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VIEW / *Music*

Jonatha Brooke Amps Up

By JIM FUSILLI

JONATHA BROOKE has been in the music business for a decade. In 1991 she formed the acoustic folk-pop duo The Story and began recording her pristine voice and insightful lyrics. By 1994 she'd gone solo. But the story now is her just-released "Steady Pull," an album that signals she's reached a new plateau.

The disc seeks to introduce Ms. Brooke to a new audience, one that enjoys the beefed-up folk sound of Ani DiFranco and Shawn Colvin, to name two obvious influences on the recording. In fact, "Steady Pull" can be seen as Ms. Brooke's own attempt to break out of the folk corner, as Ms. Colvin did with her '96 disc "A Few Small Repairs." Top-shelf producer Bob Clearmountain worked with Ms. Brooke on the new disc, and the pair brought in ace musicians for a few tracks: Joe Sample and Mitchell Froom on keyboards, Marcus Miller on bass and, for vocal duets, old friend Neil Finn and Spearhead's Michael Franti, among others. They're joined by Ms. Brooke's new band, with drummer Larry Aberman providing the loose-limbed platform on which the arrangements are built and guitarist Goffrey Moore dashing off some flashy solos.

Seizing Control

"Steady Pull" is a lot of fun, thanks to smart lyrics and music that's both relaxed and assertive, with a bit of funk to energize Ms. Brooke's folk-based songs. She says it's the sound she's been after since 1998, when, midtour, she was suddenly dropped by her record label, MCA, and faced with some big choices. "I was really down," she said during a recent conversation. "But then I realized nothing had changed. I still had music to play. In a way, it was very strengthening."

That was when Ms. Brooke decided to seize control of her own career by starting Bad Dog records and issuing a recording of performances at various concerts. The aptly named "Live" ('99) showcased a newly aggressive Jonatha Brooke, a singer-songwriter intensifying the sound of her previous solo albums and her work with Jennifer Kimball in The Story. Brian Blades sat in on drums, and Gerry Leonard provided what Ms. Brooke described in the liner notes as "strange, brilliant ambient guitar." She admits the "Live" disc was a bit of an experiment. "It was a test to see if I could put out a record by myself," she said. Perhaps more importantly, it gave her audience notice that she was going after a crisp, contemporary sound.

"Most of them are willing to grow with me," she said of her fans. "But some cringe when I play electric guitar or bass. I think most people respect it when someone is trying to evolve. People like to be challenged."

> 'Most of them are willing to grow with me,' says the folk singer-songwriter of her fans.

For "Steady Pull," she retained the immediacy of "Live" by performing her vocals and guitar parts in the studio as if she were on stage: in front of a mike, with Mr. Clearmountain recording even the gaffes. "There's so much music now that's shined up and glossed over," she said. "I wanted people to know there's a human being singing on this record."

"I would love to sell a couple of million copies," she laughed, "but I have no illusions about competing with the 19-year-olds" who top the charts. "I have hope for everything, but I guess I hope it reaches a lot of people."

It won't be easy. She knows today's pop scene is geared toward promoting acts with a saccharine-sweet sound and lyrics that are ever-so-slightly naughty. Ms. Brooke broods wryly about a boy band that felt disappointed when it only sold 1.6 million discs during the first week its new album was available. She says she's sure she can count on sales of 75,000 to 100,000 discs, all bought by her loyal fans who came to her during The Story days and have stuck with her. Her promotional budget was based on those sales figures, but though the record came out just this week, she concedes, "we've already spent that money. Oh well."

Melanie Nissen

Jonatha Brooke's **'Steady Pull'** *hits stores this week.*

Barebones Tour

So she'll be promoting "Steady Pull" all by herself on a bare-bones tour of Borders bookstores through early March. Following that, she plans to take her band on the road in the U.S. through June. She's also trying to cobble together a summer tour of Europe. This modest approach may work in her favor since, in many ways, a quiet bookstore may still be the best venue for newcomers to hear Ms. Brooke: Her lyrics remain her strong point. There is a refreshing directness to the words on "Steady Pull," which has two basic themes: the fire of passion, and what remains after those flames go out.

Sometimes the themes meet neatly in the same tune: "I am leaving because I love you/ I am leaving because I don't/ And I'm hoping you will follow/ and I'm praying that you won't" is how loves dies in "Linger," the album's catchy opening cut and first single. "My clothes are in your closet and my books surround your bed/ I wonder what you expected and what you got instead," she sings in the title track, before adding, "Where there is ruin there is hope for treasure."

But it's her song "I'll Take It From Here" that seems to best summarize her own situation: "I'll take it from here/ I'll succeed or I will fail but I will decide."