

# MUSICIAN

The Art, Business and Technology of Making Music

records

## Susan James

*Fantastic Voyage: A Double Album*  
(Red Letter)

In a field of starry-eyed, post-Lilith female folkies (and you know they're out there, gathering in little 'I'm sensitive too, dammit' camps across the country), it's getting harder to scythe the wheat from the chaff. Which is why this latest entry from crafty Californian Susan James comes as such a brow-wiping relief: It doesn't whine, it doesn't jangle, it doesn't mask vague Naomi Wolf-isms in vitriolic hyperbole. Instead, it slithers along on its muscled Gothic belly, via murky Joy Division/Echo and the Bunnymen chords, confident straight-from-the-heart vocals, and metaphors plucked from everyday existence, not some snooty college textbook. Divided into two less than pastoral segments ("Lovesick"—the songs; "Stranger Bedfellows"—the instrumentals), *Fantastic Voyage* feels as familiar and comfortable as a five-year-old Lazy-Boy recliner. No extra effort required: To hear James is to like her.

James produced both discs here, and admits she's coming from a slightly sinister sonic angle. "My stuff is a weird combination of happy, upbeat rhythms and this weird underlying melancholy," she explains. Employing an acoustic Martin and an Alvarez, as well as a handful of various electrics, she relies a great deal on alternate tunings to contour her sound. "There are a few songs on the record that are standard tunings, but I generally use about three or four completely different ones. On 'Manna' and 'Blood Of Experience,' I used D-G-D-G-A-D, sort of a mutant form of D-A-D-G-A-D, a popular one with folk performers in the British Isles."

"Thematically, *Fantastic Voyage* sums up my bittersweet life, because it's all about growing up and having these wild ideas about how things are gonna be, like 'Gee, if I'm a really good musician, people are gonna reward my efforts!' But that's not necessarily the case in the real world, so you have to rely a lot on yourself, your own beliefs about why you're doing this." Indeed, even when James, against the New Order-styled backdrop of "The Blood of Experience," slips into a comball sentiment like "This waiting 'round for you/is as painful as giving birth," she belts it so convincingly

that she elevates the material, putting a nice poetic topspin on pedestrian thoughts.

James says she included the instrumental disc, every bit as grim-sounding as its companion, because she felt that listeners "who enjoyed my vocal numbers would enjoy my musical ones just as well, and vice-versa." But that portion of *Fantastic Voyage* does drag in places, as on the special effects-laden "Magic Hour" and the monotonous bombast of "Drone." Her specialty remains the loved-and-lost-and-now-I'm-gonna-kill-him ballad; the wonderfully eerie "Falling Waltz" suggests Marty Robbins riding slowly through outlaw territory with his trembling six-shooter drawn. "I'm not a victim/And I'm not a fool," James murmurs, with the faintest hint of threat. That's enough right there to set her apart from most of her femme-folkie peers. James isn't here to bill and coo; She's here to hurt.

—Tom Lanham