

River of Song

Good fortune intervened during the recording of **Finí Bearman's** new album, the intimately personal *Burn The Boat*. **Peter Quinn** spoke to the London-based vocalist about the fruits of her fate and the making of her strongest album to date, a jazz-folk set placing her firmly in the tradition of such genre-straddling peers as Becca Stevens, Emilia Mårtensson and Alice Zawadzki



It's the biggest piece of good luck I've had," Finí Bearman tells me, sipping a glass of wine in a gorgeously sunny Bloomsbury. She's talking about third album, *Burn The Boat*, out this month on Two Rivers Records. Recorded at Giant Wafer Studios in the heart of Wales, Bearman was gearing up to mix the album when fate intervened. At her gig at The Oxford, Kentish Town, vocalist Natalie Williams and multi-instrumentalist and producer Rob Mullarkey happened to be in the audience. "Rob came up to me afterwards and was, like, please let me do your album. Let me mix it, let me do whatever, can I just get my hands on it. For me, that was the best thing ever, because I would never have thought of asking someone like that. Not to be sycophantic, but musically he's in another realm. So he got involved, spent about two days on each tune and overdubbed things, guitar and synth parts."

If Bearman's debut *Step Up* (2011) revealed a love of Gretchen Parlato and Brazilian music, particularly that 'across the bar line' rhythmic flexibility, the hugely impressive follow-up *Porgy & Bess* (2014) showed ever greater depths of imagination, subtlety and emotion. Courtesy of Mullarkey's studio wizardry, *Burn The Boat* takes the Bearman sound-world to exciting new places, a more produced effort which may surprise fans of her previous two releases.

"I hope it does," Bearman notes. "I feel like this is the one, for me. If I don't do anything else, then that's OK. I feel it's the closest to saying something that's sincere to me. Quite a lot of the songs are about my last relationship. There was the possibility of this massive romance, the biggest love of my life. The thing I feared the most was that it would just fade away, and that's exactly what happened. With a bit of hindsight and reading of Freud, I'm like, oh yeah, I was just projecting the shit out of that. It didn't end up bearing fruit in the way that I really, really wanted it to. I'm very philosophical about it. I'm a very positive person, I don't sit at home and cry about my ex-boyfriends," she adds, laughing.

"If you're going to expend all this emotional energy on this person, even if it comes to nothing you've got to get something out of it – and I'm going to get loads of songs out of it, so that's fine. I'm halfway through: they're still coming."

Following an undergraduate degree at Guildhall, which she describes as, "playing loads



of different music and learning loads of music”, a master’s degree at the Jazz-Institute Berlin enabled her to study composition with Kurt Rosenwinkel and voice with Judy Niemack. “Kurt is so deep in the music, it was really inspiring,” Bearman recalls. “I was getting into writing and instrumentalists, so going back to Judy and working on improvising as a vocalist and doing improvisational exercises – working just with the diminished scale, for example – was really useful.”

Blurring the lines between jazz, folk and alternative pop, Bearman’s compositional aesthetic seems to be founded upon a desire to remain open. “I guess my process is to try not to be bound by a canon that you think you should be representing – people like Esperanza Spalding or Becca Stevens are just doing their thing and they’ve got their sound, and it’s cross-genre.”

With other London-based vocalists including Alice Zawadzki and Emilia Mårtensson showing a similar openness to other genres, does Bearman feel she’s part of this wider scene? “I think that’s really true. None of us just listen to singers from the 1950s – though we’ve all indulged in that – we’re all coming from different places where there’s musical influences like [US rock band] Incubus or whoever. So I think it’s a pretty beautiful time in that respect. I think Gretchen [Parlato] maybe got the ball rolling with that. Simon Purcell said that jazz is the process, not the product. And I think that’s a really

important mentality to have, because it’s your approach to melody writing, how free something can be and how much you improvise with things. The finished product might not sound typically ‘jazz’, but the process and the improvisatory approach is the same.”

In terms of other music that acts as a creative stimulus, Bearman cites classical composers from Bernstein to Brahms (“anything that’s all-encompassing harmonically”), as well as classic singer-songwriters such as Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell (“those kind of songwriters with the emphasis on the lyric”). She also namechecks Laura Mvula as an ‘amazing’ writer. And then there’s Donny Hathaway and Stevie Wonder. “Stevie Wonder can teach you everything you want to know about songwriting,” as she puts it.

In addition to gigging and teaching at Leeds College of Music, Bearman also gives masterclasses, workshops and one-to-one tuition at numerous UK music colleges and universities. In terms of her journey so far, she seems to be entirely comfortable in her own artistic skin. “Most of my friends are jazz musicians and everyone’s working away at their own thing. That’s kind of inspiring – that everyone has a belief in something. The sense of community in jazz is moving, I think. Everyone really cares about each other and looks out for one another. Everyone’s in it together, and that’s a really beautiful thing.”