In early 2006, Kate Nash, an eighteen-year-old London resident, fell down a flight of stairs at her home and broke her foot. Earlier that day, she had learned that she had not been admitted to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, a prestigious drama academy. As consolation, her parents bought her an electric guitar and an amplifier. Nash began writing songs and recording them on her computer, using the GarageBand software program. Within a few weeks, she had posted several songs on her MySpace page. The British singer Lily Allen discovered Nash’s music, and featured Nash’s page in her MySpace “Top 8.” Soon, Nash had signed with Fiction Records, a subsidiary of Polydor.

At least, so the story goes. A similar tale of Web-to-chart success circulated about Allen when her début album was released, in 2005. The truth, however, is slightly different. Allen’s MySpace page has been consistently popular (it has racked up more than ten million page views), but the songwriter sent a demo, as aspiring musicians have for decades, to EMI and was signed before her MySpace page even existed. About Nash, what we can say for certain is that her bumptious second single, “Foundations,” entered the British charts last June at No. 2, pushing forward the British release of her first album, “Made of Bricks,” by a month. The album debuted at No. 1 in August, and is being released this week in the United States.

In the wake of Nash’s album, several articles about the “MySpace generation” of young British female singer-songwriters have appeared in the national press. Among the musicians frequently mentioned are Nash, Allen, the unbearable neo-soul singer Adele, the appealing rock songwriter Remi Nicole, and Amy Macdonald, a graduate of the
Bono School of Unbridled Earnestness. Like most trend pieces, these articles identify a genuine surge—in this case, an uptick in the number of young talented women making music in Britain—but overstate its meaning. Whether or not these women were discovered on MySpace doesn’t change how their music is reaching the world: their recordings are released on major labels, and they are conducting the usual rounds of music- and beauty-magazine interviews. However, compared with the great female musicians who made their mark in the nineteen-nineties—PJ Harvey, Tori Amos, Liz Phair, Courtney Love—these women are less political, less aggressive, and, so far, less inspired. Perhaps MySpace is partly to blame. Internet exposure seems to have become an acceptable substitute for experience, and many artists are getting signed before they’ve played a live show, mastered the art of songwriting, or found their voice. The promotion of young talent has always been a central activity of the music business, but now, on Web portals like MySpace, which encourage the complete documentation of one’s life in constantly updated photographs, video clips, and blog posts, amateurs are growing up in public. (In a blog post last year, Allen wrote that she felt “fat, ugly and shitter than Winehouse” and was “researching gastric bypass surgery.”) If such exposure doesn’t kill these young women, it could produce a very hardy breed of pop star.

On the strength of “Foundations,” at least, Nash merits a shot at stardom. The song begins with rudimentary stuff: three simple piano chords played over a synthetic drumbeat. A guitar enters, and then Nash’s unexpectedly nervous but pleasantly glassy voice: “Thursday night, everything’s fine, except you’ve got that look in your eye when I’m telling a story and you find it boring. You’re thinking of something to say.” The situation gets worse as the song gets bigger and better. The dumb boyfriend throws up on her trainers (that’s British for sneakers), makes fun of her in front of her friends, and generally behaves like a twenty-something male. Nash alternately whines, begs, and makes a wobbling sound that suggests an imminent rush of tears. It’s fun to hear her tell him off—“Yeah, intelligent input darling, why don’t you just have another beer, then?”—but the putdowns are there just to get your attention. The chorus is what makes the song work. The chords open up, Nash’s voice expands from a yowl into a solid, open-throated sound, and the words take the song beyond the weeklong problems of the young to encompass the lifelong miseries of anyone who hangs on to a relationship long after it should have ended: “My fingertips are holding on to the cracks in our foundation, and I know that I should let go but I can’t.”

When the verse returns, Nash embellishes full piano chords with her right hand and, with her left, hits rollicking bass notes. The “Chopsticks” opening turns out to have been a sly trick; she can really play, and sing, too: her voice rises in a convincing blend of anger, sadness, and frustration that eventually buckles, and ends as a resigned mumble. Nash was brought up in the posh London neighborhood of Harrow, and the English have taken note of her slightly incongruous accent—lower middle class, broadly speaking, with missing “r”s and “h”s. (There has been discussion in British newspapers of “Mockney,” an epithet used to describe singers who allegedly pitch their accents down a few class levels to seem tougher or more authentic.)

Nash spends much of “Made of Bricks” complaining, and eventually one begins to feel sorry not for Nash’s anonymous boyfriends (who probably don’t deserve better) but for her listeners. A man may well deserve to be called a dickhead, but repeating “Why you being a dickhead for? Stop being a dickhead” is more tedious than insulting. Nash’s first single, the infinitely annoying electro rap “Caroline’s a Victim,” suggests that whatever it is Nash loves has little to do with the “killer beat” she sings about in the song. (Be glad the track isn’t on the album.) “Mariella,” which is on the album, is a grating song about a troubled girl who has apparently glued her lips together. (“Mariella didn’t have many friends, yeah. The girls, they all looked at her and they thought she was quite strange.”) And the skeleton in “Skeleton Song” is—juvenilia alert—an actual skeleton that Nash has befriended. If you can listen to either track more than once, you have an unusually high tolerance for jumpy, repetitive piano playing and cloying language (“Skeleton, you are, you are my friend, and I will be there for you until the end”) that might have earned Nash an A in third grade. Listening to her album, I felt at times that I could actually hear the sound of a parental hand patting her on the head.

These gaffes could have been avoided had Nash been allowed a little more time to develop. The three good songs on “Made of Bricks” are very good. “Mouthwash,” the best of them, follows the musical arc of “Foundations”; it begins with a crackling solo piano figure, expands into the sound of a full band, and barrels into a chorus in which Nash abandons her habitual sprechstimme for clearly melodic singing. At first, the lyrics seem flirtatious: “This is my face, covered in
freckles, with the occasional spot and some veins. This is my body, covered in skin, and not all of it you can see.” But Nash isn’t chatting up a boy; she’s confronting herself. The chorus makes the same shift from specific to general as “Foundations” did, using mundane details to transform Nash into an Everywoman, facing down a long stretch of nothing special: “And I use mouthwash, sometimes I floss. I’ve got a family and I drink cups of tea. . . . I’ve got mixed-up memories, and I’ve got favorite places, and I’m singing oh, oh, on a Friday night, and I hope everything’s gonna be all right.”

At her second American show, in September, at Joe’s Pub, Nash projected a combination of nervousness and aplomb. A pale, button-faced redhead who wears what the British press calls “granny dresses”—think of “Little House on the Prairie”—she slumped at her piano, except when, at rare moments, she remembered that she shouldn’t and sat up straight. She tore through her set with alarming force and speed. She enunciated precisely and didn’t miss a note, no matter how hard or fast she hit the keys. (Watching her perform, a friend leaned over and whispered, “This girl does not do drugs. Her brain sounds so pink.”) Given time, Nash will probably start distinguishing between anger and peevishness, and figure out which of her terrible boyfriends deserves a song. Going easy on the Web probably wouldn’t hurt. ♦

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