

# Billboard

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## Merchants & Marketing

### Koch Int'l On A Roll With King Biscuit Deal, Other Moves

**FLAG WAVING:** Even longtime fans of L.A.-based singer/songwriter/guitarist **Susan James** might be surprised by the ambition and breadth of her new album, "Fantastic Voyage," which she has released on Red Letter Records, her own Montrose, Calif.-based label.

The collection is a two-CD set. The first disc, "Lovesick," offers 10 new original songs, crafted in the folk-based, pop-savvy style that James has worked in since the turn of the decade; guest performers include ex-**Replacement** Tommy Stinson and former **Ringling Sister** Gary Eaton. The second CD, the aptly titled "Stranger Bedfellows," is an all-instrumental affair that flashes Middle Eastern drones, the experimental use of found sounds, and some surprisingly aggressive guitar work by James, who can move from a **John Fahey** whisper to a **Jimmy Page** scream from one track to another.

James, a former student of ethnomusicology who also acknowledges the influence of the modernist composers **John Cage**, **Harry Partch**, and **Karlheinz Stockhausen**, says, "I think there's a way



JAMES

DECLARATIONS  
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INDEPENDENTS



by Chris Morris

of combining interesting songs and melodies... with those odder types of music." She adds, "To me, it was time [to make an instrumental album]. That's a big part of who I am. That's what's coming out of me right now. Why shouldn't I put it out?"

As she has in the past, James decided to issue her music on her own; she has previously released a cassette and a full-length CD on Red Letter (drolly known originally as Major Label). The imprint is distributed by Bayside, Dutch East, and the Northwest Alliance of Independent Labels (NAIL).

Explaining her reason for operating her own label, James says she was raised in the San Francisco

area: "Everybody up there was indie... I thought that was the way you did things."

But James, who has been regularly scouted by the majors, also betrays a good deal of trepidation about the corporate record world.

"I've talked to a lot of A&R people, and some of them were really scary to me," she says. "It was, 'We're going to make you this thing—get you this personal trainer and make you a hot babe'... It was about image and fashion. It's got to be about the music first."

Noting that it was unlikely that any major label would have allowed her to release a two-CD set—"not unless I was the **Smashing Pumpkins**"—she adds, "Sometimes when

you deal with a huge corporate situation, you're not going to be able to get what you need... I'm a priority with Red Letter Records."

When she plays locally, James works with a rotating crew of backup musicians; most recently, she has been supported by bassist **Abby Travis** and drummer **Amy Wood** (who appears on "Fantastic Voyage"). However, she is currently on a solo tour that has taken her through the West and Southwest. She has covered all this terrain completely unaccompanied.

"It's been wild," she says. "I have my **Mace** with me, and my pistol."

In late September, she begins a tour with **Jack Logan** in the Midwest.