

EUROFILE MUSIC

AS YEARS GO BY

LATE MASTERPIECE FROM THE 60S' LEAST LIKELY SURVIVOR

Stripped of the folklore that dogged her career, Marianne Faithfull's latest work is her finest, says **PIERS FORD**



Given the tumultuous life that has gone before, it is hardly surprising that *Negative Capability* feels like Marianne Faithfull's ultimate coming-home album. Previous creative peaks there might have been, but they all now seem to have led to this remarkable piece of work, which the singer calls the most honest record she's ever made.

Her story has been much told: discovery aged 17 by Andrew Loog Oldham at a Rolling Stones party; her relationship with Mick Jagger; and drug-related encounters with the law from which he emerged with his rock star reputation enhanced, while Faithfull was assigned the role of fallen angel by the tabloids.

Then there was a very public suicide attempt, and her subsequent descent into addiction and a kind of half-existence on a Soho wall. Creative re-awakening came in 1979 with a seminal album, *Broken English*. She embarked on the long road to recovery, finally getting clean in 1985.

There were occasional but illuminating acting roles, including an appearance as God in *Absolutely Fabulous*. But overarching everything was her imperious artistic evolution on stage and in the recording studio, building a career that embraced material from Coward to Weill, collaborating with a wide-ranging who's who of song-writers and producers, and developing writing talents that first became evident with *Sister Morphine*, the song that triggered a long legal battle before she was given co-author status with Jagger and Keith Richards. More recently, a pile-up of serious illness, accidents and injuries have tested even Faithfull's Phoenix-like capacity for regeneration.

If you want the definitive version, check out her 1994 autobiography *Faithless* and the 2007 follow-up memoir *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. What emerges most strikingly from her bleakly humorous and unsparing accounts is that even during the hardest years, she clung sufficiently to the vestiges of creative integrity and found a way to keep going. Work has been an essential survival mechanism for Faithfull, underpinned by a serious musicality and commitment that were apparent even in those tentative early recordings.

Quietly professional, she acquired the nickname 'One-take Marianne', which by all accounts still holds true today. There has always been a natural intimacy with the microphone which gives her vocals a distinctive quality that more versatile and robust singers would struggle to match. And her intuitive, occasionally eccentric phrasing was a feature of her recordings from the start.

There were also clear early signs of a desire for artistic control. A little-

remarked footnote to her early career is that she released two debut albums on the same day – an eponymously titled record of her pop hits, and *Come My Way*, a folk album that actually performed better in the charts.

The sense of a circle being completed with *Negative Capability* is enhanced by the almost simultaneous release of a handsome package of her Decca singles (*Come and stay with me: The UK 45s 1964-1969*). It serves a reminder that while she isn't quite the last woman standing, there was a time when Marianne Faithfull seemed the least likely survivor from the pack of 1960s British female singers whose voices are among the decade's most defining musical sounds.

She was never really 'one of the girls', of course, although she did record a fine cover version of Petula Clark's *Downtown* and much later, would offer her own take on one of Dusty Springfield's signature numbers *Goin' Back*. Faithfull's career took a rather different turn from the likes of Petula, Dusty, Sandie Shaw and Cilla Black, and would eventually earn her a host of reputation-defining epithets, from the ultimate rock chick to counter-culture icon.

There's a pleasing correlation between *Gypsy Faerie Queen*, co-written with Nick Cave, one of the stand-out tracks on *Negative Capability*, and the pastoral folk songs that briefly promised a different trajectory early in a career that stretches back to 1964. Inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the song conjures a landscape across which the faerie queen wanders for eternity, healing the wounded earth with her songs. Faithfull's role is ambiguous: she is the voice of Puck as he follows his mistress, yet the John Maybury-directed accompanying video, with her tenderly smiling face superimposed on the queen's sylvan progress, also suggests that the singer is catching a poignant glimpse of her own youthful self.

There are echoes of this, too, in the artwork for the album, which casts Faithfull as a stately grande dame, albeit resting on a silver-handled ebony stick rather than Titania's blackthorn staff. It's a formidable image befitting an artist who has reached a key point of reckoning in her life. And indeed, *Negative Capability* proves in part to be an autobiographical stock-taking.

When I spoke to her about the release of her album *Easy Come, Easy Go* back in 2007, Faithfull was typically unequivocal about her voice. "I know my flaws as a singer and I try to use my strengths to compensate," she said. "I know I won't be everybody's cup of tea. It's a funny thing. It may be that women are expected to have



either a very pretty voice or a virtuoso beautiful voice, whereas I've always liked Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan and Neil Young – all those people. They haven't got great voices but they have an incredible ability to put across a song."

This quality in her own singing is another reason why *Negative Capability* seems to be a perfect confluence of musical influences as well as life experiences. The arrangements cradle Faithfull's scarred voice in sparse, discreet violin harmonies, making an instrument of its fragility in a way that hasn't really happened since her flurry of 1960s singles.

There are brushes with the past: she revisits *As Tears Go By*, once sung by a girl old beyond her years but now with the benefit of a half-century of hard-learned wisdom, and *The Witches' Song* from *Broken English*, an ode to sisterhood from an album that was far ahead of its time but now plays like a beacon for the #MeToo era. *It's All Over Now, Baby Blue* is a nod to the influence of Bob Dylan and her empathy with her contemporary troubadours.

For the most part, however, the focus is on new songs that articulate the pain of losing treasured friends, and their bittersweet legacy of love and loneliness. The wounds of loss are palpable, not least on *Born to Live*, a tender eulogy to her great friend Anita Pallenberg, and *Don't Go*, an exquisitely sad meditation on grief and the futile longing for just another day with the loved one who must slip away. The whole album is bathed in melancholy



ON STAGE:
Marianne
Faithfull
performing
at L'Olympia,
Paris, on
November
20, 2014

Photo: Getty
Images

MUSIC EUROFILE



without tipping into self-pity. Offloading responsibility for old choices has never been Faithfull's style. There is no impotent raging at life's diminishing circle.

Instead, she reserves her anger for the terrorists who have focused their attacks on music venues: the driving menace of *They Come at Night*, which cuts across the record like a bloody gouge, was her response to events at the Bataclan theatre in her adopted home of Paris on November 13, 2015, when 89 concertgoers were murdered during a coordinated attack across the city. She was one of the first artists to perform there when the hall reopened a year later.

The record has been trailed as Faithfull's 'late life masterpiece', a phrase that could easily have made it a hostage to fortune. But despite its sombre themes, it turns out to be an affirming, fitting testament from a remarkably resilient artist to a life for which the description 'complicated' would hardly be adequate, and a steely character who refuses to trade in banal nostalgia.

The title might be a quote lifted from Keats, but with its contemplative, coming-to-terms fatalism, the album has an existential, Brel-like feel as Faithfull puts herself at the heart of these intensely personal stories. A reminder that, despite the English folk references in so many of her early recordings, she has always seemed most comfortable in the footsteps of the great European and American troubadours.

Her impeccable European credentials –

her Austrian mother was a dancer in Weimar Berlin – have sustained her well throughout a conflicted relationship with her native Britain. In France, she was made a Commandeur of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2011, one of the country's highest cultural awards. Back home, she has had to make do with *Q* magazine's icon of the year award in 2010.

When *No Moon in Paris*, the final song on *Negative Capability* dies away, it's like a camera pulling back, leaving her alone in her Montparnasse eyrie, bereft now of even a companion that has previously offered comfort wherever she has found herself around the globe. There is nothing left but simple truth.

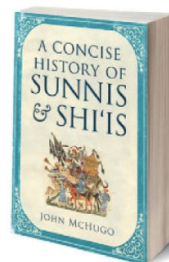
This is a stark image: Faithfull stripped of the folklore that has dogged her career, making her finest work in the teeth of physical decline at 71. A singer who has long since earned the right to be taken seriously as a hard-working, serious musician in the same bracket as her male contemporaries.

"There's perfect honour in being a survivor and it's fine," she once told me. "There are some amazing people around still left from those times [the 1960s], and I think it's wise to cherish them." As *Negative Capability* lands, perhaps it really is high time for the rest of us to cherish this woman as one of them.

■ *Negative Capability* (BMG Records) and *Come and Stay With Me: The UK 45s 1965-1969* (Ace Records) are out now

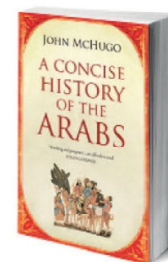
By JOHN MCHUGO

BOOKS TO DEMYSTIFY THE MIDDLE EAST



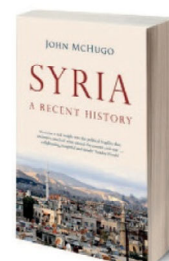
'A clear-headed appraisal of the Middle East' *TLS*

HB £20



'Thrilling and poignant' *Financial Times*

PB £10.99



'Enlightening' *Independent*

PB £10.99

Available from
all good bookshops
and online retailers

SAQI

www.saqibooks.com