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Where Is She Now?

Veruca Salt's Nina Gordon is alive and well in LA, where she's made a second solo album. Two of them, in fact.

By Bob Mehr

Six years after her only solo record and almost a decade after her departure from Veruca Salt, Nina Gordon is on the verge of turning into another whatever-happened-to story from Chicago's 90s alt-rock boom. But there's no scandal or tragedy behind her long absence from the public eye. Though she's left Chicago for LA, where she's settled down with longtime boyfriend and former Tonic guitarist Jeff Russo, she hasn't abandoned music. She hasn't even lost the support of her old label, Warner Brothers, despite the long wait for her second release. In the past few years she's cut an album, shelved it, and then made another, called *Bleeding Heart Graffiti*. The new disc comes out July 18, and with it Gordon returns to a music world that's been dramatically transformed by digital marketing trends and a wave of major-label consolidation. "It does feel a little daunting to be back," she says. "I mean, in rock 'n' roll years I've been gone a long, long time."

Gordon's solo career began after a legendarily acrimonious split with Veruca Salt coleader Louise Post in 1998. With her 2000 solo debut, *Tonight and the Rest of My Life*, she took a gamble, moving away from the band's buzzing rock and recasting herself as a glossy pop heroine. Most critics were indifferent, but the album sold about 300,000 copies worldwide—not quite as many as *Eight Arms to Hold You*, the last Veruca Salt album she'd played on, but more than the band's first post-Gordon disc, *Resolver*, which sold less than 100,000. "The record wasn't a massive commercial success," says Gordon. "But it did really well. It sold enough that I was allowed to make another record, which is all you really want."

Gordon's position at Warner Brothers has remained secure through the multiple changes in management and ownership the label's undergone since 2000, partly because she's well liked by key players in the company—Tom Whalley, the label's chairman and CEO since 2001, is her A and R rep—and partly because her preexisting fan base makes her a relatively cheap investment. "It's not like they have to put a gazillion dollars into promoting Nina Gordon," she says. "And I've been lucky—part of the way I've managed to hang on is that lots of people have wanted to license songs for movies and television." The title track from *Tonight*, for instance, was used in the film *The Notebook* (2004) and in the trailers for *Chocolat* (2000) and *Captain Correlli's Mandolin* (2001).

Gordon left for LA in 2002, after touring behind *Tonight*. "Every time I came out to LA I felt inspired," she says. "In Chicago I felt trapped." In early 2004 she entered the North Hollywood studio of producer Ethan Johns, who'd worked with Ryan Adams and Counting Crows, and recorded an album provisionally titled "Even the Sunbeams." But Gordon had second thoughts once she heard the finished product. "It's a really sad and really slow record. I guess that's how I was feeling at the time," she says. "But when I sorta snapped out of that, I thought, 'I don't know that I want this to be the album I put out next.' It's really a lovely record, but it didn't have the spirit of the records I've made in the past."

With her label's blessing, Gordon started over in spring 2005, hooking up with longtime collaborator Bob Rock, who'd produced *Eight Arms to Hold You* and *Tonight*. They'd completed Gordon's first solo album during a leisurely seven months in Maui, but the basic tracks for *Bleeding Heart Graffiti* came together in just a couple days at LA's Sunset Sound. "Most of the songs were tracked live, and I got a bunch of great musicians and did something like 12 songs in two days," she says.



Nina Gordon

Gordon rerecorded six songs from "Sunbeams" and added several new cuts, including tunes cowritten with Russo, LA-based singer-songwriter Courtney Jaye, and twin sisters Wendy and Susannah Melvoin, both mid-80s alumni of Prince's band the Revolution. In comparison to *Tonight*, which drew criticism for its overcooked arrangements and thick studio sheen, the new disc sounds relatively organic. "It's definitely not as slick as my last record because we did it so quickly. We didn't overthink anything, re-redo vocals, or stack as many harmony tracks," says Gordon. "It's certainly similar in a lot of ways: my songs are my songs, and so there's a common thread to the writing. I kinda feel like this record may not be as pop as the last record, but you know, it's still pretty pop. I can't help it—I just can't get that out of me."

Gordon hasn't hit the road since her move to LA, but Veruca Salt—which Post relaunched in late 2004 with a second post-Gordon lineup—has been touring steadily, playing Chicago most recently in November. The bad blood between the two women is, according to Gordon, a thing of the past. "All those animosities have really cleared from our lives," she says, "and if I saw her tomorrow I'd give her a big hug and we'd have a lot of fun."

This alleged rapprochement

notwithstanding, Gordon continues to rule out a Veruca Salt reunion. It rankles her that Post has been using the band's name, she says—her old partner has turned Veruca Salt into something she no longer feels connected to. "Technically, legally, I could've caused a stink and kept her from using the name," says Gordon. "But I also felt like I didn't want to get involved in that kind of a battle—it didn't seem that important to me at the time. In retrospect, I don't know. It is very odd that she continues to tour with that name. It's difficult for me, it really is. At the time I felt like, I just gotta walk away and forget about it. But now I think I might've been happier had I said, 'OK, the name dies with our breakup.'"

These days, though, Gordon is more concerned with getting her own name back out there. She'll embark on a solo promotional tour early this summer, then follow up with a series of fall club dates, where she'll be backed by a full band. "My only hope is that the new album gets a shot, and that the people that want to hear it can get it," she says. "Hopefully, Warner Brothers are creative and persistent enough to get it heard. But the important thing is I've made the record I want to make so my family can hear it and my friends can hear it and, hopefully, a few other people." ☐

The Treatment

A day-by-day guide to our Critic's Choices and other previews

friday28

CC DAVE DOUGLAS QUINTET This is the third band trumpeter Dave Douglas has brought to town in a little over a year—the way he jumps from project to project would be exasperating if each group weren't so fully realized. His eponymous quintet is where he shows off his straight-jazz chops, and *Meaning and Mystery* (Greenleaf), which came out earlier this month, is the best of its three albums. That's thanks in no small part to a change in the group's lineup: new saxophonist Donny McCaslin, a youngish journeyman who's turned up in a multitude of New York ensembles since making a name for himself with vibist Gary Burton, tops his predecessor, Chris Potter, by combining rhythmically thrilling phrasing with a tight, blocky tone that's as tough as granite. With his stuttery solo on "Elk's Club" he builds momentum even while the rest of the band is frustrating it, first clambering over a series of divots dug by the rhythm section and then picking up speed as he hits open ground. Miles Davis's classic quintet, with its open, modal approach, is Douglas's main template here, but even in this purist-friendly context the trumpeter treats nothing as sacrosanct—his history-spanning technique and boldly original compositions build on tradition rather than simply adhere to it. Though Douglas assembles the tunes' structures with plenty of room for improvisation, his composed themes are supremely catchy, not just placeholders between solos. And the band tears into ballads and up-tempo numbers with equal vigor, constantly finding fresh ways to explore the material. Pianist Uri Caine crafts gorgeous, deceptively simple harmonies on the Fender Rhodes, and bassist James Genus and drummer Clarence Penn play with the hard-swinging postbop grooves like putty—in their hands even the most complex patterns become endlessly malleable, molded into new shapes on virtually every pass. See also Saturday. **►** 9 PM, Green Mill, 4802 N. Broadway, 773-878-5552, \$15. —Peter Margasak



Alejandro Escovedo

ALEJANDRO ESCOVEDO *The Boxing Mirror*, out Tuesday on Back Porch Records, is Alejandro Escovedo's first disc of new material since he fell gravely ill from hepatitis C in 2003; the disease nearly killed him, so the occasional bro-mide like "Gonna learn how to live / Not to simply get by" (from "I Died a Little Today") is forgivable. But thankfully Escovedo takes advantage of his recovery mostly by pouring more of his soul into his music. His songwriting and singing are as good as they've ever been, but producer John Cale doesn't always do right by him; his use of electronics sounds uniformly incongruous, particularly on "Looking for Love," which is splintered by synthetic beats, or the oddly stomping "Take Your Place," whose synths make it sound like an homage to Escovedo's niece Sheila E. Luckily he's always riveting live, performing with an intensity that few can match. The Horse's Ha, a duo of Freakwater's Janet Bean and the Zines' Jim Elkington, opens. **►** 8 PM, Old Town School of Folk Music, 4544 N. Lincoln, 773-728-6000, sold out. ☐ —Peter Margasak

THE ESSEX GREEN, TAPES 'N TAPES On its third full-length, *Cannibal Sea* (Merge), **THE ESSEX GREEN** tips its psych-to-pop ratio a little farther toward pop, making the disc its best to date. It was bound to happen: the core members of the Brooklyn group—Ladybug Transistor bandmates Sasha Bell and Jeff Baron, along with Chris Ziter—have always seemed to prefer the sunnier side of late-60s rock, evoking the Byrds, the Mamas & the Papas, and the Monkees. On the album, they pay tribute to their forebears with the "Last Train to Clarksville"-like intro riff of "Snakes in the Grass" and the Roger McGuinn-esque 12-string-guitar refrain on the jaunty "Penny & Jack." But the songs also showcase a noteworthy change: Bell's vocals, which previously functioned more as color, now ring out strong and beautiful. —J. Niimi

TAPES 'N TAPES is an indie-rock band. See, isn't that a lot clearer than piling up a bunch of references to Pavement, Wire, the Pixies, and the Feelies? The urgently droning rave-continued on page 6