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Music

MECCA NORMAL THE OBSERVER (KILL ROCK STARS)

SWF, 45

In Jean Smith's hands, a concept album about Internet dating becomes an unsparing investigation of what it means to be an independent woman.

By Jessica Hopper

Mecca Normal's new album, *The Observer*, is hard to listen to. Not for the usual reasons—I don't mean it sucks. What makes it tough going is the same thing that makes it great: subtitled "A Portrait of the Artist Online Dating," it's so mercilessly honest and personal it's hard to believe it can exist in the pop-music marketplace. A concept album about Jean Smith's romantic life as a single woman of 45, it develops a grim, intimate picture of the solitary struggle for connection that doesn't go easy on anyone—not Smith, not the men she dates, and certainly not the audience.

The pop canon is full of songs about romantic longings and failures, so that we've been conditioned to expect certain story arcs, delivered in each genre's codified language—blues and its back-door men, hip-hop and its baby mamas, rock and its lonely motel rooms. There's pleasure in having our sufferings and hopes reaffirmed, however approximately, by such archetypes. But Mecca Normal, the Vancouver duo of Smith and guitarist David Lester, have spent two decades hammering away at the musical and social conventions that mainstream culture goads us toward as listeners and as people. They're overtly political artists—



Mecca Normal

anarchist-feminists both, they've developed a traveling workshop called "How Art and Music Can Change the World"—and their loose, abrasive, drumless songs don't rest easily in any genre. And even coming from them *The Observer* is startling. When we listen to music it's natural to try to relate to the singer's experience or inhabit it

as our own, but getting invited along on Smith's blind dates and hookups is discomfiting to say the least—as a storyteller, she skips the niceties and just plunks everything down on the table. "He tries to put the condom on / He curses / I try to see what he is doing," she sings in her low, acidic croon. "But I'm pinned

beneath him / I hear him stretching the condom like he's making a balloon animal." All but a couple of the album's 12 songs are connected to its basic theme of relationships between the sexes, and half are diaristic synopses of actual dates Smith went on with men she met at Lavalife.com. She's a keen, literate

lyricist, prosy rather than melodic—right now she's at work on her fourth novel—and her attention to detail and detached, acerbic tone make *The Observer* a particularly apt title. Though each diary song is a separate scene, with each man allowed his own particulars, they're unified by Smith's blunt portrayal of herself—we learn

about her as a date, not just an artist, and she makes a messy, inconsistent impression, veering from cynical and judgmental to petulant and needy.

On the album's centerpiece, the 12-minute "Fallen Skier," she skips between snippets of dinner conversation and an internal monologue about her date, a 47-year-old student and recovering addict who describes himself as a "fallen waiter/ski bum/party guy." From the moment she says "guy," drawing it out and accenting the word, you can tell she's mocking him. She repeats his story without sympathy, sounding frustrated, almost disgusted: "I feel I'm with a boy, a very young boy / He's only been away from home for 27 years / Only 27 summers, 27 winters / Partying and skiing / I guess that's why he hasn't gotten anything together yet / I don't think he realizes it, but his life has gotten away from him." When he seems concerned that her band might play hardcore punk, she makes a half-indignant aside that lightens the mood: "I stand, a middle-aged woman in a fantastically subtle silk jacket / Hush Puppies / Curly hair blowing in the wind / And this guy's fretting over the possibility / That I'm actually Henry Rollins." But almost immediately her complaints begin to boomerang, telling us as much about her as they do about him. "He never asked the name of my band," she says, "never tried to touch me." Suddenly she sounds vulnerable, even wounded—though her date's clearly wrong for her, she can't keep herself from wanting to be interesting and desirable to him. When she hugs him good-bye at the

end of their chemistry-free evening, it's unclear which one of them she's trying to console.

The Observer is a harsh toke, but it's compelling on all fronts—Smith's lyrics force you to think about loneliness, need, and bad dates, but the songs are as engrossing as they are exhausting. Her voice flits and dips like a plastic bag in the wind, moving from a moany sort of sing-speech to a deep, silky quaver to a thick shrill trilling, and she often draws her words like she's trying to fill the room with distended consonant sounds. The self-explanatory album opener, "I'm Not Into Being the Woman You're With While You're Looking for the Woman You Want," is a glowing example of the interplay between her vocals and Lester's guitar, which is equally distinctive and powerful. On "To Avoid Pain" the duo toys with early-60s pop country as Smith hee-haws like a half-drunk Brenda Lee, trying to talk herself down on the way to a first-time hookup: "Take a city bus / To a downtown hotel / I don't feel weird / I don't feel weird / Ask me / Ask me / Ask me if I do." Then, as a dark, discordant synth tone rises out of the music, she eagerly proclaims a dubious victory over her own unease: "Soon enough it's true-ooo!"

On "I'll Call You" Lester's buzzsaw guitar gallops around Smith as she reads a fake personal ad—her version of what a truthful guy would say—that sounds like it was placed by a member of the Duke lacrosse team. "Attraction Is Ephemeral," which provides the most complete picture of Smith and what she's about—the way she begins to doubt her own doubts, wondering if she'd be able to spot genuineness in a man even if it were there—is also the most musically moving track on the album. It's the most

romantic too—or rather, it's most explicitly about romance, or at least the yearning for it—though in typical Mecca Normal fashion, it opens up from there, addressing gender and class inequality, patriarchy, and how they can really ruin a date.

In press releases and online materials, Smith provides links to photos she's used in her dating profile, including shots where she's posing in her underwear and others where she's wearing nothing but the ribbon in her hair. But given how unpleasant *The Observer* makes her dating life out to be, it's hard to argue that the pictures are just Liz Phair-style exhibitionism—if you're gonna use sex to sell records, you don't usually linger on the vulnerability that intimacy requires.

In the band bio Smith notes her reluctance to make an album about dating—as evidenced by the fallout late last year over the book *Are Men Necessary?* by *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, romance is a loaded topic among the feminist cognoscenti, perhaps because it's considered unseemly or irresponsible for a feminist to open-

ly admit to wanting or needing something from men (or caring enough to be disappointed with them). Dowd claims that successful men don't want competition from their partners, and thus tend to date or marry down, choosing women who are younger, less educated, and less accomplished. Though she makes her argument largely with generalizations, as opposed to Smith's nuanced particulars, both writers are suggesting the same thing—that independent women wind up alone.

Smith is forthcoming about the concessions she makes for intimacy—while she holds to her standards with men who aren't good enough, she swallows her pride and sells herself out to others who don't have much idea who she is or much interest in finding out. But her artistic integrity never wavers, and throughout it's clear she knows herself and understands the choices she's making. It's a brave act for her to admit that she quietly shushes the "difficult" parts of herself in order to connect with men: she is airing a common secret of women's lives. **B**

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