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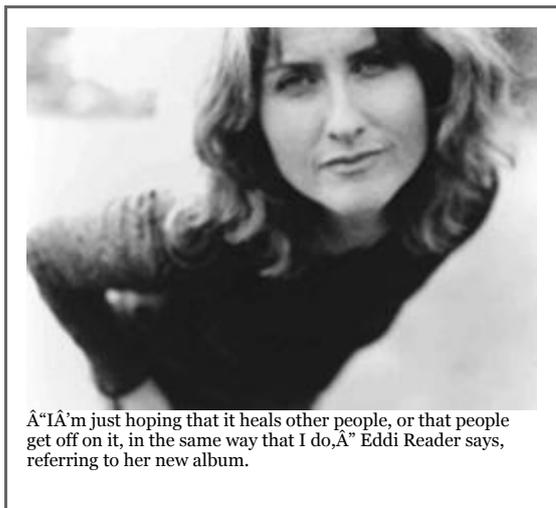


Folk Implosion

On her latest album, Eddi Reader stays true to her *Simple Soul*

By Jessica Parker

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“I’m just hoping that it heals other people, or that people get off on it, in the same way that I do,” Eddi Reader says, referring to her new album.

Songs with meaning were once an occupational requisite for anyone taking the stage; now, they're restricted to the catalogs of "serious" musicians. Thoughtful storytelling has been eliminated from pop music, and until Jewel's next album, folk music will continue to be ignored by the masses. This dire state of affairs makes *Simple Soul*, the latest album from the gifted Eddi Reader, all the more welcome. The strength of an Eddi Reader song is not only her perfectly breathtaking voice but the story that unfolds with each allegorical verse.

"I like the old French song where you'd have a story of maybe a prostitute walking the streets and finding love," Reader says, on the phone from her London home. Further describing her early songwriting days with collaborator Mark

E. Nevin, she says, "We'd write songs about going to see a fortuneteller in a fairground, and she would tell you that the man you were in love with was a waste of time and you wouldn't believe her. The last line would always be that you would see the man, and you realized by looking in his eyes that what she was saying was the truth. I love that kind of song with a story and a little bit of an atmosphere rather than just, 'I love you, *ooh ooh*, baby.' I like the noise of a lot of pop music, but what really gets me going is a story and coming out for an evening and listening to somebody tell you their life in song. I think it's wonderful. I'm very into the theater of it all."

The Scottish singer embodies a bygone era of songwriting, where wit and grace were every bit as important as wardrobe and makeup are to synthetic pop stars today. Even a simple question like, "How's the weather?" yields a poetic response from the lovely Reader. "It's raining," she replies. "We've got spots of sunshine today, as well. But it's all very dramatic, which is good for writing, for the sort of old romantics that always end up living in Britain. The sky is always stormy and looks like some sort of mythical god's going to come and descend upon us or something," Reader says in her rich Scottish brogue, sounding every bit as incredible as her words.

The Glasgow native first discovered her strong, ethereal voice as a child, starting to sing and play the guitar at age 10. Like a page from a pastoral 18th-century novel, Reader recounts days spent singing while washing the stairs of tenement buildings where she grew up. The stone-walled entrances caused her voice to reverberate; she couldn't help but take advantage of the stunning acoustics. In her late teens, the blossoming vocalist left for London and fondly remembers years spent performing on the streets there.

"When I did my own touring with my acoustic guitar on my back singing street songs, I went

everywhere," Reader says. "That was what was great about busking in the street, was that you went to maybe Lyon in France, and you'd stand in the street and you'd sing and you'd meet someone who would invite you to their home for lunch, or some old lady or someone you could trust. Then they'd give you a bed for the night. Maybe you'd stay for a couple of nights. I was always protected when I did it because I always had a couple of friends with me. I don't know if I'd let any daughter of mine do it, but it was great for me."

A lot has changed for Reader since then. Not long after she arrived in London, the young musician toured with the Eurythmics and later became a backing vocalist for Thomas Dolby and Gang of Four. Eventually, she met songwriter-guitarist Nevin, with whom she formed Fairground Attraction. The band split a year later but not before it scored a hit single, "Perfect," as well as a U.K. No. 1 album, *First of a Million Kisses*, in 1988.

Fast-forwarding through the years, Reader says that "between that, I had two babies, a marriage to a Frenchman that broke up, and various other things, including the death of a parent and the longing for a girl child, which I haven't had yet." She has, however, just released her fifth solo album, *Simple Soul*, on Compass Records, and true to its title, the record is a collection of 11 straightforward folk numbers confronting love, longing, and leaving. Most songs feature minimal adornment, Reader and company opting instead to spotlight her empathic voice. Collaborator Boo Hewerdine shares songwriting credits on *Simple Soul*, as has been the case since Reader's self-titled release in 1994. Reader feels "blessed" to have him in her life, emphasizing that they work together like "brother and sister."

Simple Soul's title track showcases the perfect musical union of Reader and Hewerdine. A classic folk structure, augmented by an otherworldly "toy keyboard," renders "Simple Soul" the kind of song that sticks in your head like gum on your shoe. The chill-inspiring line, "Not too complicated to shiver when I'm cold," sums up Reader's whole nature and the entire feel of this album. Oddly, the song was inspired by the Alcoholics Anonymous creed, which, Reader says, calls for simplicity as the cure for addictions. "It doesn't have to be that hard," she pleads on the same song. "If it hurts you, let it go."

"We as humans, we have this soul that's simple and pure when we're born, and we go through life and we are tempted to be separate from our path, which is a loving path," she says. "This album feels like a really lovely and healing time for me because I'm doing music that really touches me and heals me rather than anyone else. I'm just hoping that it heals other people, or that people get off on it, in the same way that I do."

At different times, *Simple Soul* is honest, poetic, and human, precisely mirroring its maker. On the phone, the red-haired Scot is surprisingly soul-baring and warm, even agreeing to sing to this admiring American journalist. Toward the end of an hour-long interview, Reader, quite naturally, turns the tables on the interview, inquiring of my history just as I have of hers. She's hardly intrusive though; she simply delights in intimacy, getting to know *people*. During the interview, she expresses the joy she finds in community living with her neighbors, speaking fondly of the "mother's club" that has adopted her since the birth of her two children, Charlie, 12, and Sam, 8.

"Once you become a mother, suddenly you're in the mother's club, and all the women that are mothers become friendly and they help you out," she explains. "So I'm finding a lot of beauty in community living with my neighbors. I'm finding the romance of boyfriend-girlfriend stuff has given way to romance of how beautiful life can be with the communities that we are living in."

Not surprisingly, *Simple Soul* is her most stripped down, up-close-and-personal affair, making her previous album, 1999's *Angels and Electricity*, sound downright ornate. *Angels* is one of those perfect albums that communicates so much more than words can, a dreamlike album that speaks to the heart

without button-pushing clichés or grandiose orchestral moments. But *Simple Soul* is much more grounded in classic roots music, highlighting the sound of voice and acoustic guitar. It's so bare in places that the sound of fingers sliding down the strings or faint background vocals become the centerpiece instead of merely the consequence.

"My songs now are really intimate," Reader says. "I try to make them very much a human experience, not a big ego experience. It's all about relating to human beings. Look at what it's like to be a human being in 2001. 'How is it for you? Is it terrible, is it OK, you happy? This is what it's like for me. This is what it's like to be a mother; this is what it's like to be in love; this is what it's like to lose; this is what it's like to win.' I'm really into communicating all that without big noise in the way."

"Footsteps Fall" illustrates Reader's eschewal of the elaborate: Detailing the loneliness of hearing "the sound of love through a stranger's wall," Reader admits that it's the silence that breaks her most of all. As Reader reveals, all of her songs are about "questioning the human condition."

"If you really let go with music, with singing, for me, it comes out of your mouth like a baby's cry," she explains insightfully. "And it will come out right, unless you put your mind and your ego in there and try to say, 'Well, I'm going to show off here with a nice, big high note or with a very clever word.' If you can get rid of all that and just let be whatever it is to come out, then you'll find that it will teach you things about what you're feeling that you didn't even know you needed to be taught."

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