



keren ann

Child of the Globe

Explore the beguiling, cultivated heart of a modern voyageur.

by **Shane Kite**



A beauty in possession of the same vision and perfectionism associated with the French musical canon, such as that of its Grande Dame, Edith Piaf, 33-year-old singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist

Keren Ann Zeidel comes fully merged on her latest, eponymous album. Sweet, darkly honest and effortlessly melodious, Zeidel manages to summon Piaf's angst with the ethereal edge of a Nico-fronted Velvet Underground, but in a sonic appellation firmly planted on *la terre*, or wherever she is at the moment: the Paris of her youth, her home in New York, or recording the bewitching, standout track "Liberty" with an Icelandic choir. But this is no ice cold femme fatale or art scene nihilist; Zeidel's existential ache is empathetic—a balanced yin-yang that resonates true and knowing, shimmering forth without resignation, endemic and organic to experienced living. Zeidel, Israeli-born daughter of a Javanese-Dutch mother and Russian-Israeli father, rises smartly from among the eyelash batting, whispered delivery of her chanteuse peers. She sings out, albeit softly, with captivating results. We caught up with her on tour in June to discuss the intricacies of chasing the muse.

Nikki Style: I just wanted to tell you how beautiful the new record is. It's a good mix, with some big arrangements. What attracts you to the production aspect of recording?

Keren Ann: What is very interesting is that the production part is always explorative. You can always experiment. Those same themes that obsess you and the same things that you go back to with that same mysterious song that you try to write over and over again—all those things that you're attracted to, that come out in songs, all those emotions that come and affect you—these are things that make up your musical identity. But there are so many ways to produce. It's fun, and I like the chal-

lenge. I wouldn't be able to produce two records in the same way or with the same atmosphere; I'd be very bored. I guess that's where the privilege is when you record.

NS: How do you merge your songwriting vision with your production responsibility?

KA: In songwriting, anything can happen. But I think that the very first draft, or the first instinctive melodies and words that come out, are probably the most important, because they will decide on the mood and the atmosphere of the song. Mostly, a song is a virtual emotion: By recording it you give it a physical form—a shape. There are many ways to do that, and I think, probably discipline is what will make you sometimes turn a song around in many different ways to get you to the one version that suits you most at the time you're recording it. But it's still pure emotion. Even if there is architecture and discipline and concentration, it still comes from instinct, and something that you're sensitive to. I try to let the needs of the soundscape get me there. Even if I know what results I want from the record, I never know exactly how I'm going to get there. It's selfish. You're there to satisfy yourself first, and be true to the process. But counting on that, whatever you're touched by, other people might be touched by it, too.

NS: What's your approach to performance, both onstage and in recording?

KA: Onstage, the venue, the people, your mood, your interaction with other musicians—all these things become the new ingredients. And it's nice all this is ephemeral: It just lasts for an hour and a half or two hours. Then it's gone. But in recordings, you record for a very long time, and whatever you record today will still be the same record many, many years from now. But this momentary thing [of performance] is very important [to recording]: You have to be able to let go of it and be spontaneous, even though you're aware of the fact that the

recording is going to remain forever. So there is something very crazy about that. But I really like it. I like that it depends on so many things that you have to recall in order to be able to spontaneously record music and be natural with your voice, your guitar, the arrangements, all the instruments that end up on the track.

NS: Knowing that all songs and art are composites of experiences, of other people as well as our own, I found "It's All a Lie" to be powerful and disarming. It seems to be about universal insecurity, and being toughened by the sting of experience, in seeking, losing love, both between art and audience and between two lovers. This particular artist's dilemma, and gallows humor—that fear about somehow being found out—like it's all a fraud or something. I hear artists of all stripes say this. But I find it interesting...

KA: Yeah, the fact that you constantly want to be freed from anything anyone may think of you. What actually inspired the song: I was on the road and picked up the local paper and read an article about a tightrope walker with the circus. And he was saying as a child he had a fear of heights; he had vertigo. That's like any artist who goes on stage, you know, you have those few moments of having a complete blackout about what you're doing and going up there and performing, being like "Why would you be on a stage? Why you?" Of course, fear is general to any profession; you could be a musician or you could be a tightrope walker. But it could also be the excitement, the challenge. There's something that I find beautiful about that.

NS: Sometimes walking down the street is difficult! And sometimes you're strutting. But the image one projects may not reflect what one's feeling inside. Are you attracted to that dichotomy of the projected self and the internal emotions?

KA: Absolutely, that's definitely a dynamic. But, you know, you absorb all that to become a richer

person, not necessarily to write songs. But I feel very privileged that I can live all that and at the same time write the songs, to have the opportunity to do that for a living.

NS: How do you identify with the many places you've lived? What manifests: the Parisian side, the Dutch side, the Israeli side, the New York side?

KA: I'd say the New York side, because New York is the home to everyone, you know? When I moved to New York, I realized how blended it was; there are so many different cultures. It's the home of everyone. You don't have to be an American to be a New Yorker. You're a New Yorker in your inner soul, and to be cosmopolitan, to understand that identity doesn't necessarily come from specific nationality or religion, and in my case, definitely not, because it's all mixed up. But it's still important to me to belong somewhere, but to still know that you can feel at home anywhere.

NS: So should I vacation in Provence or do Paris again and bike through the Loire Valley?

KA: Ah, the Loire Valley is beautiful. If you go to Provence, this is a very good time, but it may get a little hot, like in August.

NS: I was thinking September.

KA: It's probably Provence then, because if you're in the Loire biking, you wouldn't want rain. But that's more towards the end of September. If it's early, both are great.

NS: Lastly, I was wondering if "It Ain't No Crime" was meant to reference fame and the need to protect relationships, or is it a critique of the record business?

KA: Both of the elements you mention are in it. But it's a mixture of tons of stuff, lots of little emotions like that.

NS: Which is what makes a good song, right? It's open to interpretation.

KA: Absolutely.

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