

Joanna Newsom - Ys (2006)

Written by bluelover
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1. *Emily* [12:08] 2. *Monkey & Bear* [09:28] 3. *Sawdust & Diamonds* [09:55] 4. *Only Skin* [16:53] 5. *Cosmia* [07:17] Bill Callahan – vocal harmonies Matt Cartsonis – banjo, mandolin Grant Geissman – electric guitar Don Heffington – percussion Emily Newsom – vocal harmonies Joanna Newsom – harp, leader, vocals, pedal harp Van Dyke Parks – accordion Lee Sklar – electric bass

Harpist and singer Newsom's debut album, *The Milk-Eyed Mender* established her as one of the most individual American new-folk artists, but *Ys* is a quantum leap out of that scene. Recorded by Steve Albini, mixed by Jim O'Rourke, and with orchestral arrangements by Van Dyke Parks, it's a visionary statement of such extraordinary beauty and invention that it seems to have sneaked in from some parallel world.

The cover displays the sort of allegorical tableau that Albrecht Dürer might have painted, and there is something ageless and troubadour-like in Newsom's glittering harp and poetic narratives. Although the shortest song is over seven minutes and the longest over sixteen, these are finely-wrought, suite-like creations, in which she investigates both mythical worlds and the strangeness of the here and now. On "Emily", Parks complements Newsom's swooning vocal melodies with mercurial flurries of strings, while on "Monkey And Bear", his ensemble arrangements evoke the sepia-tinged Americana of his *Song Cycle* album, and his work on Brian Wilson's *Smile*.

Newsom's cartoon-character yelp – a stumbling block for many would-be admirers – is much more settled and expressive now. In her more hushed moments her voice is reminiscent of Bjork's, and at full throttle attains a harder edge redolent of 70s singer-songwriter, Melanie Safka. Throughout one senses she is wrenching out something from deep within, which makes her delivery peculiarly moving.

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Her lyrics may be childlike at times but there's nothing mimsy or fey about them. 'I was all horns and thorns, sprung out fully-formed, knock-kneed and upright', she exclaims on "Sawdust And Diamonds". Ys nods towards the panoramic sweep of Van Morrison's Astral Weeks, the exquisite detail of Nick Drake's Bryter Later, and the billowing orchestrations of Joni Mitchell's "Paprika Plains". And there's no doubt that this fabulous, fantastical music belongs in such exalted company. ---Mike Barnes, BBC Review

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