I’d always hear in my head were drums, drum patterns, drum fills. For the first couple of years of JAPW I played as a duo with only a drummer, Ben Perowsky. As of 2007, I began working with Parker Kindred and we’ve now got a simpatico that’s easily heard on my albums.

‘For me, everything comes from the drums, the heartbeat; it’s just gospel that the music is only as good as the drummer.’

One needs to look no further than *The Silence* to recognise what Wasser is describing. Its bold, persistent groove and rhythm lends a dark and foreboding urgency. As the song progresses, chants and handclaps add to the tension.

‘Yes, it’s a political song,’ she agrees. ‘I recorded the chanting at the Women’s March in Washington. There’s a thread on this record about communication, about being vocal in what you believe in. My maxim is: if it feels scary to say it, it’s the thing you must say. The refrain is “It’s the silence that’s dulling the blade”. This is what I’m talking about.’

Born in 1970, Wasser grew up with her adoptive family in Connecticut before

decamping to Brooklyn to join the music scene. Having studied the violin at university and played in orchestra, favouring new classical compositions written for smaller ensembles, by the time she reached New York in 1994 she'd already been performing with art/punk bands, experimenting with how far she could stretch the parameters of the violin. She began working as a session musician, collaborating with indie, jazz, pop, Haitian, soul & R&B musicians and working with Anohni (Antony and the Johnsons) and Rufus Wainwright. Along the way, in 2002, Joan As Police Woman was born, named in homage to the 1970s TV cop show starring Angie Dickinson.

Previous albums have won awards and accolades, such as the Best Rock and Pop Album in the Independent Music Awards (*Real Life*) or one of Q Magazine's Albums of the Year (*To Survive*). *Damned Devotion* is her fifth album in the JAPW incarnation, in addition to an album of covers (*Cover*) and the 2016 collaboration with Benjamin Lazar Davis (*Let It Be You*).

There are, of course, the well-documented dark times that have informed the melancholy; the death of her boyfriend Jeff Buckley in 1997; the suicide of her friend Elliot Smith in 2003; her mother's death four years later. Music, it has been suggested, is the medicine that has carried her through difficult times. Certainly, the gap between *The Classic* and *Damned Devotion* has not included much downtime, echoing previous periods of collaboration with artists as diverse as Lou Reed, Beck, Toshi Reagon, David Sylvian, Sparklehorse, Laurie Anderson and Damon Albarn.

This time around, she's worked with Sufjan Stevens, John Cale, Aldous Harding, Woodkid, Justin Vivian Bond, RZA, Norah Jones and Daniel Johnston, produced an award-winning album for Scottish avant-folk outfit Lau and another for fellow Brooklynite Domino Kirke. The list could go on...

'I say yes to almost everything,' she admits. 'I just want to be making music all the time.'

Additionally, she's stood in for Guy Garvey on his 6Music show ('It felt like such a luxury to actually spend time listening to music'). She's co-written a film score with pianist Thomas Bartlett (Doveman) for a Brian Crano movie called *Permission* that stars Dan Stevens, Rebecca Hall and Jason Sudeikis (inspiring the song *Silly Me* on her new album). She performed as part of

Pieces of Man: The Gil Scott-Heron Project at the London Roundhouse, creating a song around his spoken word piece, *Running*. And she's continued her long-time collaboration with Dutch fashion designers Viktor & Rolf, writing and performing music for their fashion shows.

Within her peer group, she's universally admired. And it's that, along with her enormous musical vocabulary, melodic beauty and the fact she continues to surprise, which cements Joan As Police Woman as an important artist, collaborator and muse.

"Today", she discloses, "I can comfortably say that music has saved my life and continues to save my life. I am a devotee. It's not something I can even choose or not choose, it's just what is." ...*Damned Devotion*