

CREATIVE LOADING

SUSAN JAMES Fantastic Voyage: a double album Red Letter Records

It's rare that a singer/songwriter comes out of nowhere with — of all things — a double album. No, a two-disc set is usually the sort of grand gesture reserved for the midpoint in an artist's career, often indicating some ambitious change of direction or revived interest in their own career. What's even more peculiar in the case of Susan James — a west coast folkie with a voice like Sinead O'Connor and a sensibility similar to Liz Phair — is that, judging by the color photos included in her double-disc CD set *Fantastic Voyage*, the "nowhere" from which she has come could very well be Alaska, Spain, or the surface of the moon.

CD One, entitled "Lovesick" — The Songs, contains ten original tunes written by James and recorded in what sounds like a live setting (there's even some spontaneous applause after "Every Side of Lonely"), although the weird sampling and electronic enticements on many of these numbers give them a suspiciously studio-like ambience. Nevertheless, the string squeak of James' acoustic guitar on "Manne" is startlingly real (as is the presence of the Replacements' Tommy Stinson backing her on the bass), and it's hard to envision any listener who couldn't warm up to the frank true-life message of "Static": "Turn off the radio! can't stand the sound/Don't want to hear love is good/When I'm down." James describes the awkwardness of starting a new relationship in "Falling Waltz," alternating a Duane Eddy baritone guitar twang with sorrowful fiddle notes as she sings, "You left me waiting at the Roosevelt Bar/Like a martini glass filled with ash of cigar." Her most moving tune here is the album's title track, on which she sings, "Read some books in college/Fell in love there too/Argued over *The Fountainhead*/And what if Ayn Rand was true?" before her optimism sours, causing her to end the song with this bleak (albeit realistic) vision: "There are kids in the yard...they dream of being astronauts/Some will board the *Challenger*/While some walk on the moon."

Since these forty-odd minutes of music could, when combined with the additional half hour or so of material on CD Two, almost all fit together on a single disc, their separation is due more to artistic choice than practical mechanics. It's no surprise, then, that the second CD — which is entitled "Stranger Bedfellows" — The Instrumentals, — sounds quite different. In fact, its entire contents suggest leftover backing tracks intended for additional, more experimental songs James has yet to write. In various peculiar ways, they're far more ambitious. "From Black Sheep" is a calypso composition mixed with fuzztone guitar, "My Don Don Song" features weird Devo-like effects over some rough-edged twang,

and "The Bean March" could be either a medieval madrigal or a lost track from Yessongs. "Happy Camper" and "Dark Mississippi" are both rootsy acoustic guitar workouts, and "Drone" sounds like the choral compositions Ennio Morricone created for the soundtrack of *Moses the Lawgiver*. We also hear a classical violin piece ("Stringfellow's Garden is Growling") and a painfully monotonous tape loop ("Stranger Bedfellows") before the disc concludes with "To Black Sheep," which is little more than repetitions of "baa-baa baa-baa baa-baa-baa."

Ultimately I was intrigued by Susan James' *Fantastic Voyage*: a double album which, despite its length, left me eager to hear more. What I'd really like next from her, though, is a single disc which blends the strong lyric content of *Fantastic's* first



Susan James

CD with the musical adventurousness of its second. A combination like that would be fantastic indeed. — Gregory Nicol

Susan James performs at *The Point* on Oct. 10. ♦