

Classy James finally appears to be making her mark

By Gene Armstrong
The Arizona Daily Star

For years, critics have been calling singer, songwriter and guitarist Susan James the next big thing.

Now that she's touring with Ratdog and last year saw the release of her debut album, maybe the rest of us will notice.

From Palo Alto, Calif., James exercises her classically trained soprano in a gritty, emotional manner. She rides her voice from a delicate trill to a guttural moan in the same phrase.

Her style has been compared to that of such rock women as Tori Amos, Joni Mitchell and P.J. Harvey. But that's too easy.

Because of James' limber vocalizations, graceful and inventive melodies and her uncanny range, it might be more appropriate to call her a female version of Jeff Buckley.

In addition to touring with Bob Weir, Rob Wasserman and Ratdog, James has opened shows for John Doe and former Fleetwood Mac member Lindsay Buckingham. With Doe, she shares an anything-goes punk



Susan James is an original

attitude and with Buckingham, an uncanny melodic sense and inventive guitar prowess.

She's known for sly, unconventional guitar solos and hooks that transport her songs to the realm of madrigal blues, avant-garde pop and Middle Eastern-flavored jazz.

That heady combination of James' diverse interests can initially make a challenging listen.

But if you pay attention and listen more than once to wrenching and insightful tunes such as "We Both Know," "Rock Star" and "Suicide Door," you'll find yourself needing to hear them a couple of times a day.

James also creates unique scenes and characters, such as in the following passage from her tune "Eileen":

"We found her in the corner of Ellie's Cafe / Looking like a

cabist painting someone threw away / Her shirt was on her leg, her skirt was on her arm / That night we raised a toast to all her hidden charms."

And so-called angry rock gals such as Alanis Morissette sound

REVIEW

"Shocking Pink Banana Seat," Susan James. Major Label Records.

like whining teen-agers next to the righteous retributive power that James invokes in "I Want You": "I want you to be like me ... spread like pretty flowers on the ground."

It's that poetic power to charm, rebuff and spin tales at the same time that makes James' music so attractive.