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Letters @ 3AM

Love Is a Dog From Hell

By Michael Ventura

A fantastic tabla drummer, Marcus Wise (check him out, and see for yourself if he ain't fantastic) cut red paper into a heart and wrote upon it: "Love Is a Dog From Hell." Then he tied string to that red-paper heart and hung it around my neck. No, he wasn't making a pass, and it wasn't Valentine's Day. Marcus just thought I should wear that truth around my neck, and I did, in a public situation, for the remainder of the evening. (It hangs as we speak from a doorknob in my apartment.) Neither Marcus nor I could guess, at the time, that in 2008 Jo Carol Pierce would release her first album in 12 years, *Dog of Love*, addressing in song those very truths and issues which Marcus hung around my neck, to which she added inflatable dolls, carnivals, cars, drunken rain, nudity, barbed wire, a baby smiling over her mother's shoulder as Mama's on the cell phone, prayer, a rock in one's shoe, the nature of truth, and the Blessed Virgin Mary Magdalene. For instance:

Parts of *Dog of Love* are spoken, and in "Criminal Thinking" Jo Carol says: "That night I dreamed a new grammar rule: Any personal pronoun could be replaced with the phrase 'a pair of your panties.' The example given was: 'A pair of your panties just robbed that liquor store.'"

Wearing a "Love Is a Dog From Hell" heart would hardly impress a woman who did this bit, expressed in dialogue on Jo Carol's album *Bad Girls Upset by the Truth* (on many a Top 10 list in 1995). The guy (David Halley) says, "Jo Carol, I heard you drove through the Hi Dee Ho take-out window naked today after school!" High-school-age Jo Carol answers: "Oh, God, I'm so relieved! I was afraid I'd made that whole thing up in my head and was turnin' out crazy like Mama. ... I'm so relieved that somebody besides me thinks that happened!"

Dog of Love (spoken by female people who are maybe 7 years old): "We're carnival girls even when there's no carnival."

There's often no carnival. But a real carnival girl doesn't let that stop her, which is a problem Jo Carol's dealt with the hard way (same way she does most things). *Dog's* slow and wistful "Naked and Home" tells the story of more married carnival gals than I know how to count: "Took my vows and went to sleep/so deep so I could keep them. ... Naked and home/I find you in the music. ... I'm naked and home/in a world of my own/with you." How many carnival girls have had to put themselves into a waking sleep to keep their wedding vows? Jo Carol's song makes how many husbands shiver?

Now we need the take of a woman, the writer Jazmin Aminian Jordán – knocked out by *Dog of Love*,

she wrote an e-mail to Jo Carol, copied to me: "All your songs are NAKED and I listen to you sing and I can't believe Eve ever wanted to put clothes on. And something inside it all tells me Eve's God is alright with her having other boyfriends cuz you sing and make music that goes back before woman was virgin or mother, wife, angel or queen – this is music that is before wild. ... It's woman waking up with Dog-of-Love ability, the see-you-in-me ability, it's woman that sings east, west and smack inside of Eden. It's a woman who knows the ins and outs of Paradise that can write music like this. Ending with 'Barb Wire Crown' is perfect – who else but the Blessed Virgin Mary Magdalene can hold all the shattering after Mary has shattered too?"

You need to hear *Dog of Love* to make sense of that, but, believe me, Jaz talks true.

How's this for "Love Is a Dog From Hell" paradox? From *Dog of Love's* contemplative "You're So True": "You're so true/not that you don't lie, you do/But you're like a door always flying open/You're so true/like a story in a book/for truth mistook/though it probably never happened/Truer than true/as opposed to/the merely agreed upon."

This woman should be a legend. Among some of us, she is – and has been for years. There was a "Jo Carol" in my mind before I ever met her, instilled in me by many a story told by mutual friends. Surely she's had one of the stranger careers in music. For instance, she didn't exactly participate in her first album, though that album won the Austin Music Awards' Album of the Year in 1992, when she also won Best Songwriter. The album was *Across the Great Divide: Songs of Jo Carol Pierce*, on which (except as songwriter) Jo Carol herself is absent. Led by Michael Hall, Austin musicians rallied 'round Jo Carol and cut an album of her stuff. Some of those artists were famous (Terry Allen, Joe Ely), some weren't but deserve to be (Lisa Mednick, David Halley), and many are forgotten now; even though the album displays many styles and conceptions, its remarkable consistency results from Jo Carol's unique style.

Her rhythms, timbres, and shadings are pure Americana, especially when delivered in her breathy, sexy Texas accent. Melodically, however, Jo Carol takes big risks (like she does in most things): She'll sing long lines of many syllables, or short lines of clipped syllables, which don't always scan but always work. Melodically, in many songs her closest equivalents are European art and cabaret music, as in Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill or Jacques Brel or even (amazingly) Noël Coward. I don't know if she's listened to these people, but sometimes she writes in forms they use.

From *Across the Great Divide*, as sung by Michael Hall: "Heaven on earth was made in a minute/but anything can happen in it/Heaven comes and goes/When I'm living in heaven, sometimes I know/that hell's as close as my own shadow."

Often she doesn't exactly sing a song – she *does* a song. It's just as good.

Her second album was 1995's *Bad Girls Upset by the Truth*. A spoken-word, sung-from-the-core, spiritual-sexual, coming-of-age account of a daring woman realizing herself in Lubbock, Austin, and points unknown (unknown, that is, to the rest of us – until Jo Carol explains). For instance:

"Loose Diamonds": "And I know that God means well/Will you please tell Him/I've been to paradise/and I'm amazed that I survived."

"I Blame God": "He's the only one original enough to make a mess like this/and even He can't clean it up/I didn't do this by myself/I had divine assistance/You'd have to be a deity to be this mean/You know that's just not me."

And the song with one of the best song titles ever, "Vaginal Angel": "Prepare a place for another bad girl/to grow up and do what bad girls do/They give their bodies to the music/'cause the music knows what to do/for the bad girl who's forgotten/who she is and who to give it to/the music knows what to do."

This, from her new *Dog of Love*'s "I've Got Your Eyes": "Old coyote paces down/the edges of his cage/looking to get free/like you and me/Always thought we were/the same one/or are we just missing the same part?/Same broken heart?"

Those questions aren't asked, they're lived – and if you've got to dive down the rabbit hole to find the answers, well, that's what you do ... if you're of her tribe.

As Jo Carol sings in *Dog of Love* (in yet another context), "Hey! Don't miss this!"

Give her the almost-last words: "Holy nights like this/are meant for burning down."

Burning down to what? What Jo Carol's music says is: Go the distance, baby, and find out – find you.

That dog from hell is your dog.

Jo Carol Pierce's Dog of Love record release party is on March 14, 10pm, at Evangeline Cafe.

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