

Looking Over

*Aimee
Mann*

*Finds Inspiration
for Her New
Album in
the Past*



Her Shoulder

AIMÉE MANN HAS A NEW HABIT.

BY KEN FOSTER

No, it's not boxing—that hobby is old news now that she's worked her favorite sport into the action of "The Forgotten Arm," the latest release from her own SuperEgo label. "I listen to very little music in general," Mann confesses from her Los Angeles studio. "I wouldn't know where to start." But she's trying to get back into the habit via a piece of equipment that now takes center stage on her desk. Her newest gadget is not an iPod, a satellite radio, or even an oldfangled turntable. It's a wooden radio from the fifties, with an elaborate grille design that resembles the dashboard of an old car, and a tube system that has to warm up before she can use it. "I dusted it off and put it on my desk and found KCRW," she says. "Now in the morning I'll turn the radio on."

THOUGH IT MAY SOUND ODD TO HEAR OF A musician who doesn't listen to music 24-7, it's not that uncommon—especially if one is actively writing music. “If I’m writing songs, I keep working on them in my head, and it gets me off track if I listen to other people’s music,” she says. “Or, God forbid, I start unconsciously stealing.”

When she does listen, it's more often for specific musical references. For *The Forgotten Arm*'s seventies-era vibe and story line, Mann found herself dusting off old releases by the Band, early Elton John, and Rod Stewart. Her previous release, *Lost in Space*, like her three solo records before it, was a richly layered recording that took advantage of all the unlimited tracks and overdubs that digital recording allows. But for *The Forgotten Arm*, Mann was inspired to go in the other direction.

“Sometimes you go back to old records and realize there's nothing going on. The impression is that it is really *rocking*. Listen to Rod Stewart. ‘Maggie Mae’—that's just acoustic guitar driving it. But my memory is that it really rocks along. Acoustic guitar and mandolin!” she laughs.

The other element that drives Mann's *Arm* is its character-inspired songwriting, which has caused some listeners to describe the CD as a collection of stories or a musical novella. Mann prefers the more old-fashioned term *concept album*.

The songs follow the meeting and courtship and struggles of a drug-addled Vietnam-era amateur boxer and the girl he meets while working at the Virginia State Fair. While the CD's liner notes playfully refer to each song as a “chapter” in the book of *The Forgotten Arm*, Mann hesitates at categorization. “It's in an order,” she says, “but it's not a musical. All of the songs orbit around these characters, and they meet and go on a road trip. It's not like a ton of stuff happens. Each song doesn't advance the plot. It's more like a soundtrack to a movie that doesn't exist. It's mostly mood.”

Intentionally sequenced as the CD is, Mann won't object to fans' listening to the songs in iTunes' Shuffle mode. “I put them in an order that was chronological to me, but I certainly would never write a song that couldn't stand on its own,” she says. “You can ignore the concept altogether if you like.”

Aimee Mann Playlist

🎧 **“DENTON ROAD”** by Michael Penn (*Mr. Hollywood Jr. 1947*): This is a song from his new album. I love how he tells such a painful story in such a beautiful way.

🎧 **“CARING IS CREEPY”** by the Shins (*Oh, Inverted World*): I love their melodies and the way they add experimental sounds. They don't sound like anyone else right now.

🎧 **“PITSELEH”** by Elliott Smith (*XO*): I always loved Elliott's songwriting. It's so painfully honest.

🎧 **“GRAVITY”** by Embrace (*Out of Nothing*): This reminds me of a Coldplay song. Makes complete sense since they wrote it with Chris Martin.

🎧 **“DAVID”** by Nellie McKay (*Get Away from Me*): It's witty cabaret music.

🎧 **“SOMEWHERE ONLY WE KNOW”** by Keane (*Hopes and Fears*): Once in a while a really great song gets played on the radio. This is one of them.

🎧 **“LIGHT AND DAY/REACH FOR THE SUN”** by the Polyphonic Spree (*The Beginning Stages of the Poly-*

phonic Spree): They have this sort of refreshing relentless optimism that's kinda funny. I first saw them in London when we played the same TV show.

🎧 **“VAN LEAR ROSE”** by Loretta Lynn (*Van Lear Rose*): Who doesn't love Loretta Lynn and Jack White? What a brilliant combination.

🎧 **ANY SONG** off Elton John's *Tumbleweed Connection* or *Madman across the Water*: A lot of this has influenced my songwriting lately. It is very Southern rock with some English flair.

🎧 **“STRANGE CONDITION”** by Pete Yorn (*Music for the morning after*): This is just a great album from start to finish.

🎧 **“REASON TO BELIEVE”** by Rod Stewart (*Every Picture Tells a Story*): I just started listening to Rod Stewart again for the first time in years. I forgot how good his first album is.

🎧 **“ALL THE YOUNG DUDES”** by Mott the Hoople (*The Ballad of Mott: A Retrospective*): I am just rediscovering them now. They are the quintessential British rock stars.

Singer-songwriter Joe Henry's live recording approach further supports the seventies vibe. Henry succeeds a long line of clever, trick-filled, Jon Brion-esque producers, including Brion himself. "I thought of Joe Henry early on and was familiar with his approach," Mann says. "The more spontaneous way of recording was something I'd wanted to do. Recording with the band was maybe nine days total, and then I did vocals and that always takes longer. There were a couple of corrections we made in mastering, and that was it." In other words, the new record has none of the layering overdubs familiar to fans of *Whatever, I'm with Stupid*, or *Bachelor No. 2*.

The Naked Arm

Fans of Mann's more ornate arrangements needn't worry, though: as Mann discovered, stripping down, musically speaking, can bring out the bolder side of the songs. "If you have the nerve to take stuff off, each thing you leave on sounds more muscular and thus fuller," she says. But in the world of digital recording, where every trick—not to mention an unlimited number of recording tracks—is easily at your fingertips, resisting the urge to add more layers can truly be a challenge.

"It's hard," Mann notes with real surprise. "Because you think it is going to make it better. It seems like it would make [the sound] fuller, right? To double the guitar and add on the little teeny part and the counter line. It's interesting—it sounds thinner and thinner the more you add on, and softer too. When I stick my voice on something, it's so soft anyway. I can't really afford to have it made softer. Joe thought I was singing better, but maybe it's an effect of not having as much stuff in the mix on each of the songs."

Recording the band live helped simplify things, Mann says, as did working with a producer who knew when a mix was done. "Even when you make a really stripped-down record that sounds live, you—as a musician or producer or someone in the studio—become accustomed to working a certain way. And especially working with [Digidesign's] Pro Tools, with unlimited tracks, it is very foreign to stick with four instruments and maybe one overdub."

It's about as foreign, in fact, as expecting a kid to practice self-control around a Halloween candy stash. In past sessions, this digital gorging has often brought the production schedule down to the wire. Mann herself hasn't always been able to resist temptation. Her enviable control of everything from writing to distribution allowed her to add an extra song to the *Lost in Space* track list *after* sending out review copies. While she clearly has no regrets about that critically acclaimed set and its complex "space noise," Mann seems equally liberated by Henry's back-to-basics approach.

"Joe's really good about that," she adds. "He says, 'That sounds good, let's move on.' He really discourages that



Playing Both Sides

Some artists claim the digital age of MP3s and CD burning has stifled their creativity and robbed them of their power. But for Aimee Mann, the advent of online distribution and iPods is just another phase in a career that spans musical developments from the early days of MTV—which launched her former band, 'Til Tuesday, into the Top 10—to the digital recording revolution of the nineties, when she joined Ani DiFranco and others in using audio technology and the Internet as a way to gain artistic freedom.

For fans who embrace digital distribution, Mann's Web site (www.aimeemann.com) offers streams and downloads. But she also feels strongly about overseeing the physical package of her work, employing illustrators and designers to create something her fans can't get in a simple download. "If I expect people to buy the physical package, I don't want them to have to deal with a crappy jewel box," she says. "I like a nice, healthy package with a booklet, and illustrations for every song." But Mann has to remind herself to leave time for graphic artists like Seth, who designed the booklet for 2002's *Lost in Space*. "I forget that if I'm requiring an artist to come up with 12 illustrations, it's an enormous amount of work."

Though she may appreciate MP3 players as a cool way to share and distribute music, Mann still prefers the old-fashioned experience of listening with lyric booklet in hand. "I have an iPod, but I have my husband [singer-songwriter Michael Penn] program it for me, so I can't really tell you what's on it," she admits. "There are probably a couple of records that I specifically requested as references, but his computer did all the CD loading." Still, the iPod's portability appeals to her: "I don't listen to it at home. I listen to it on the road."

kind of adding on. Especially in mixing—with just bass, drums, piano, *maybe* organ and electric guitar, *maybe* acoustic guitar, *possibly* tambourine—I would have thought that would sound stripped down.” The result is a mix that seems just as full as is necessary, with plenty of room for Mann’s deceptively simple voice.

“I do like to just get out of the way of the song,” Mann explains. “Either the song can stand on its own or not. It really bugs me when singers get all showboaty

“A lot of it is taken from a conversation with a dear friend of mine who’s been a crack addict for 20 years, in and out of treatment centers. It was heartbreaking, because he was convinced he could absolutely not live sober. He said he was thinking he’d just clean up for Christmas and be with his family, then it was over! There was no way I was going to write about it while he was still in danger.” Fortunately, Mann’s friend found his way out of the abyss, and Mann found her way into the song.



“‘Maggie Mae’—that’s just acoustic guitar driving it. But it really rocks along. Acoustic guitar and mandolin!”

and emotional. It’s like they think you’re too dumb to get the emotional subtext of the song, so they have to have a little catch in their voice.”

An additional shift is a more prominent use of keyboards, and not just in the arrangements. “I try to write more songs on piano,” she says. “It also is part of the era of [albums like] Elton John’s *Tumbleweed Connection*. I always think writing on a different instrument will get me out of certain chord progressions that I might do automatically on guitar.”

In the end, though, it’s always Mann’s lyrics that hold everything together: dark, witty, character-driven encounters that seem too personal not to be true, too universal not to be fiction. It’s a thin line to tread. “If it’s too much about me or doesn’t really translate, I’d definitely hesitate to write it. And if something is too upsetting, I don’t want to go to a place, like writing about my dear old dead grandma or something,” she says. Still, *The Forgotten Arm* manages to be both brighter and bleaker than the addiction-themed *Lost in Space*. On “Clean Up for Christmas,” for example, the narrator makes an empty promise that’s even more chilling given Mann’s cavalier delivery.

“Once he was out of the danger zone, then I was able to write the story. Otherwise, it’s just too much.”

Describing the evolution of “Little Bombs,” another cut on the new CD, Mann begins, “I was in Atlanta. I was on the 22nd floor. . . .” As the lyrics’ origins blur into a recitation of the lyrics themselves, Mann catches herself and stops in a manner that could seem prickly, but is rather the sensibility of someone for whom everything comes down to pure and simple songcraft. “You know,” she says, “I can’t really describe it, because I was trying to describe it in the song.”

With Mann, the surfaces of things can be misleading, just as her glorious melodies often momentarily disguise the bitterness of the lyric. Or the way in which the more spare sound of *The Forgotten Arm* might be misread as merely nostalgic. Or just like that old radio on her desk, dusted off not for the sake of fashion, but for the simple function of what’s inside.

KEN FOSTER is the author of a collection of stories and the editor of two anthologies. His latest book, *The Dogs Who Found Me*, will be out next year.