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ALBUM REVIEW

MIRAH

(a)spera

[K; 2009]

By MIA CLARKE

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Rating: 7.8

Mirah Yom Tov Zeitlyn has played a vital role in the Pacific Northwest's indie scene since releasing her breakthrough album *You Think It's Like This But Really It's Like This*, a 4-track collaboration with fellow analog enthusiast and sad-eyed songwriter Phil Elverum of the Microphones, back in 2000. Since then she's had far more ups than downs, hooking up for collaborations with artists such as Black Cat Orchestra and Tara Jane O'Neil, releasing 2004's outstanding *C'mon Miracle*, and providing the soundtrack for the excellent political documentary *Young, Jewish, and Left*.

Fittingly for such a skilled lyricist, the title of Mirah's latest solo album, *(a)spera*, is a play on the Latin words "asperak," which means "adversity" and "a spera," which translates as "hope." And it's between the fine lines of this double entendre that the roots of this album begin to grow. It encompasses a range of ideas on a grand scale, as the listener wades through her candid musings on unrealized love, death, the nature of time, emotional suffering, and the shedding of material wants.

Mirah's songs have always thrived on modest instrumentation, which tend to belie the careful intricacy of their structures, and are often emphasized by one instrument in particular, such as the commanding drumbeats that gave *Advisory Committee's* wonderful opening track "Cold Cold Water" such a fiercely memorable edge. *(a)spera* keeps the

trick rolling, except that in the last few years Mirah has grown markedly as a songwriter and the emphasis is now mostly provided by expansive string orchestrations, bold bursts of horns, and deftly placed vocal harmonies that recall early Cat Power. It's been five years since her last studio release, but from the opening violin flourish of *(a)spera's* startling opening track, "Generosity"-- arguably one of the strongest songs she has ever written-- it is clear that Mirah's walking a different path, and whatever route she chose to get there proves to be well worth the wait.

Until now, Mirah's most appealing quality as a songwriter has been her immediate intimacy and sincerity, which manifests itself at the center of every song. While these characteristics are more present than ever on *(a)spera*, they have been taken to another level through the sheer diversity of her choice of instrumentation. She has completely avoided the trap of sounding too repetitive-- a curse of many solo singer-songwriters who have released a few albums-- and instead chooses to employ a different approach to every song. On the Phil Elverum-produced "Shells" she drafted the remarkable Mandinka harp player Kane Mathis to provide the soundtrack to her tale of a diver hunting for a dinner of mollusks for a land bound lover. Later, she moves into the intricate, bossa nova-inspired frenzy of "Country of the Future", sparse electric guitar interplay on "Bones & Skin", and animated conga accents on "Gone Are The Days". Not only does each song have a vivid personality of its own, there just isn't a weak track on here-- a mighty feat indeed.

(a)spera is the sound of a musician accomplishing the challenges she has set herself, both musically and communicatively. There's an interdependent exchange of significance between the music and lyrics, and their subtle yet compelling message ends up staying with you long after the stereo is switched off.