

Give a big 'Hello' to Tristan Prettyman

by *George_Varga*

First impressions can be misleading, as Tristan Prettyman found out after she and her then-boyfriend, fellow singer-songwriter Jason Mraz, toured North America as the opening acts for James Blunt in 2005.

TRISTAN PRETTYMAN - Tristan Prettyman kicked off on a new tour recently. 'I'm so proud of this record that I want to share it with everyone,' she said. CNS Photo courtesy of Sasha Eisenman.

DiFranco one of Prettyman's favorites

Tristan Prettyman's reputation as a sensitive singer-songwriter is well-deserved. But when this 25-year-old troubadour first got into music, it was through her hard-rocking older brother, Cody.

"He was into Metallica," she recalls. "So I'd steal his Metallica albums and sing 'Enter Sandman' over and over, and Faith No More songs, too. My first concert he took me to was Widespread Panic."

What music are Prettyman and her band grooving to in their van? She cites a variety of old and new bands, including Vampire Weekend and The Police. "I also love rap," she says, giving a shout-out to 50 Cent.

But there's one artist who has probably inspired Prettyman above all others, and that's ...

ANI DIFRANCO

The 411: This fearless singer-songwriter and bandleader set the standard for making uncompromising music - in her case, an exhilarating fusion of folk, punk, funk and more - exactly the way she wants. All of her nearly two-dozen albums have been released on her own label, Righteous Babe, and her fierce do-it-yourself ethic was cited by Prince as a key inspiration for launching his own label.

Suggested albums: "Not a Pretty Girl," "Dilate," and "Living in Clip."

Prettyman: "She is one of the most amazing singer-songwriters, performers, activists and do-it-yourself people of all time. She is a role model to me more than anything. When I first discovered her, I was 15. To see a woman playing music who was not like Janet Jackson or Mariah Carey - these sexed-up pop dolls - was really inspiring for me. Ani opened the window for me to realize that all music wasn't just what you heard on Star 100 on the radio and that music can go beyond that and be deeper than that.

"Not to discredit musicians and songwriters like that, but Ani is amazing, and I fell in love with the sincerity of it all. I'm not much of a political person, but she knows her (stuff) and goes after issues and is so on point. It's nice to see someone who knows all her facts and is so confident." Blunt's career was exploding at the time, thanks to his ubiquitous ballad of spurned love, "You're Beautiful." The song, like the album it came from, was a worldwide smash. But Prettyman, to be blunt, found this English pop troubadour to be anything but beautiful.

"I hated him!" she recalled. "My feeling was: 'This guy is so (expletive) annoying. He's a womanizer - I can't stand him - get him out of here.' I was such a (straight) talker, and (later) I told him, so I don't feel bad about saying this now."

Prettyman, who was still getting over her breakup with Mraz, recorded her second album, "Hello," due out April 15 on Virgin Records, in London. One of "Hello's" two producers, Sacha Skarbek, was the co-writer of "You're Beautiful" and six other songs on Blunt's multimillion-selling debut album. What's more, Skarbek hired three of Blunt's band members to play on "Hello."

In a recent interview, Prettyman laughed about her initially awkward London encounter.

"One of Blunt's band members said 'I remember you! You were no fun at all. You're really different now.' Then, I met James and I think he didn't like me, because he knew I didn't like him. But his band members said 'Oh, her record's really coming out good, you should hear this.'

"We all went out together one night, and I said, 'I thought you were so lame,' and he laughed. We're good friends now and it's so ironic. He's a super-nice gentleman and his work ethic is amazing, especially given his reputation for partying. He's as flabbergasted by his fame as anyone else."

Prettyman has yet to score a hit remotely as big as "You're Beautiful," which was parodied in a 2006 video by Weird Al Yankovic as "You're Pitiful."

But the dozen-song "Hello" finds Prettyman evolving nicely. She is a more substantial and subtle artist than on her 2005 debut album, "Twentythree," which was promising but lacked the musical and emotional breadth and nuances of "Hello."

"When I made 'Twentythree' I hated the idea of recording," said Prettyman, who recently kicked off her second national tour of 2008 with her two-man band.

"I hated being in the studio and having to go back and record things 14 or 15 times. I felt that when you write a song, it's in its freshest state. Now, I realize you just have to get the musicians and the vibe right, and then it can be amazing. So, making 'Hello' definitely re-sparked my interest. Having these fresh new songs makes me excited to go on tour and play them live. I'm so proud of this record that I want to share it with everyone."

Technically speaking, "Hello" nearly qualifies as Prettyman's third album.

The former model and competitive surfer recorded another album's worth of material soon after her split with Mraz. But she worried that the resulting songs, which were fueled by her anger and disillusionment, would be too depressing to endure.

"They were slower, 'lock yourself in a cabin in the forest and shoot yourself in the foot' songs," she said. "But I was at a point where I was past it and didn't want to have to relive it on stage. I wanted to move on."

So she shelved most of those songs and started over.

The moment she did, Prettyman noted, "a whole bunch of new songs came that were definitely inspired by (Mraz) and things I've seen on the road, as well as by friends' relationships. I find the songs on this record much more interesting than the typical love/breakup stuff. I always try to write from a hopeful, helpful perspective; I don't believe in wasting time being negative."

Some of "Hello's" songs are upbeat and playful, while others indicate Prettyman may still be healing from her emotional wounds. On the electric-piano-tinged "Echo," she sings: Baby, I don't want to see your face 'round here no more.

On "California Girl," a bluesy ballad that is one of the highlights of the album, she vows: I'm never gonna fall for that old trick again.

Then, there's the album-closing "In Bloom," a hushed torch song that would do Norah Jones proud. It boasts Prettyman's most expressive singing on the album and such heart-on-sleeve lines as: I am not yours / You are not mine / Trees sway, seasons change / And so did my heart / We bend till we break / And then we fall apart.

"I think the majority of humans are always looking for a partner," she said. "That seems to be a goal in life, to find someone you're super-happy with, and I'm very inspired by that."

Prettyman was a 20-year-old student at MiraCosta College when her parents came to see her perform an opening slot gig at the Belly Up Tavern in San Diego. Her mother (a microbiologist), and father (a since-retired building contractor who is now a surfing instructor) surprised their daughter by encouraging her to drop out of school and pursue music full time.

"They said 'Just do what makes you happy. Play music and go and see the world. That will be more of an education than you'll ever get in school.' And I was like: 'Huh? OK.'

"Now, they take all the credit for my success and say, 'We told you so!' They are my biggest fans, and it's crazy to see how much they've changed. I'm going to cry talking about this. My parents used to be so concerned with working all the time. After I really got into music, it was like a switch was flicked, and they said, 'We need to live, have fun and be a family.' It's cool to see them now, totally relaxed, more in love than ever, and totally proud of their kids."

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