

# MAGNIFIED

## >> Dream Academy MARIANNE NOWOTTNY

"I just tell them I play the keyboards," Marianne Nowotny explains with a thin smile, describing her response to the questions she gets at New Jersey's Sparta High School. She's unusually poised for a 17-year-old, both onstage and off, but then there's little about her that's ordinary. "Some people tell me it reminds them of Tori Amos, and I just..." She smiles stoically and nods.

Though her classmates are correct in the most superficial sense—Nowotny and Amos are both females playing keyboards—they're way off in the comparison. Nowotny's visionary music, fully captured on her debut album, *Afraid Of Me* (Abaton), indulges in completely surreal trips of fantasy, like if André Breton wrote Harlequin romances. Arrangements consist mainly of her incredible voice and sparkling layers of her trusty Concertmate 990 ("\$175 worth of quality," she quips) drenched in unearthly echo. But finding points of reference for her haunting songs is difficult, even for her.

"I don't really know what to say about my music because I didn't try to make it sound like anything," she says. "Most of it's out of tune and changing rapidly, because that's the way my mind is. It's like a fly, the way I bounce around on sentences. Some people say that's a sign of immaturity."

Immaturity is the last thing that comes to mind upon hearing Nowotny's music. Her voice sounds like she's had lifetimes of experience, croaking with cosmic weariness one moment and spinning tales of forbidden love the next. In the space of one song, she can suggest Patti Smith, Polly Harvey and Patty Waters, yet she avoids sounding much like any of them. The deeply psychedelic *Afraid Of Me* unfolds, says Nowotny, like scenes from a dream—the kind that "lasts for 15 minutes but feels like it goes on for hours, the way its plot fluctuates, the way details turn rapidly and people and things suddenly become other things."

Nowotny started out writing poetry before meeting her best friend, Donna Bailey, in eighth grade; the pair soon began to collaborate musically, matching the former's poems with the latter's piano training. "We made all these little albums, the fooling-around tapes," Nowotny grins, "where we weren't exactly in the right consciousness." After moving to northern New Jersey, she began to miss making music. "I bought a keyboard for myself for Christmas because I wanted to figure the songs out by ear," she explains. "And I was missing Donna." The two convene whenever possible under the group name Shell, having already released a massively bizarre cassette with a CD due soon.

Nowotny, who will record the follow-up to *Afraid Of Me* this winter, has one specific goal for her music. "This day will come," she predicts. "I will make people forget that they're awake when they hear my music. I've heard melodies in my dreams, out of tune, muffled, going from this side to that. I want to recreate that. The best compliment to my music would be if they played it in asylums to calm people down, to make them feel OK about being insane."

—Mike Wolf