

entrevue | todd brown:: photographies | sara jane rhee. jason morehead:: disposition | monsieur le duc

Rosie Thomas first popped onto most people's radar screens with the release of Damien Jurado's Ghost of David album, on which she sings one track. Obsessive liner note junkies may have spotted her name from time to time before then - she was, notably, the third and final vocalist for ex-His Name is Alive drummer Trey Many's Velour100 project - but it was through her association with Jurado that Thomas began to rise in her own right and that collaboration eventually led to Thomas signing a record deal of her own with SubPop when they began their current turn into singer-songwriter territory. We caught up with Rosie before a recent Toronto show and had this conversation about music, life, art, faith and her neck-braced alter-ego Sheila.



credit | morehead

rosie

thomas



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RT: Okay, let's begin. Todd just bought me coffee 'cause I scammed him. [laughs]

TB: I'd like to start with some history stuff.

RT: Okay, sure.

TB: You're from Detroit originally?

RT: A suburb right outside, yeah.

TB: Is that where you hooked up with Velour100? I think that's the first time I heard of you.

RT: Yes, I met Trey [Trey Many, Velour front man and former drummer for His Name is Alive] and those guys there. They lived in Ann Arbor and I met them through some friends of mine who told me this band needs a singer and blah blah blah. That was pretty much how it happened. I went and auditioned for him and thought, "Cool, I'll play in a band, why not?" That's how we met, just through other friends.

TB: Were you already doing your own stuff at that point?

RT: Yeah, I had been for about four years at that point. I was still continuing with my own stuff but I just thought - and I still think this way - that a different part of being creative is being part of somebody else's music creativity and it was really fun for me to have a different creative outlet with somebody else's music.

TB: You seem to have guested on a lot of people's stuff since you headed west.

RT: Yeah, and I love that stuff, man, and I don't care who it is. I just met a kid the other day who asked if I'd sing on his record and I said "Sure, if we come back through." I love doing that stuff. I love harmonizing with people. It's a different sort of pressure because it's not your music. You get to listen to somebody else's work and add your own interpretation to it, which is what I really like.

TB: I know you've done a lot of stuff with Damien.

RT: Absolutely, yeah.

TB: And I have the Suffering and the Hideous Thieves record.

RT: That's right! I did that too, I forgot about that!

TB: Was that a Raft of Dead Monkeys connection there? Did Damien have a hand in hooking you guys up? [Damien Jurado and Jeff Suffering were both part of post-punk act Raft of Dead Monkeys]

RT: Yeah. Well I met Dougie and I knew Theresa and Jeff. I knew Jeff for a while. We had been really good friends. I love that guy. He's so fun to talk to. He's so serious all the time. So he came to me and said "Rosie, we're going to do this record. Will you sing on it?" So I said "Sure."

TB: I met him back when he was still in 90 Pound Wuss and he was already talking about doing this more goth oriented thing. He was already burned out on punk back then.

RT: Yeah. Have you gotten to see Suffering perform?

TB: I'd love to.

RT: It's so good. He has so much energy. It's over the top. So I knew Dougie and those guys and Jeff is somebody I just really enjoy as a person so I absolutely wanted to do it. I lived about a block, about a mile, away from this theater that they did the recording in so I just walked over one afternoon. We just did it there. It was freezing; I remember you could see your breath. I said, "Jeff, this sucks. Give me something hot

here."

TB: Your SubPop deal, that happened pretty much because of Damien?

RT: Yeah. Basically he and I had been friends for a pretty good amount of time and he kept making a joke with me, "I'm going get people to hear your music." And I was just like "Damien, it's fine. I'm doing what I'm doing. It's great and it'll happen like it's supposed to." But he was on this big kick about "I'm almost done with SubPop and I want them to know you write your own stuff and blah blah blah ..." So anyways he'd asked me to sing on the Ghost of David record. It's funny because I'd never ... I was going to theater school at the time and I was playing music. I was so busy, just insanely busy, and Damien asked me to sing this song. I rushed over to his house in the two hours I had free to sing on it and never did I think "Well, SubPop's going to hear that. I wonder what they'll think?" And a few weeks later he said that they'd listened to it and asked about me. And I said "Who asked about me?" "SubPop did." "Well, what about, though?" "They asked if you played your own music." And I said, "For what?" Why would they ask about me? "Rosie, they really like your voice." "That's ridiculous, dude, why would they be interested?"

TB: It seems like they've really consciously been recasting themselves in the last couple years with Holopaw and Iron and Wine ...

RT: That's really it. You figured it out. When I met with Jonathan from SubPop ... He came to a show a couple weeks later. Damien called and said Jonathan was going to come to the show that night. We'd been singing together and it was Damien's show and he said "Look, they're coming tonight and I want you to play a few of your own songs during my set because I want them to hear your songs." I said whatever, alright, and I played a couple and figured he wasn't even going to show up so who cares. But after the show he was there and we talked for a little bit. We met up a couple of days later and that's exactly what he told me. He said "If you'd be willing to take a risk with me, I'd be willing to take this risk with you because ..."

TB: As risks go for you that's a pretty nice one.

RT: [laughs] Yeah. I guess. That's true. He said "We're trying to transform what people know us for and I'd love for you to be one of those people that begin that process." And the cool thing was he said "Look, go record three songs the way you've always wanted them to be heard. I'll give you money. I don't care what you need. I'll get you whatever you need. You record them exactly the way you want and we'll put it out. I'll give you money. If you want to take that and walk away, go somewhere else with it, do whatever you want with it. If you decide when it's done that you don't want to work with us tell me to take a short walk off a long pier." Is that right?

TB: Other way around.

RT: Right. Long walk, short pier. Okay. I just got that wrong. "Long walk off a short pier and it'll just be over and you can have three songs the way you wanted them and I'll pay for them." I went and recorded Bicycle Tricycle. I took Damien with me and we went out to our friend's farm and we just collaborated with a bunch of people and recorded songs. I gave them to him three days later. And that was it. He said "Let's do a record." And I'm like, "Jonathan, I don't even know if I have a record's worth. C'mon. You've got three songs." But he wanted to do it.

TB: I'm surprised that after Damien did the more folk oriented thing

with them for so long - and being mostly overlooked because he was this folk guy on a punk label - now that they're making that move they let him go. It doesn't make any sense to me.

RT: I think that was more Damien's choice. I really believe that they probably would've had him stay but I think Damien was in the mood to try something new for himself. He's always been a big Secretly Canadian fan. He loves Chris Swanson, he loves those guys.

TB: The stuff he's put out since he's left has been really, really good.

RT: Yeah, it's great. I bet you Jonathan wouldn't have minded keeping him on because now they're doing Iron and Wine and Holopaw and Ugly Casanova, the Fruit Bats ...

TB: Those Iron and Wine and Holopaw records are so good ...

RT: That Holopaw record is amazing ... and Iron and Wine ... have you gotten the EP? The new Iron and Wine EP? It's ridiculous, that guy.

TB: He is such a good writer. There are so few people whose lyrics you can take and totally strip them from the music and it's just as good. He's amazing.

RT: And I have to say he's one of the most fantastic people I've ever met.

TB: And you got him on your record. I just spotted that going over the credits on my way here. Denison Witmer, too.

RT: Yeah! That's right. I got Denison to do it as well. Denison and I are great friends. He's another one of those guys ... he tours ridiculously. He just has so much determination and such a positive outlook. He could be so jaded by this point and he's just not. I know there are moments where you're just like "Okay, is this it? Sitting in a van all day, freezing?" but Denison has been doing it for so long and he's so determined. I love his attitude. Every time I see him or Sam [Beam, Iron and Wine] I'm like "those are the guys I want to make a million bucks." Because they deserve it. They'd be good with it. Sam's writing is ridiculous. So I'm really glad of SubPop's transformation because it allows me to tour with those people. Even The Shins. I love their music as well. It's cool to see the artists SubPop's been signing lately ... great taste. Really ridiculously talented guys.

TB: Tell me about the Sheila thing. It seems like a really odd combination ... Just knowing you through your music, it's not really the kind of situation where you pop in one of your records and think "This person should be doing stand up comedy."

RT: No, no, not at all. That basically started ... It's always something I've enjoyed doing, laughter, making people laugh. I always wanted to entertain people. If you asked me, when I was a kid, what I wanted to do it would be "I just want to entertain people." So I never had a vision of being a singer-songwriter. I don't know what I thought it'd be but I knew I wanted to make people laugh, affect somebody, do something. About four years ago I was going to theater school for a year and my teacher kept me after class one day and said "Hey Rose, why have you never tried stand up comedy?" And I said that I didn't know. It got me thinking that maybe I was afraid of it and I don't want to be afraid of life. I just want to try everything. So I actually went that night. It was an open mike night, a Thursday, and I went there and just started doing it and I kept on doing it for about a year or so. Then I started developing this character, Sheila, because I always loved character work. I'm a huge fan of improvisation, I love improv theater, it's probably the funnest stuff that I love to go see. Growing up in Detroit we always had a Second City ... you guys have one here, don't you?

TB: Yep.

RT: See?

TB: That's where Mike Myers got started. John Candy. Martin Short.

RT: Yeah, exactly. I forgot they had one in Toronto. Man, I wish I could go ... but that was a highlight for me on birthdays and things, to go to Second City. I just watched the improvisation and I thought that's what I want to do. And, of course, growing up with Saturday Night Live and Gilda Radner, those were all great influences for me. So what I started doing was I started moving into character work and there was something freeing about it because I didn't have to be me up there telling jokes. I could be this whole other person and that involved theater work and it was really fun for me. To be honest I really think the two go together. I think it does catch people by surprise and that was the whole point of it in the beginning. I wanted to. I wanted to do something different. Why not? What's the worst that could happen? Someone doesn't like it? I take that risk all the time with the music.

TB: You work her into your sets, don't you?

RT: Well, normally what I do now ... I've done it long enough now that I've worked out where the best place for her is. I used to open with her and I'd start laughing when I came out as me. I couldn't get into the music. Or if someone knew it was me they couldn't take it seriously, and I didn't want to take that from anybody. That's kind of robbing from someone because if they came to listen to my music, if they came in that sort of mood, then how unfair of me is it to just goof it off. So now I just close the show with it is usually what happens. And I don't do it every night. I feel out the audience and I also feel my own mood out and see if maybe I feel a bit more serious and I just want to give the music portion. Which is more important to me. But I do think that they go hand in hand. I think they're very similar, that they both come from parts of me, parts of people. People need just as much laughter as they do to fall apart and go through real trials.

TB: Your music seems very autobiographical. Is that fair to say?

RT: Yeah, yeah. That's fair.

TB: Again, looking at the credits there are an awful lot of Thomas's on this record.

RT: [laughs] Yeah. There are. My whole family, I had them be a part of it.

TB: Do they have a musical background as well?

RT: My parents have been musicians for years and they were the force that opened my brothers and my eyes up to wanting to pursue doing what you love. My father was a musician for years and when my mom and dad got married they started singing together. So basically they've been playing music together since we were kids, as their second job. It was a chance for me to give them something back. That's how I look at it anyways, you know? My mom works at the post office, so my mom can go to the post office and bring that record with her and see her name on it and I know how proud and happy that makes her. I think that's more exciting for me than anything. Obviously it's exciting for me that my family be a part of it because I'm so in love with them, but really more so for my parents to be able to look at it and say "Look, my name's on there." You know what I mean? Just to share that with them is just really important. And they're family and they're musical. My brother's piano playing is ridiculous. It always has been.

TB: Is it one of your brothers that run your website?

RT: My brother John runs the website, my other brother Brian plays piano with me most of the time on tour. They all have a little hand in something.



credit | sara jane rhee

TB: Your other musicians ... it seems like the group of musicians you're playing with are really key to your sound. Especially Eric [Fisher, guitar player].

RT: Yeah, absolutely. And Eric has been a good friend for years.

TB: Now did you steal Damien's band or did he steal yours?

RT: Let's see. No, I remember. He stole mine. Yeah. Well, I think it all happened at the same time. I started and I thought I'd always play solo. I figured I'd never involve anyone else because I don't know where I'm going to be from one year to another. I didn't want to make promises to people and that sort of thing. I figured it would just be easier to stay alone. My father and I used to play music together, but that was my dad. I could tell him at any moment, "Okay, it's done" and it would be like "I love you!" I was always afraid to involve anyone else. Eric was the first friend ... you know when you play music you always have people asking you if you want to have a jam session later and you're just like "No." Eric had asked me one night after school, "Do you want to play guitar together?" And it's just like "Oh, no ... I can't even play, so please don't play with me because it's boring." And months later I just said, "Look, if you really want to ..." because he just kept persisting about it. And that's when I realized, "Wow, how awesome would it be to have more people help accentuate what I'm doing?"

TB: Well, you have such a distinctive sound with them and then they're able to turn around and do such different things with Damien as Gathered in Song. Even record to record they sound pretty dramatically different.

their technique ...

TB: Your voices would work really well together ...

RT: Oh it would be ridiculous. And Don is such a rad little guy, he's just like "Yeah, we could do it for, I don't know, what do you think?" He's just one of those people where you're like "Hell, yeah. I need to work with someone like you." Just completely different from a business person. He's just a guy that's talented. He's got such a gift and so does his wife. I just think what a lucky couple. Lucky. How cool is that, that they get to play music together? And her voice is ridiculous, their songs. I seriously think they're one of my favorite bands. There's a way that they do things that just grabs me. And I don't [know] anybody that I've given that record to, I don't care who it is, that doesn't just go, "Oh my gosh."

TB: Their approach to writing is pretty similar to yours in a lot of ways. You both write about things that are pretty simple and things that could be fairly mundane and banal and make them into something larger. They're also people who are fairly clear that they have faith without being clichéd about it. Karen is someone who has so much hope in a lot of her stuff, but can also ...

RT: Write about despair. Yes. For sure.

TB: It seems that there's more of the darker stuff on your new record, too.

RT: It's funny, isn't it? I was thinking when I wrote it that this was going to take some people by surprise. It's a different year from my life and I was in a different place and I was thinking, "Wow, this is really going to freak people out. This is so happy!" Then I listened to it when we fin-



sheila. credit | morehead

RT: It's true. It's very true. Eric played with me for our first show, and Damien was there and he started thinking "I should get a guitarist, too." And then they became friends so it just kind of gave us a way to all collaborate with one another. We're all really great friends and that's just basically what we do, we just collaborate with one another. Damien does a record and we all sing on it, we all play on it. And I think that's the way it should be. It makes it that much more creative and inspiring to do it that way. To have the people around that you love a lot, especially, and respect.

TB: Something that struck me listening today ... have you been a fan of The Innocence Mission at all?

RT: I love them. I love them.

TB: You have such a distinctive sound and the only other people I can think of who do anything similar are them. They've stripped back a fair bit recently, but they used to do that very airy thing.

RT: Their music is so ridiculously beautiful that I swear they could do whatever they wanted. Couldn't you just see Don and Karen come out and do something completely a capella? I'd be totally sold.

TB: Apparently when they toured with 16 Horsepower Karen and David Edwards used to come out and do old hymns together.

RT: Oh, gosh I'd freak out. They just played in New York not too long ago for CMJ and my drummer has a live recording of the show and it's just amazing. Denison is trying to talk me into doing a record with them and I'm really pulling to try and do it for the third one. I love, so much,

ished it and I was just, "Oh no! I did it again!"

TB: Well some of the songs are ...

RT: One More Day ...

TB: How do I have hope when I know in the end I'm going to be dead ...

RT: But that's it, isn't it? Exactly. That's the stuff that's, like, that's the truth. For me when I write I try to unveil everything. Even as a person I think that's very important, to unveil it all. You put it all out on the table and you go, "So this is it. I'm confused, I'm insecure, and I'm scared. There are days I don't know what I'm doing. There are days I want to give up." I'm just like anybody else, regardless of whether I have faith or not, that still exists and every day I have to pick that up. Make that choice. So what are you going to do with that? That's the question. Are you going to wake up and go "Yeah, life sucks. Forget about it. I hate it." Well, I did that in high school. That was a bummer. It didn't get me anywhere. So then you choose ... it's like what you were saying about the Innocence Mission, there's a hope there. It's like when I listen to Stevie Wonder, that man can write about the most heart wrenching thing but you can still feel the joy in it, you can feel a strength in it. He may be admitting that things are bad but he also knows that things are going to be alright and I think that's the most important thing to remind people of, at least for me. Yeah, I can admit all that stuff, but it doesn't mean that I think there's no point. I mean, think about that stuff because I know it's there regardless of whether you admit it or not. I know it's there. Ask

yourself those questions: where are you going? What are you doing?

TB: Do you feel like you're taking a risk exposing yourself like that?

RT: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I'm probably a bit more naïve about those risks. Most of the time I've never, and maybe this is a good thing, I've never really thought too much about how I'm going to dress or what I'm going to say. I've never thought much about that. There were no boundaries. I thought you just play and you do what you do. You just be yourself. Perhaps I can hide behind my parents for that, for teaching us "Don't compromise who you are. Don't compromise, never ever Rosie. Because if you do you will lose that very thing that you can give somebody, that very unique thing that only can come from you." And so I think that's really a strong point for me. However of course I'm human and of course I know that even on this record there are things that people have misunderstood, have taken the wrong way.

TB: As soon as you bring any sort of faith aspect in you're risking polarizing and alienating people.

RT: Oh, absolutely. And that's hard to do because as a person that loves people that's not what I want to do. I don't want to come across as that ... I want to be a part of the world to do that stuff, to write that stuff that we all need to hear. I don't want to put it in a box. But on the other hand I also don't want to hide. I'm not ashamed of what I feel. I'm not ashamed of my faith and I never will be. I think there are times when you think about that stuff because just look at your life and look at what you're around most of the time, but I fight to not be ashamed.

TB: Did SubPop have any concerns about you bringing the faith thing into your songs? They've had bands blow up over that.

RT: No, and that's funny. I think it's pretty amazing. When I gave them Tell Me How I thought "Wait till they hear this one. I know they're going to be like 'Nope. Next.'" I was sure that even then I would have been like, "Well that's too bad because I really like it and I think that it's something I want people to hear." But no, they listened to that record and Tell Me How was one of Jonathan's favorite songs. But I think they have a different understanding. I think because they know me ... and that's the difference, I think, because we do have a friendship and I think that they know where I'm coming from with those songs, what I'm trying to portray. What I'm trying to say. I think they're a bit older and a bit more open minded about people having their own beliefs.

TB: It seems to me like the industry's changing. It looks like most of the Christian market has fallen apart because it's not needed anymore.

RT: I hope so. Yeah.

TB: I hope so because most of what they produce is crap.

RT: Yeah, it sucks.

TB: They don't let people be honest.

RT: Absolutely. And that's something that's just ... that's just it. We're all coming from the same place. I've been a Christian for five years, it's not something I've really understood my whole life. But that can be a beautiful thing, and a hard thing, because I know where I've come from and that makes it a very sensitive issue for me because, again, I very much remember what it was like on the other side. I hated when people told me that stuff, I despised it. I wanted to run for my life. And so, being on the opposite end I just have to constantly pray "Please God, just show me how to do that without being that person I couldn't stand. Without being that person that only made me want to run away." And that's the stuff that I get worried more about. You know what I mean? When I bring faith up I get worried more about someone taking it the wrong way and thinking I'm one of those people trying to shove things down their throat. I don't want that. I don't think it helps. But, again, I'm not going to hide what gets me through my day. Why? And I'm not going to hide that I struggle all the time and that I'm broken and that I do Sheila and it's weird. I'm not going to hide my awkwardness. There's no point to that. If it's an art you want to put yourself into it and that's how you're going to connect with someone because you're showing them you and you aren't that different from anyone else, you know? I have to remind myself of that sometimes. But yeah, we'll see what happens.



**Rosie Thomas
Only With Laughter Can You Win
Subpop**

The release of Rosie Thomas' sophomore album brought much anticipation within me. I have been listening regularly to her debut, 'When We Were Small', as well as her two EPs, since their release. The first record was filled with bittersweet laments of brokenness and beautiful odes to love delivered by Rosie's marvellous voice. It was her life story in some respects, exposing the wounds suffered as a child of divorce and the consequent pain that caused. It struck a chord within me, as I have shared similar experiences.

'Only With Laughter Can You Win' finds Rosie in a less depressed mood. 'Depressed' is the wrong word but I don't know how else to describe it. Maybe 'melancholic'? Anyhow, this new record has a more positive, hopeful tone. You know those movies that feature a beautiful scene of the sun breaking through the clouds after a storm, dispersing fear and trepidation and replacing it with joy? That's what I feel when I listen to Rosie - hope and joy. In her songs, she does not dwell on the bad experiences but she does reflect on them and acknowledge their tremendous impact in her life before making efforts to grow and move ahead. There's also an innocence that permeates every song Rosie has recorded that just endears me to her even more.

The young chanteuse includes her family on this project, with her mother contributing vocals on the opening track, 'Let Myself Fall' (featuring a haunting mix that is striking and wonderful), and her brothers & sisters on the second tune, 'I Play Music', which is a warm, simple-life song that excites me. The siblings are featured on multiple tracks, demonstrating what a talented family is this Thomas clan. Denison Witmer assists with some guitar work on a couple tracks, while Eric Fisher (who has worked a lot with Damien Jurado) contributes to almost every song (as do Andy Myers and David Broecker on the drums and bass, respectively). There are a lot of contributors on here that make this album as stunning as it is. The other songs I adore are all destined to be mix tape classics - 'You And Me', 'All My Life' and 'One More Day'. Oh, and I would be remiss to not mention 'Tell Me How' for its wonderful synthesis of the physical & spiritual elements.

The musical arrangements on this album remain true to Rosie's debut with no major alterations. The instrumentation employed matches each song perfectly, adding tremendously to the aura of the entire album. Strings are used when necessary and increase the beauty of the songs. One of my favorite complementary instruments, the glockenspiel, is also implemented on three tracks as well. Furthermore, Rosie's piano playing is incredibly moving. The production and mixing on this album are ideal, blending the instruments and vocals in a smooth fashion without any unnecessary battles for dominance.

Do yourself a favor and buy this album. Let your parents hear it. Buy it for your friends. If you want rock, punk or metal, get it too. One day, you'll thank me and regret the years you spent without Rosie in your life. And be sure to catch her perform because she incorporates her other gig (stand-up comedian) in her act. I thank God for Rosie Thomas. Few artists move me as she has, like a friend you hold dear who has experienced agonizing heartache but longs for healing and redemption and spurs you to seek the same. -joel martin