**Olivia Chaney**

***The Longest River***

Singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Olivia Chaney’s profile has been rising over the last few years, particularly in her native England, where she was recently nominated for BBC Radio 2’s Horizon Award for best emerging folk artist. But until now, she has proven elusive on the recording front, with only one highly praised but modestly distributed EP to her name, plus a few home-spun bootlegs. One had to be lucky enough to catch her on a stage to hear her entrancing sound and unique sensibility, evolving and refining with each gig she played.

Her Nonesuch debut finally makes that experience more widely available. *The Longest River* is striking in its simplicity; it preserves the passion and immediacy of her live performances with a deceptively-structured informality. “It’s taken a long time to get to the point where I wanted to make a full record and I’m lucky Nonesuch heard me at the right time,” Chaney explains.

Chaney co-produced the album at the legendary RAK Studios in London with Leo Abrahams (guitarist, film composer, and Brian Eno collaborator). Veteran engineer Jerry Boys (Buena Vista Social Club, Sandy Denny) brought his magic to capture the takes with layers subtly added using Chaney's multi-instrumental skills, analogue synths, and steadfast collaborators on the London scene (Oliver Coates, Jordan Hunt, Leo Taylor).

Chaney’s work has deep and varied roots which have enabled her to carve out something new yet timeless, bravely sparse, yet intensely lyrical. Original compositions are balanced alongside a typically eclectic range of covers that she has arranged and made her own, including the dramatic “Blessed Instant” by Norwegian voice-artist/composer Sidsel Endresen, 17th-century English composer Henry Purcell’s “There’s Not A Swain,”Chilean protest-singer Violeta Parra’s “La Jardinera,” and “Waxwing” from Scottish alt-folk singer-songwriter Alasdair Roberts.

A combination of rigor and anarchy has always characterized Chaney’s life and music-making. This is apparent in her lyrics, which can be intellectually challenging even as they appeal to the listener’s emotions: in fact, the title track’s lyrics show empathy for Sigmund Freud. “I wanted it to have a transparency and intimacy, even if in a voyeuristic way,” Chaney explains. “I also wanted to pick up the atmosphere of the room I recorded in … almost tangibly feel the mood of the song and the performance.”

Born in Florence, Italy to an Australian mother and Anglo-Dutch father, raised in Oxford in a home where music and art were part of the culture, Chaney recalls, “There was an eclecticism to my upbringing, and there certainly wasn’t one style of music we were listening to, but there was a heavy dose of the ‘60s folk revivalists and songwriters. Alongside classical opera, there was Billie Holliday, Anne Briggs, Sandy Denny, Bert Jansch, Bob Dylan, and Joni Mitchell, with my dad’s own beautiful renditions of these great artists.” The family’s cassette collection fuelled the long car journeys to and from Italy, adding a filmic soundtrack to her childhood, including further influences from Pergolesi to Prince.

Chaney admits she became “a wild-child delinquent” when she entered her teen years, but was saved from more serious trouble by landing a scholarship as a piano and voice student to Manchester’s prestigious Chetham’s School of Music. From there she graduated to the Royal Academy of Music in London, where she spent more time breaking rules but also collaborating with young composers, exploring free-improvisation and experimental orchestrations of a growing repertoire of her own songs.

After leaving college, she taught herself guitar and harmonium. She also participated in many multi-media/cross-genre collaborations and began attracting a following at her one-woman shows in London. The directors of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre spotted her and invited her to join two seasons as both actress and musician in *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida*. She was then approached by dance-music duo Zero Seven to front their touring band, reinterpreting some of their hits with her harmonium and guitar to audiences of 2,000 people per night, before returning to the intimacy of her solo performances.

—*Michael Hill*