

DON'T BE AFRAID

Marianne Nowottny Discovers Herself

By KENNETH GOLDSMITH

Marianne Nowottny recently released her first CD, the seven-song *Afraid of Me* (Abaton). She also just got her first job. At a Burger King.

Marianne Nowottny is 16. She's a high school sophomore living in Sparta, in northwestern New Jersey. And *Afraid of Me* is as fabulous and strange a debut as I've heard in some time.

Imagine Dietrich doing covers of Tim Buckley, or Om Kolthoum recording Nick Drake tunes. Or Jeff Buckley's gut-wrenching *Live at Sin-é*, and the self-confidence of *Guyville*-period Liz Phair; for its sheer hipness, this record might be the musical equivalent of filmmaker Sadie Benning's *Girlpower*. It's "a moment," and what a moment.

And as impressive as it is, what's more astonishing is the potential here. *Afraid of Me* was recorded in a loft using nothing more than a keyboard and a couple of cassette players. There're no production values to speak of, yet the power of the disc is undeniable. Wait till some producer gets his hands on Nowottny.

Nowottny sounds much older than she really is. She's got a touch of Marianne Faithfull's gravelly mezzo and sounds like she's seen more than her share of nights in smoky bars—but of course, she's too young to drink. She's got an impassioned way of slurring phrases, stumbling over lyrics and slamming syllables together that gives an unexpected punch to her songs. Equally unexpected are her complex song structures, which dash in and out of con-

ventional time signatures, moving in all directions at once.

But the most radical feature of Nowottny's program is her use of alternate tunings. On one cut, "Harbor," she's detuned her keyboard and let her voice drolly snake around it in an obliquely related key. It's haunting stuff. An instrumental cut simply titled "Instrumental" pits an off-kilter music box against a wobbly detuned synthesizer, creating a precariously clumsy musical dance.

When I mention some of the more obvious experimenters working along similar lines as Nowottny, she draws blanks. Charles Ives' experiments with quarter tones? Nope. La Monte Young's investigations into microtonal drones? Nah. Stereolab's wink-and-nod use of dated analog equipment to make savvy pop? Never heard of them. Danielson's home-grown, warped religious pop? Daniel who?

"I'm ignorant as to who discovered what," she tells me in an interview. "All I know is that I've discovered myself."

Lauri Bortz lives in nearby Newton and runs the Abaton Book Co. She thought Newton was a pretty sleepy place until she saw Nowottny, a stunning 6-foot bleached-blond teenager who dresses in Victorian-era clothes, hanging out on the street with a group of friends. Bortz went over, introduced herself and told Nowottny she was a publisher and playwright. Nowottny told her she was a poet. Bortz asked to see some of her work and later published a small chapbook in an edition of 200.

Not long after, Bortz had Uscha Pohl, fashion designer/gallerist at the Tribeca boutique Up & Co., stage a photo shoot in Newton using Nowottny and her high school friends. In their skin-tight uber-babe t-shirts, they look straight out of *Kids*. Suddenly, something was happening in Newton.

Bortz and her husband Mark Dagley—an artist and former guitarist in the punk band the Girls—had bailed out of the Lower East Side a couple of years earlier. They found a huge loft in Newton, about an hour outside Manhattan if you have a car, which, being New Yorkers, they don't. (Nowottny also doesn't drive. She uses