

Jenny Scheinman

A DOUBLE PORTRAIT IN AMERICAN MUSIC

Genre is irrelevant, categories are deaf. This theory couldn't be better argued than by noted composer, violinist, and singer Jenny Scheinman's two upcoming recordings: *Crossing The Field* and *Jenny Scheinman*, scheduled for simultaneous release on **May 27th** on **Koch Records**. *Crossing The Field* marks her fifth and most extravagant instrumental release to date. Its lush and cinematic arrangements feature longtime collaborator and **Grammy Award**-winning guitarist **Bill Frisell**, jazz-piano extraordinaire **Jason Moran (Blue Note)**, and a string orchestra led by founding members of the string quartet **Brooklyn Rider**, who are notably known for their ongoing work in **Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project**. *Jenny Scheinman* is her much-anticipated vocal debut, and in many ways is an intimate letter home. Combining original, autobiographical songs with the folk and country repertoire of her rural childhood out West, this eponymous album, produced and recorded by **Tony Scherr** in his Brooklyn home-studio to eight-track analog tape, is her most revealing and personal recording effort. The two releases, presented as a multi-faceted double portrait, establish Scheinman as a pioneer in modern American music and a leader of a generation of musicians committed to breaking down boundaries of culture and influence.

If Scheinman learned anything from her childhood growing up in a remote rural town of 300 people in northern California two hours by car from the nearest deputy sheriff, in a home with no electricity or phone and traveling often by horse, it was to appreciate and make use of everything. In these two unprecedented albums she does just that, unabashedly embracing it all: the violin and the fiddle, the epic orchestral and the narrative, the dance and the meditation, the raw and the rocking. From small town living to becoming an acclaimed artist working with the likes of **Norah Jones**, **Bill Frisell**, **Lucinda Williams**, **Madeleine Peyroux**, **Marc Ribot** and countless others, Scheinman leaps into the deep waters of American music, both vocally and instrumentally, spotlighting her singular talents as an idiosyncratic songwriter.

***CROSSING THE FIELD*, the instrumental record: "This is my extravaganza."**

Since moving to New York in 1999, Scheinman has become well-known as a violin player in both U.S. and European jazz circles. She has taken the **#1 Rising Star Violinist** title in the *Downbeat Magazine Critics Poll* and has been listed as one of their **Top Ten Overall Violinists** for the last five years. She has four releases of original music under her belt, the last of which, *12 Songs*, was named by the *New York Times* (Ben Ratliff) as one of the **Top Ten Albums of 2005**. In addition, she has garnered numerous high-profile arranging credits (i.e. *Lucinda Williams's West*, *Bono's A Dying Sailor to His Shipmates*).

But *Crossing* clearly distinguishes Jenny Scheinman as a musician not bound by the jazz sphere, and she confidently moves in a much broader world of sound. This isn't too surprising given some of the things she's achieved in the past year: "I spent a week with **Paul Motian** and Jason Moran at The Jazz Standard, did a movie score with Bill [Frisell] and toured with him and **Greg Leisz** a ton, had a weekly singing gig at The Living Room with Norah Jones and The Handsome Band backing me up, saw Wagner's "Ring Cycle" at The Met, spent a month with Lucinda Williams in L.A. making *West*, opened for and played with **Jimmie Dale Gilmore**, **Joe Ely**, and **The Flatlanders**."

The bulk of *Crossing* features a string orchestra, with multiple soloists, plus a jazz septet. It is her fourth collaboration with producer and recording engineer **Sascha Von Oertzen**, and by far her most adventurous. All but one of the 13 featured tracks are original compositions (**Duke Ellington's** "Awful Sad" is the sole cover). Scheinman's violin swoops over the full orchestra on "Born Into This," an homage to the violin concerto; she jousts with pianist Jason Moran on two trios, "That's Delight" and "Awful Sad;" and takes a careening solo over the fast-swinging "I Heart Eye-Patch." On the album's longest and most ambitious piece, "Hard Sole Shoe," Moran's piano lines build slowly over a thickening groove and respond with increasing intensity to horn-like

orchestral hits and slow-arching triadic phrases which threaten to envelop him. As he finally faces the band, a huge wave of strings rises up and obliterates him. There is a moment of reckoning, of total stasis, and then the victorious strings ascend again in a gorgeous bloom of tremolo and evaporate, exposing Frisell's guitar loops like another tiny orchestra that had been playing along the whole time.

The strings are highlighted on several compositions as a distinct voice. They are featured on the slow pastorate "Ana Eco," and have one track, "Ripples In The Aquifer," all to their own. They also clearly dominate "Einsamaller," the sole live track, performed to a sold-out crowd packed into the now defunct venue Tonic and conducted by fellow string player and visionary **Eyvind Kang**. Three ascending phrases become increasingly confused by canonic mutiny and rebellious drones, and at the height of a swarming high-D all strings are silenced, exposing the tail ends of the clarinet and cornet's held notes. These are in turn abruptly cut off, leaving nothing but the sound of the room, until a final phrase falls down the D-Major arpeggio into a cloud of guitar haze.

In addition to the orchestral pieces there are a handful of small ensemble compositions, many of which carry a more playful tone. **Ron Miles'** cornet solo on "Song For Sidiki" pushes a **Tony Allen** African-dance groove into the more transcendent realm of ***Bitches Brew*** with an improvised chorus of longer and longer ascending phrases culminating in a perfect bebop hand-off to the ending melody. Frisell spars with **Doug Weiselman** (clarinets) in "The Careeners," and with Miles in the on-the-brink "Three Bits and a Horse." The album's closer, a band-only echo of the first track, is an ode to Scheinman's new hometown and the three generations of Scheinmans that once lived there, appropriately titled "Old Brooklyn."

Throughout *Crossing*, Scheinman's talent as composer, arranger, casting director and soloist is at its peak. Her famously lyrical melodies are given a whole choir of strings; her game pieces are played by some of today's most imaginative jazz soloists; and her trademark dark tone (she is often mistaken for a violist) has never been more compelling.

Scheinman typically utilizes a visual image that serves as a muse for her recordings: "The image for *Crossing The Field* came to me during the first day of recording. It was a vision of a group of people, young and old, traversing a wide-open meadow in a unison of movement. The people were a bit bedraggled but not strained, not like gypsies from some distant land. I realized it was us--all of us--carrying instruments, food, tools, bags...there was a cart, too. And we were all crossing through this high wet grass, looking happy but like we'd been traveling a long time."

JENNY SCHEINMAN, the vocal debut: "This is my letter home."

Scheinman was born into a family of musicians who homesteaded a foggy bluff above the Pacific Ocean on the western most edge of the continental United States. Music and song were part of the landscape. From her parents she learned the old-timey songs, from her teachers "in town" she learned classical violin and piano, and from local bands at the Grange Hall (about thirty minutes away) she was introduced to country classics made famous by artists such as **Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, George Jones** and **Dolly Parton**. She left home as a teenager and, through her early twenties, rambled around various cities before putting down roots on the eastern seaboard in Brooklyn, NY. The lyric of the opening **Bob Dylan** cover says as much: "I was young when I left home, An' I been out a-ramblin' round, An' I never wrote a letter to my home..."

Since arriving in her adopted home in 1999, she developed a close-knit musical community, and later grew into her own as a singer, holding weekly residencies at the Living Room on Manhattan's Lower East Side (often backed by Norah Jones and The Handsome Band) and at Barbes in Brooklyn. The vocal album came about organically from these experiences. Scheinman is of the lineage of female country singers whose strength lies in the reality and plainspoken honesty they bring to love and life. These are the anti-coquettes, the women who sing about love and longing but also about changing diapers and feeding the chickens; singers like **Hazel Dickens, Loretta Lynn, Bonnie Raitt**, and Lucinda Williams.

Whereas the mental image for *Crossing The Field* was of a tribe trekking across a weathered terrain, the image for her vocal album was a photograph: "An old friend from home sent me a photo a year or so ago that I kept on my wall while we were making this recording. It's of a woman from the valley whose pick-up truck had broken down on the Wildcat, the long winding road that leads from the highway to home. She's standing in the billowing steam

of her overheated engine in a bright red dress and rain boots, and harnessed in the back of the pickup, inexplicably, is a huge inflatable heart strapped down with bailing twine.”

Jenny Scheinman was recorded in as rootsy an environment as one could find in Brooklyn: straight to eight-track analog tape at the home studio of Tony Scherr. Known for his rough-around-the-edges aesthetic, Scherr is a longtime regular sideman to Frisell and has worked as a bass player and guitarist for many of the great singers of our time including **Feist**, Norah Jones, **Willie Nelson**, **Ani DiFranco**, **Marianne Faithfull** and **Rickie Lee Jones**.

The songs on *Jenny Scheinman* live in four different sonic rooms: the early band tracks, the early duos, the austere acoustic, and the layered productions. The early duos and band tracks were all recorded live as first takes, with tons of bleed, no overdubs, no fixing--in other words, strictly old school. This gives them a confidence and integrity rare among the contemporary protooled, pitch-corrected mainstream. They are visceral and brave and not afraid to embrace their own slip-ups. Scherr’s guitar pleads and stammers against the lyric on Lucinda Williams’ masterpiece “King Of Hearts,” as if it too is begging for love. **Kenny Wollesen** slaps the snare indignantly in **Jimmy Reed**’s “Shame, Shame, Shame;” and the band is tight but irreverent under Scheinman’s defiant rendition of “Twilight Time” (made famous by **The Platters**), bringing the florid poetry of the lyric firmly back to earth.

The early duos also share a first-thought-best-thought approach that prevents them from sounding either intentionally “retro” or emotionally manipulative. Dylan’s “I Was Young” is never sentimental or wistful. **Mississippi John Hurt**’s “Miss Collins,” though about a mother mourning the death of her son, is never overtly tragic. These are strong, unadorned songs, sung with soul and emotion.

If the early duos and band tracks bring out the defiant Scheinman, the small acoustic tracks bring out the quiet storyteller and picture maker. “Newspaper Angels,” an original piece, describes a woman in a town much like her old hometown, saddled with children and an absent husband: “Outside the rain it is a fallin’, there’s nobody callin’ and nobody will. The wind is a howlin’ and loneliness sits by the window and watches her face, she sits by the window and waits.” “The Green,” another original tune, is about Scheinman’s aunt, whose unresolved disappearance in 2005 has left her family in limbo. The only redemption is the regenerative hope of nature interpreted by Scherr’s disembodied electric guitar, which ascends into thin air as Scheinman sings “the green will take her sometime or another.” “Johnsburgh, Ill.” (**Tom Waits**) and “Rebecca’s Song” (**Rebecca Fanya**), also produced in this intimate acoustic environment, feature two of Scheinman’s most emotive violin solos to date: chalky, minimal, willful.

The more produced originals, “Come On Down” and “Skinny Man,” provide a window into Scheinman’s more pop-and-rock-oriented songcraft. What started as homemade tape loops, created in the studio utilizing random and not so random sounds (a truck going by on the highway, knee slapping, backwards drum machine), were the foundation for full-on rocking multi-track tunes. A defining sound in these two tracks is **Steve Jordan**, the legendary drummer whose work with the likes of **Keith Richards**, **Stevie Wonder**, and **Sonny Rollins** has made him one of the major voices in American music. “Come On Down” honors one of the great performers and characters of American showbiz, **Little Richard**. Scheinman comments, “My uncle took me to see Little Richard on Martin Luther King Day last year. Little Richard was completely out of his mind, alternating between preaching and pimping, one minute talking about the glory of the Lord and the next minute pointing out some old friend in the audience who used to make him ‘scream like a white woman (ooooh!).’ He was outrageous, still pushing the boundaries of the acceptable like he did fifty years ago. On the subway ride home I wrote “Come On Down” as a rock-n-roll fantasy of a future time when God and sex can be finally de-segregated. It’s an homage to Little Richard and to rock-n-roll, the banished children of the church.”

“Skinny Man” is more pop in its harmonic trajectory. It’s a portrait of Scheinman’s violin teacher (who was a rock-n-roll character in his own right), still scheming and lying and as charismatic as ever when Scheinman saw him through the crack in his door the night before he died: “wicked angel, a drunkard and a gambler, tall tales of love, fame and grandeur.”

WHAT HOLDS these two recordings together? Is there any indication that they spring from the same imagination? Clearly within each album there is a broad spectrum of influence (*Crossing* is at once symphonic, jazz, and chamber music, and *Jenny Scheinman* covers old-time folk, roots rock, and pop), but what is the distance between them? And are these questions important or are we moving into a time when ‘bins’ have become obsolete, irrelevant? Are we now finally breaking into a world in which, like **Louis Armstrong** said nearly a century ago, “all music is folk music”? Listen, then you decide.