

Smart Pop for the New Year

BY CYNTHIA POTTS

"This album covers the course of a relationship," Mara Levi said, her distinctive voice tinged with old regret. "Which obviously didn't turn out very well."

The relationship may have tanked, but *Life's A Ball*, Levi's debut album, is an unqualified success. Combining smooth, Morissette-style vocals with ambitious, complex musical arrangements results in an album you reach for again and again – and enjoy with every listening. Levi's unique musical style stands up to every challenge she takes on, whether it be the politically-tinged folk "La Di Dee Da," poppy "In My Head," or sad love song, "Take the Blame."

Capturing universal experiences and expressing them the way we would – if we were smart, sarcastic, and both uber-confident and supremely vulnerable – Levi is a talented lyricist, writing songs that are engaging and enjoyable. She's comfortable slinging words in an intelligent, creative fashion, which has resulted in her work being branded "Smart Pop." You find heartbreak without histrionics, pain without pathos, confidence without that "I've had way too many antidepressants for breakfast" feel found in a lot of contemporary folk-pop.

For example, from "Without Alarm" – the ultimate reflecting on one's recent-breakup song: "It seems that you've begun to wear me down / It's time I learned to face my fear / And in the end you'll say you stood your ground / Well that's not a compromise, my dear."

Subtle but stinging points ring throughout Levi's work – the type of *bon mots* one wants to shamelessly steal, whilst hoping desperately to avoid ever having to use them. The chorus from "I'm Sorry" pinpoints with razor accuracy the weight of emotion that can hide behind ordinary words: "And I'm so sorry, and I'm so sad / And now it's over, and we've been had. / Well it's the end, it's the end of a long, long day / and now all we ever do is say goodbye."

All seems innocuous enough, until put into context: "Those words, so sharp / are full of holes, they just express my fear / and leave you in the dark."

It's not all dark. At several points, Levi celebrates strength and resilience. The album ends optimistically with "I've Arrived," one of the best tracks.

Levi's musical education

shines throughout the entire album. She began playing piano at 4, picking up other instruments as she matured. Studying jazz composition in college definitely influenced her song structures. "I like to put something different in there, something unexpected." With jazz, classical, and myriad folk elements running throughout the album, Levi keeps listeners entertained without ever being predictable.

"Several of these songs were written while I was with my band before I started a solo career," Levi explained. She'd been the songwriter, vocalist, and bass player with an indie-pop band, Kid Sampson, for a number of years.

Currently, Levi is touring the Washington, DC, and metropolitan New York areas. "The crowds have been good, and it's been a great experience. I'm not on the road every day at this point, but just about every weekend I've got somewhere to be." Don't despair if you're not headed to the big city anytime soon – Levi has expressed interest in playing in Vermont if

the right opportunity arises.

Beyond promoting the current album, Levi is working on material for a second album. She also has an unexpected project waiting in the wings. "I'd love to write a requiem." Admittedly, writing a classical mourning song is not the traditional direction for an up-and-coming folk musician to go, but Levi is determined. "Right now, I'm researching and taking notes. But it's something I'd love to get done, a large piece with lots of strings." While we'd be curious to see how this ambitious project turns out, what we're really hungry for is another album in the tradition of *Life's A Ball*.

You can listen to Levi's work on-line at her website, www.maralevi.com. A number of audio clips are available, as are links to her tour dates and locations. ▼

Cynthia Potts listens to music while driving around Plattsburgh.



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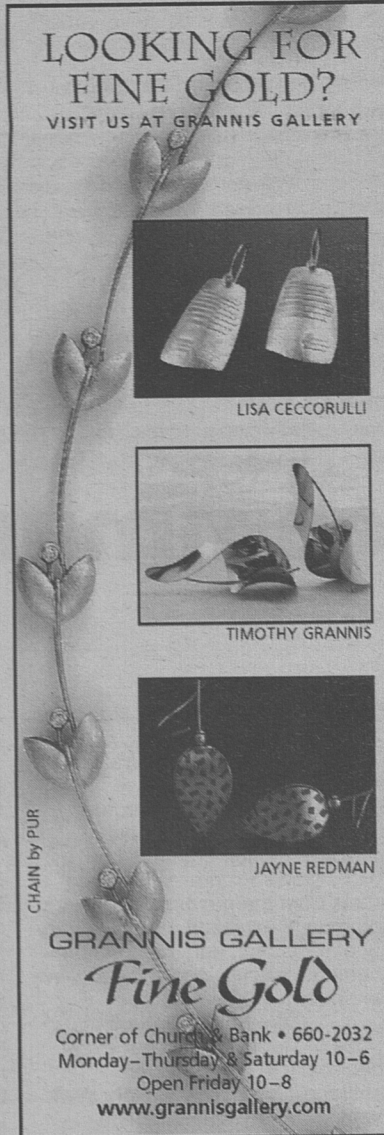
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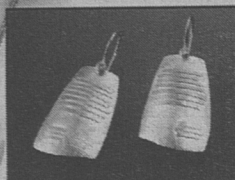
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