**BESS ATWELL**

Bess Atwell’s songs are written far from city lights, in the South Downs communities where she’s lived for 12 of her 22 years. But in her debut album, *Hold Your Mind*, local, thriving folk and singer-songwriter traditions meet a pop sensibility. Produced by Michael ‘Smithy’ Smith (12 Dirty Bullets) in London and Sussex, observations on identity, self-dismay and claustrophobic social media combine intimacy with rock hooks and gauzier, more expansive atmospheres. Timeless in essence, her songs are solid with modern detail.

The title track challenges a digital existence unique to Atwell’s time, *“when nothing’s alive, but it’s all been immortalised.”* “Facebook’s such a strange thing for my generation,” she explains. “Before, people were able to progress, and find out who they were, and start afresh. But we are constantly faced with what we’re meant to be. I have a profile on Facebook I don’t think represents me at all. People have this constant reference: this is Bess, this is what she looks like, her photos and her friends. This is what I am, this one thing. Social media isn’t very accepting of being a mixture and a contradiction. It’s like you can’t really progress. That’s you, on the internet forever. And I hate that. There’s no space to breathe.”

*“Killing with the camera...I have no questions, I have no mind,”* Atwell also sings in “Hold Your Mind”, homing in, dismayed, on other modern rites. “It’s much more difficult to live in the moment,” she says, “and experience things without thinking, ‘I want to capture this in a photo, to show people what I’m doing.’ Loads of people feel like this, I know I’m not alone. People don’t clap at gigs now, because they always have their phones in their hands, ready for a photo. Me and my friends all clap each other’s hands. My attention span’s shot, and it’s not enough to be happy, you have to show other people you are. It takes a conscious effort to just enjoy something.”

This contrasts with the bucolic, ancient English scenes which have been around Atwell all her life, a distinctive background in an aggressively urban nation. “Quiet, countryside places are where I see myself and my music,” she says. “Not the city, where it’s busy and things are happening right now. My songs are mostly about my own life or things close to me. So they need that moment of stepping away, and reflecting.” Such moments are sometimes jotted into Atwell’s phone on long Downland walks, but always written, music and words at once, in the house beneath a looming chalk cliff in the Sussex county town of Lewes that’s been home since 2012 (following 8 years in nearby Ringmer, two in Brighton and a Cambridgeshire childhood). Her recent move back to Brighton may perhaps have been foretold in the words of her first single.

Bess Atwell’s debut single “Cobbled Streets”, written after a Lewes night out, describes Atwell’s sometimes ambiguous relationship with small-town existence. “I was totally bored at a social gathering,” she remembers, “and finally found an excuse to get out. And I was thinking that night that I should be enjoying the company of these people, but I’m not. Because my family moved around quite a bit when I was a child, I desperately wanted to belong somewhere, and I’ve always sought out a close community, people that you see every day. That’s my idea of home, though I haven’t really found it yet. Lots of my friends are keen to go to London, but I feel comfortable and creative in a small community. At the same time, I’m so aware that there’s a world out there that I want to explore. That contradiction’s in “Cobbled Streets.””

Atwell’s family is creative, with a mum and sister who, like her, are fine artists, and a dad who wrote and played in bands. Still, there wasn’t much music around, except the Smiths and Divine Comedy CDs her parents played on holiday journeys. But she divined the mystery of what she heard early. “I remember listening to music when I was 7 or 8,” she says, “and asking my mum, ‘How does someone write a song?’I always really enjoyed music when the person was really present in their music. And I loved singing, my whole life I knew that. At 14, in the first month that I realised I could write, I wrote 10 songs, took a day at a studio and laid them all out acoustically. There were hard things going on with my family, that’s where the songs were coming from. And still, whenever something’s really difficult, my mind’s really, really busy. Then I write about it, and communicate it, and feel better.”

Atwell’s influences in her late teens included Fleet Foxes and, in an eventually positive way, Bon Iver. “I had a lot of angst in those years, like everyone does, and family frustrations,” she recalls, “and I felt like Bon Iver perfectly captured that. You couldn’t really understand his lyrics, but he had such beautiful melodies. It was melancholy, but sweet and beautiful, and felt really universal, and I became obsessed with wanting to write something that explained how I feel just as well. It wasn’t art, it was me just trying to replicate something I’m not, and it hindered me. I realised that I desire to express a universal feeling, as Bon Iver does, but that I could do so without sounding like him. That’s really what I learned from him. I write all the time now, because I’m not comparing myself to anybody else. And then you end up being you.”

Atwell has found her version of the universal in concrete, domestic detail: a light in the kitchen, a key in the door, catching the train. “I wanted it to be like a memory – like suddenly you’re there, back in that present moment that the song was written about. I wanted to express the emotional undercurrent of domestic life, which there is in every house. Sometimes something so simple can be a massive part of your day. I wanted to ground those memories.”

“Salt” finds delicate, sensual nostalgia in equally concrete recall of the pale skin and bodies of an affair. “That’s an early, innocent song about young love. The fickleness, purity and immaturity of it.” The album’s opener, “A Thousand Lovers”, considers an odder romantic tangent with equal care*.* “I’d just broken up with a boyfriend because,” Atwell remembers. “I knew we weren’t right for each other, but I hadn’t ended it because I didn’t want it to be for nothing, to feel I’d wasted time. You have such strong relationships in your life, but because they’re so important they all have to disappear and be denied once they’re over. The song’s about wanting everyone I’ve ever loved in the same room instead.”

*Hold Your Mind* was mostly recorded at producer Michael ‘Smithy’ Smith’s RnR Studio in London, with a five-piece band. But when the sessions stalled, Smith and Atwell headed south. “Smith packed up his equipment, and came to Lewes,” Atwell explains. “We recorded for four days in the garage of my best friend’s house in Barcombe, a village near Lewes, but ended up with birdsong on every track. So then we recorded in my living room. And we ended up creating the album’s sound in those two sessions away from the musicians. It was already going in the direction I wanted in the studio – slightly poppy, and dark, with weird modulating guitars - but it was being drowned a bit by the band’s musicianship. They were amazing guys, but with technical knowledge that I don’t have, which left me feeling out of control. Me and Smith went back to basics, simplified it and messed around and experimented. We gave it this slightly ethereal, softer but still dark edge. Which is exactly what I had pictured. It was nice to get a breather. It gave the album air. We went back to where I wrote the songs, and I felt like it was mine again.”

This sure sense of time and place pervades *Hold Your Mind*, a debut built on strong foundations by a subtly fresh new songwriter.