Who Will Free Fiona Apple?  
Suddenly on the Internet: A flood of unreleased bootlegs sung by a goddess. What gives?

By Mark Morford, SF Gate Columnist  
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It started with two little songs.

Two little, beautifully crafted, wonderfully quirky, secretly bootlegged, commercially unavailable versions of two Fiona Apple songs that very few people have ever heard because, well, they’re from a Fiona Apple album called "Extraordinary Machine" that was actually never released anywhere in the world. Never. As in not ever.

And you could find those two amazing songs, the title track and one called "Better Version of Me," on many a not-so-secret download site and P2P service for the past year or more, and they were small balm indeed for the legion of Apple fans who were desperate for any taste or sigh or glimpse of the waiflike goddess, any snippet of new tune to come their way like manna, as Apple hasn’t released any new work in over five years, since she was knee-high to a weird angry self-immolating 19-year-old diva prodigy.

Apple is, in case you forgot, the luscious Grammy-winning songstress who penned "Criminal" and whose second album had a title that was 57 words long (shorthanded as "When the Pawn ...") and who, as this column has long lamented, seemed to
vanish from the pop music scene six years back and who I have been long hoping will return to reclaim her position as skinny doe-eyed ruler of the divine female songstress universe and squash the Norahs and the Avrils and the Vanessa Carltons and the Michelle Branches with her astounding breathy smoky jazzy throaty vocal skills and delirious songwriting prowess and soul-healing hip-gyration proficiency.

Alas, the wait has been endless. And painful. And barely allayed by the likes of astounding newcomers Rachel Yamagata and Cat Power and Jesse Sykes et al. But still.

But here's where it gets funky. "Extraordinary Machine" is an album that Apple finished over two years ago, but which was quickly shelved by the sad corporate drones over at Sony because they didn't "hear a single" and because it doesn't sound exactly like Norah Jones and because they're, well, corporate drones. They dictate cultural tastes based on relatively narrow and often deeply ignorant criteria related to marketing and money and fear of the new and the different. This is what they do.

In other words, it was shelved because it's different, unique, a little eccentric, all bells and oompah horns and strings and oddly lovely circuslike arrangements, and you as the co-opted overmarketed oversold listening audience can't really handle anything like that, anything challenging or interesting or distinctive or deeply cool or lacking in prepackaged backbeats that sound just like Kelly Clarkson or maybe "American Idiot," even if it comes from an stupendously talented world-class Grammy-winning artist. Right? Isn't that you? Doesn't matter. This is what they believe.

But now, a hot new twist. The rest of "Extraordinary Machine" has, somehow, been leaked onto this fair Internet. All of it. Every song, some at first sounding not all that complete and some reportedly with only tentative titles, but, then again, a DJ at a radio station up in Seattle (the End 107.7) somehow managed to get his hands on the whole album and has apparently been playing almost every track and it's all much more finished and incredible than anyone thought.

And fans have been whipping the tracks into high-quality MP3s and splaying them all over the Net, and Rolling Stone and MTV and other media have picked up on the odd story, noting how fans are calling into the station like mad and most everyone loves the songs and protest Web sites like freefiona.com (alongside dedicated fan sites like fionaapple.org) have popped up to try and get some action and yet Sony refuses to actually release the album and the corporate drones remain mum and everyone's wondering just what the hell's going on.

Is it the dumbest test-marketing scheme in Sony history? Is it a silly corporate ploy to gauge fan interest two years after the album should have been released? The DJ, apparently, ain't telling where he got his copy, but, so far, he has yet to receive a cease-and-desist from Sony, and, while some ISPs are sending threatening notes to bloggers who post the songs and the RIAA is probably having colon spasms, the songs aren't exactly all
that difficult to find.

Fans, meanwhile, are gushing. The songs are, by and large, mesmerizing and distinctive and completely wonderful slices of funky art pop, showcasing Apple's trademark languid, off-time verse style and eccentric lyricism and increasingly rich and mellifluous and still quite gorgeous voice that never feels the need to yell or oversing or jump multiple octaves into obnoxious glass-shattering range.

As for Apple herself, well, rumor has it she really didn't care all that much about Sony's lameness two years back, really didn't feel a driving need to be slammed back into the soul-mauling pop music spotlight and therefore didn't really push all that hard to have "EM" released.

And while she is also reportedly very happy to hear about the current mad fan support regarding the album, according to a brief interview with producer Jon Brion, he says she also knows it ain't all that radio friendly and might not ever make a gazillion dollars and she doesn't really care. Which is, of course, what makes her so goddamn wonderful.

All of which simply serves as a potent reminder, an illuminative example of the everpresence of the Big Dance, the all-pervasive push-pull between the free voice and the corporate-controlled one, between the art and the marketing, between the rawly creative and the Wal-Mart floor display, between the Fiona Apple and the profit quotient.

And now, that dance has become more heated, more intense and vicious than ever before. The corporations have consolidated power, have turned into ugly profit-driven monoliths hell bent on clinging to their dwindling earnings and archaic business models despite the wild shifts in culture and technology.

As meanwhile any Net user worth her blog or encryption software knows multiple means for downloading a nice free copy of the latest astounding Rufus Wainwright album or a fine copy of the brilliant cult hit movie "Donnie Darko," sans money and sans guilt and sans anything resembling serious concern for the well being of SonyViacomDisneyMicrosoft.

This, then, is the bottom line. The rules are changing fast. Great songs want to be free. Fiona Apple is singing anew, despite the corporate crackdown and the RIAA sneers, and it's all just more proof positive that you can't really contain or restrain raw human talent, can't kill the need for true creative prowess, and that goddamn flower is gonna crack through that corporate concrete no matter how much weed killer they pour on it. The commercial dictatorship is crumbling. New songs are being sung, in spite of the old rules. Really, really good songs. Sung by a goddess.

You want to hear them? All you have to do is click.

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