

Liz Phair

at the Vic Theater, Chicago

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In *The Last Rock Star Book Or: Liz Phair, a Rant*, the new first novel by New York guerrilla rock critic Camden Joy, the protagonist (also called Camden Joy) is hired to write a where-is-she-now quickie biography about Liz Phair. The novel is set in the four-year gap between the release of Phair's second album, *Whip-Smart*, and her recently released *Whitechocolatespaceegg*, and Joy, the protagonist has been commissioned long-distance by a sleazy raconteur named Gabriel Snell to dictate the story into a microcassette recorder. Snell doesn't really care what the book says because it's his belief that people will buy it for the photographs.

The novel is a mess, albeit a likable mess – a meandering narrative dosed with entertaining anecdotes of middle-American teenage shit-stirring and suitably seminal rock references. (For instance, the protagonist Joy discovers that his girlfriend is the illegitimate daughter of the Stones' Brian Jones, conceived the night before he drowned in his heated swimming pool.) As if to poke fun at Snell's insistence that a picture is worth a thousand words, Joy the author has illustrated the novel with crude line drawings depicting, among other things, Liz Phair – with guitar – In her mother's womb and "The Contents of Liz Phair's Brain," which include "What to Wear," "Lyrics," "Melodies," "Verses," "Choruses" and "How to Tune the Guitar."

Art has a tendency to double back on life like a dog chasing its own tail. If Phair's show at the Vic on Sunday was any indication, the fictional Snell is an oddly prescient judge of Phair's character (and her appeal). In lieu of an opening act, the packed house was treated (or subjected, depending on your perspective) to a 35-minute slide show of Ms. Phair in various states of undress with various famous and not-famous friends. The slides were accompanied by what seem to be some of Phair's favorite tunes from her own middle-American teenage shit-stirring years, including Iggy Pop's "Lust for Life," the Violent Femmes' "Kiss Off," and Prince's "Little Red Corvette."

In my experience, most people fall into two categories: those best remembered as photographs and those best remembered as movies. Some people are most beautiful when posed – the isolated moment grants an appeal that motion disallows. Others reveal their gifts with the unfolding of time, communicating gifts with their movements – the way they walk, the way they laugh, the way they spin to respond to a greeting from behind. Liz Phair looks best in freeze frame and she knows it. She has used still photography to great effect throughout her career. All three of her album covers feature her image and her 1993 debut, *Exile in Guyville*, even includes a soft-core Polaroid photonarrative. (The woman in the interior Polaroids isn't actually her, but she could be. And that's part of the point) Phair has posed provocatively in a variety of music and entertainment magazines and, during Lilith Fair, even a Levi's ad. Sure, her not-so-little slide show was breathtakingly vain, but in the pictures you had to admit that Phair exuded confidence, sex appeal, brattiness, even a certain rock-star swagger – all components missing from her live performance.

When she hit the stage in the flesh on Sunday, the fresh-faced Phair announced how good it was to be home. She could have, perhaps should have, pointed out members of the audience . . .

and you were there. And you. And you!" Because, truth is, a great many of us were there five years ago, when Phair set off to see the Wizard. The *Sun-Times*' Jim Derogatis as the Cowardly Lion and the *Reader's* own Peter Margasak as the heartless Tin Man were both there in 1993, kicking down the yellow brick road behind her and both were there on Sunday night. I was there in '93 too, tugging desperately on that infernal curtain in my self-published fanzine. We all recall with VCR accuracy her onstage stiffness, her rudimentary flubs, her deer-in-the-headlights appearances on Letterman and Leno. And we have all been pleasantly surprised, probably more so than critics in cities where she did not start out, to see this year's looser and more comfortable version of Liz Phair in motion.

That's not to say that compared to other performers at her level of fame that Liz Phair is either loose or comfortable onstage. On Sunday, even with a summer megatour under her belt, she held her guitar as if it were a snake that would fang her the minute she let down her guard. When she set it aside to take the mike in hand, she was as hard to watch as ever. She didn't know what to do with her body, often resorting to illustrating her lyrics with gestures. During "Dance of the Seven Veils," from *Exile*, she accompanied the line "Toss you up and pump you full of lead" by forming a pistol with her right hand and firing three imaginary rounds into the balcony. If she were, say, Diana Ross, I suppose this could have been effective, but on Phair it looked gawky and contrived – as if some offstage coach were urging her to “work it” against her better judgment.

Of the 21 songs Phair and her band (which included Velvet Crush drummer, Ric Menck) played on Sunday night, more were from *Exile* than from the new *Whitechocolatespaceegg*. Considering the new album's obvious play for mainstream pop acceptance, this came as a surprise. All over *Whitechocolatespaceegg* I hear the echo of a voice whispering that old adage

in Phair's ear: "Don't bore us, give us the chorus." It might be the voice of somebody at Capitol, the major label that co-released (with Matador) her new album; or it might be Phair's own inner voice, telling her she can be the pop star she looks like in those photos; or it might be the voice of her much-ballyhooed baby boy, demanding a car and an Ivy League education. Back on 1993's *Exile*, she showed an astounding disregard for all the other voices, making a double album with verses at the wheel and, with the exception of the single "Never Said," choruses in the back seat.

So was Sunday's set a nod to a loyal hometown constituency? An attempt to show the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion that she could too sing those songs live? Or was it an implicit admission that her first album is and probably always will be her strongest work? The naïveté required to fire off a salvo like *Exile* can't be manufactured or recaptured, and those of us who've been hoping for another such round from Phair will have to content ourselves with imaginary shots aimed into the balcony.